

Stanek sparks Saints by No. 3 Grinnell

Written by Jim Ecker

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DES MOINES - Kiana Stanek turned in a Kayla Armstrong performance at the Class 4A girls state basketball tournament Tuesday night.

It left all the Saints jumping for joy.

Stanek popped in a career-best 22 points and also excelled at the defensive end as the sixth-ranked Saints knocked off No. 3 Grinnell, 60-55, in the opening round at Wells Fargo Arena.

Xavier (18-6) will meet North Scott (19-5) in the Class 4A semifinals Friday at 10 a.m.

In case you don't remember, Armstrong was the girl who turned into Super Woman at the 2013 state tournament and led the Saints to the championship with the two best performances of her career.

Stanek still has work to do to match Armstrong, but she got off to a great start Tuesday with five 3-pointers and skin-tight defense against Grinnell star Madeline Wilkins, holding the 3-point artist to just five points.

Stanek's eyes got bright when a reporter wondered if she knows who Armstrong is and what she did.

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"We definitely know who she is," Stanek replied. "She's kind of our inspiration when it comes to state tournaments for Xavier."

Armstrong, known primarily as a mega-soccer star, averaged a modest eight points for the 2012-13 campaign, but she scored a career-best 22 points against Heelan in the semifinals and topped it with 23 points against Harlan in the finals.

Stanek was sitting in the stands in 2013 when Armstrong led Xavier to the state title. She was an eighth grader at the time, still six months away from enrolling at Xavier.

"Yeah, I was here," she said. "I missed school so I could come down and watch it. It was the best missed-school-day ever."

Stanek, a 5-foot-2 senior, is averaging 8.1 points for the Saints, almost exactly what Armstrong averaged four years ago.

The Saints needed a big game from Stanek because Lexi Noonan, who normally leads the team in scoring, was whistled for her third foul with 5 minutes, 47 seconds left in the second quarter and sat down for the rest of the first half.

Xavier held the fort and led at halftime, 25-22, despite Noonan's misfortune with fouls. Stanek had a lot to do with it, along with the rest of the Saints.

"I felt pretty good that Kiana Stanek was shooting triples lights-out," said Xavier Coach Tom Lilly, happy to have the lead after 16 minutes. "I think a couple of those, you can look on the film and I think they're NBA triples."

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"Sometimes people shine in the bright lights," he said. "There were big moments in that game and we needed it from somebody. I'm happy that she had the courage to do it."

"When she's hot," said Lilly, "she's smoking hot."



Noonan returned in the second half and the reunited Saints built a 12-point lead heading into the fourth quarter at 43-31, but it was far from over at that point.

Grinnell (19-5) pestered the Saints with a trapping zone defense that forced key turnovers and the Tigers came storming back to pull within 49-47, 52-50 and 54-53 on a 3-pointer by Kyra Hungerford with just 25 seconds left in the game.

The Saints had a chance to fold, but did not.

Stanek cashed two free throws with 20.2 seconds left to make it 56-53, hitting both ends of a crucial one-and-one.

Sienna Durr, who led Grinnell with 26 points and 11 rebounds, missed a shot for the Tigers and Maria Steffen, who was huge for the Saints off the bench, grabbed the rebound and fed Noonan.

Noonan, who had struggled at the foul line Tuesday, made both of her shots to give Xavier a 58-53 advantage with 10.4 seconds to go, but Durr scored with 3.2 seconds remaining to keep Grinnell alive at 58-55.

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Grinnell fouled Steffen before the Saints could make the in-bounds pass, hoping the 47.4 percent free throw shooter would miss both shots and give them a chance to tie the game with a 3-pointer and force overtime.

Steffen, a 5-foot-9 junior, had other ideas. She made both free throws for a 60-55 cushion and the Saints were headed to the semifinals.

Wilkins, a 5-foot-7 senior, had poured in 80 3-pointers this year and was averaging 14.3 points before she faced the Saints, but Stanek held her to just one 3-pointer and 2-for-7 from the field.

"I thought she did a great job on their best player," said Lilly.

Grinnell ranked second in the state in 3-pointers heading into the state tournament, but the Saints beat the Tigers at their own game. The Saints, not known as a prolific 3-point shooting club, were 7-for-12 from distance while the Tigers were 5-of-17.

Stanek is Xavier's best 3-point shooter and proved it Tuesday. She tied the school record earlier this season with six triples against Jefferson and nearly matched it in Des Moines, sinking 5-of-7.

Noonan finished with 12 points, five rebounds and three blocked shots and never picked up her fourth foul. She remained calm on the bench in the second quarter, confident the Saints would hang in there without her.

"I knew my teammates were going to step it up for me," she said. "They've been playing well all year. Kiana had a special night and Kylie stepped up in the fourth quarter for us. It was awesome."

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Kylie is Kylie Brown, the soft-spoken senior who made a huge 3-pointer with 1:40 left in the game to give Xavier a 52-47 lead when Grinnell was making its charge. It was only the third 3-pointer for Brown all season and it came at the perfect time.

Xavier lost to Grinnell in the regional semifinals last year and Brown was happy to get some revenge. She finished with 10 points, six rebounds, two assists, two steals and two blocks.

"It feels really good, especially coming off the loss to them last year," she said. "It feels good to beat them this year."

Xavier freshman Caitlynn Daniels collected eight assists, seven points, five rebounds and two steals, but she was charged with seven turnovers as the primary ballhandler.

Steffen played 12 crucial minutes for the Saints, providing six points and three rebounds. Maddix Stovie also gave Xavier a big boost off the bench, primarily with good defense and four rebounds.

Xavier won state titles in 2003, 2005, 2007 and 2013 with Lilly calling the shots. Now the Saints need two more victories in another odd-numbered year for a fifth crown.

The Saints had a scrimmage against North Scott during the holiday break this season and Lilly knows what's coming Friday morning in the semifinals.

"We watched them set screens and knock us apart pretty significantly," he said. "North Scott is not going to be afraid of us."

XAVIER (60): Stanek 6 5-5 22, Daniels 3 0-0 7, Brown 3 3-4 10, Noonan 5 2-5 12, Ivester 0 0-0 0, Steffen 2 2-2 6, Stovie 0 1-2 1, Jasper 1 0-0 2. Totals 20 13-18 60.

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GRINNELL (55): Harris 0 1-3 1, Wilkins 2 0-0 5, Moore 2 3-4 7, Durr 9 8-8 26, Hungerford 3 0-0 8, Jackson 2 0-0 5, Doty 0 0-0 0, Hulsing 1 0-0 3, Cooper 0 0-0 0. Totals 19 12-15 55.

Halftime - Xavier 25, Grinnell 22. 3-point goals - Xavier 7 (Stanek 5, Daniels 1, Brown 1), Grinnell 5 (Hungerford 2, Wilkins 1, Jackson 1, Hulsing 1).