

Saints slay No. 1 Waverly in OT

Written by Jim Ecker

Friday, 10 March 2017 06:22 -



DES MOINES - The Xavier Saints never stopped believing in themselves even when they had a disappointing 4-9 record in late January.

Now the Saints firmly believe they can win their second state championship in a row.

The remarkable Saints bumped off top-ranked Waverly-Shell Rock, 47-41, in overtime Thursday night in the semifinals of the Class 3A state tournament at Wells Fargo Arena.

Xavier (15-11) will face Sergeant Bluff-Luton (17-9) in the championship game Saturday at 6:05 p.m.

Xavier and Waverly-Shell Rock slugged it out on defense all night in a low-scoring affair that featured 12 ties and nine lead changes in the 36-minute contest.

The Go-Hawks took a 41-38 lead on their first possession in overtime on a three-point play by All-American Austin Phyfe, but the Saints shut them out the rest of the way and finished the game with a 9-0 run for the gritty victory in Des Moines.

Xavier all-star Matt Mims gave the Saints the lead for good, 42-41, with a huge 3-pointer and the Saints came up with a series of big defensive stops from there.

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Now the Saints are aiming for back-to-back state titles. That dismal start is long forgotten now.

"It's an incredible feeling," said Mims, who popped in 21 points. "We never stopped believing. Every day in practice we kept working hard and we never stopped believing.

"I'm so proud of this team. It's a great feeling, but we're not done yet," he said. "I can't wait for Saturday."

Phyfe, a tremendous talent at 6-foot-10, finished with 22 points and 11 rebounds, but the big guy did not kill the Saints and they made him work for everything he got.

Max Techau had the initial task of trying to guard Phyfe, but he ran into foul trouble along the way. Bryce Schulte and Max Johnson, a pair of strong guys who will play college football next year, came off the bench to battle him at times. And Quinn Schulte regularly dropped off his man and pestered Phyfe as much as he could with double-teams.

"It was really physical," said Phyfe, a special talent who will play at Northern Iowa. "They were going with me, wherever I was going, trying to beat me to the spot.

"And once I caught it, they would be bringing two or three guys, trying to battle me and get me frustrated. Give a lot of credit to them. They did a good job."

Jackson Joens also stuck his nose into the fray on defense. "I got an elbow and was bleeding," he said, smiling about his battle scar. "It was a dog-fight."

Waverly-Shell Rock (23-2) whipped the Saints by 22 points, 76-54, in Waverly in the second game of the regular season Dec. 3, but the Saints are a much different team now.

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The Saints went 4-9 in their first 13 games, but they've gone 11-and-2 in the last 13. Night and day.

"Four-and-nine is a little misleading when you play the second-toughest schedule in the state," offered Coach Ryan Luehrsmann. "There's a reason we scheduled a team from Nebraska and went over there and took our lumps. It was to prepare us for this.

"We feel like it gives us an advantage to play against the best," he said. "We're blessed to play in the MVC. It gets us ready for tonight.

"Once the regular season is over, everybody is zero-and-zero and right now we're 5-and-0. And that's where we want to be."

The five-game winning streak in the postseason includes two victories in the district tournament, a victory in the substate finals and now two victories at state with triumphs over the No. 7, No. 4 and No. 1 teams in Class 3A along the way.

Phyfe had three inches on Techau and seven inches on Bryce Schulte and Johnson, but the Saints played him tough and did not give an inch.

"We made Phyfe earn every one that he got," said Luehrsmann. "Those are hard-fought points. He's probably the best player in the state for a reason. And we just feel fortunate to eek out a win.

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