

Saints claim 2nd state title in row

Written by Jim Ecker

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DES MOINES - The Xavier Saints finished their incredible journey with another state title Saturday night.

It was twice as nice.

The incredible Saints bumped off Sergeant Bluff-Luton, 54-49, in the championship game of the Class 3A state tournament at Wells Fargo Arena to claim their second title in a row.

There were 21 lead changes in the see-saw battle, but the Saints scored the last six points in the final 42 seconds to carve their names into the history books.

Xavier became only the second school in Metro history with back-to-back state titles in boys basketball. Regis High School, one of the forerunners of Xavier, claimed consecutive crowns in 1982, 1983 and 1984 and now their descendants have joined them in elite company.

The Saints had an uncomfortable 4-and-9 record in late January, but they came on like gang-busters the rest of the way and finished the campaign with a 16-11 record and another

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shiny award.

"These kids showed unbelievable resiliency the whole year when we were going through some struggles," said Coach Ryan Luehrsmann. "They never stopped believing and knew that this was our goal.

"This is where we wanted to be," he said. "We wanted to defend it and wanted to put ourselves in special territory as far as being one of the great teams in state history in 3A. And to their credit, they did it."

The Saints trailed, 49-48, heading into the final minute of the hectic championship game and Luehrsmann knew exactly what he wanted to do in that situation: Call a play for all-star Matt Mims and let him do what he does best in a play they call "Florida".

Mims drove all the way to the basket and scored to give Xavier a 50-49 lead with 42 seconds remaining. They never trailed again.

"Coach challenged me," said Mims, who scored 17 points and was named the captain of the all-tournament team. "He told me to make a play.

"I put in a lot of work during the off-season for moments like this," he said proudly.

Luehrsmann has total faith in his junior point guard.

"There's nobody's hands I'd rather have the ball in than Matt's," he said. "He was having his way the whole day, he was getting into the lane and I felt like he was going to get all the way to the

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hoop and score or find a shooter in the corner."

Sergeant Bluff-Luton called a timeout and gave the ball to Chris Kroll, their star guard who scored 32 points in the semifinals against West Delaware, but Kroll missed a shot and fouled Jackson Joens.

Joens, who shoots 81.0 percent at the foul line, cashed both ends of the one-and-one to give the Saints a 52-49 lead with 12 seconds remaining.

Kroll missed a 3-pointer that would have tied the game. The Warriors fouled Nolan Butkowski with three seconds left and Butkowski sealed the victory with two free throws to make it 54-49.

"I just had to block everything out," said Butkowski. "I just focused on the free throws. It's a good feeling."

Xavier principal Tom Keating, a board member with the Iowa High School Athletic Association, had the pleasure of presenting the championship award to his own student-athletes. He wore a big smile when he handed the hardware to the Saints.

"It's special," said Butkowski, one of several Saints who helped the club win the state title last year. "It's something we'll remember forever."

"This was our goal from Day 1," said Mims. "It's amazing that we were able to accomplish it."

"These guys will be my brothers for life," said Max Techau.

Butkowski finished with 12 points and nine rebounds. Techau also scored 12 points, despite foul problems that limited him to 16 minutes in the 32-minute contest. Joens popped in three early

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3-pointers, contributed 11 points and joined Mims on the all-tournament team.

Sophomore Quinn Schulte did not score a single point for the Saints, but he played a huge role for Xavier by guarding Kroll all night. Kroll scored 13 points, four under his average, and shot just 6 for 18 from the field.

"Quinn is one of the toughest competitors that we've got in our program," said Luehrsmann. "It wasn't a big deal for him.

"He guarded A.J. Green (Cedar Falls), he guarded Devonte Lane (Iowa City West), he guarded some of the best in the state, so it was no different when he saw another one tonight.

"He didn't flinch, he wasn't afraid," said Luehrsmann. "And to his credit he made Kroll work for everything he got."

Bryce Schulte played 13 minutes for the Saints and lent his muscle and toughness to the victory, guarding Sergeant Bluff-Luton center Jackson Wright when Techau was on the bench. Wright scored 19 points but looked capable of much more.

Max Johnson also helped the Saints with a bucket and defense.

Sergeant Bluff-Luton finished the season with a 17-10 record.

SERGEANT BLUFF-LUTON (49): Groves 0 0-0 0, Kroll 6 0-1 13, Boekelman 0 0-0 0, Savary 4 0-0 10, Wright 8 3-4 19, Salker 0 0-0 0, Croston 0 0-0 0, DeMoss 3 0-0 7.

XAVIER (54): Mims 7 2-2 17, Butkowski 4 2-2 12, Joens 3 2-2 11, Q.Schulte 0 0-0 0, Techau 6 0-0 12, Johnson 1 0-0 2, B.Schulte 0 0-0 0. Totals 21 6-6 54.

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Halftime - Xavier 27, Sergeant Bluff-Luton 25. 3-point goals - Sergeant Bluff-Luton 4 (Savary 2, Kroll 1, DeMoss 1), Xavier 6 (Joens 3, Butkowski 2, Mims 1).