

No. 5 Saints hold off Linn-Mar girls

Written by Sher Jasperse

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Two Mississippi Valley Conference girls basketball teams on opposite trajectories collided Friday night at Linn-Mar.

They made some fireworks – but continued on their respective paths.

In a fight to the finish, the Lions came oh so close to avoiding their fifth straight loss before falling to the Xavier Saints, 39-34.

No. 5 Xavier (11-2, 6-2) won its fourth straight and its eighth victory in the last nine games. The Saints' only loss in the last month was to top-ranked Iowa City West.

Waging a rugged defensive battle, the Saints contained Linn-Mar's shooters for most of the game and surged to a 13-point lead after three periods.

But the Lions (6-6, 3-5) refused to quit, exploding for 18 fourth-quarter points on the strength of four three-pointers.

Aided by Xavier's cold free throw shooting, the Lions pulled to within three points on a Hannah Yearling triple with 10 seconds left in the game.

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But the Saints' Katlyn Andersen nailed two final free throws to seal the victory.

"Our coach tells us to slow it down and run some time off the clock, and we had to do that at the end," said Xavier's Alex Bartz, a 6-2 senior who had six rebounds and three blocks to go with six points.

"But they were fouling us and we had to go to the free throw line and we missed a lot of free throws tonight. But it all comes down to your mental state and staying relaxed."

Xavier Coach Tom Lilly was happy with his team's defensive effort in spite of the late scare.

"I thought that up until the point where they started knocking down triples we defended pretty well. At least we made them work hard for it. We boxed out, and our bigs defended pretty decently and rebounded well."

The Lions are looking to recharge their offense without senior post players Shanice Cheatham, who is out for the season with an ACL injury, and Rachel Thrune, who is out for a month.

"They're missing a couple of kids tonight, basically their two starting post players," said Lilly. "If they get one of them back, that's 10 or 12 points, and that's the difference in the game."

"Credit Linn-Mar for shooting well like we figured they were going to do. That's what they do. They've got good shooters, and it's just like next guy in when it comes to how well they shoot the ball."

The Lions hung close to the Saints throughout the first half, trailing 8-6 after one period and 16-14 at the break.

But Xavier's deeper squad began to wear them down in the third period, outscoring the Lions 13-2.

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Linn-Mar point guard Mykaela Brandt, who led all scorers with 14 points, said she expects her team to resume its early season winning ways once it gains experience with a new combination of players.

“We’re all juniors right now since our injuries and things like that, so we’ve just got to keep working at it. Some people haven’t stepped onto the floor until a few days ago. You’ve just got to keep playing and look forward to the next game.”

Xavier hosts Washington on Monday. Linn-Mar plays at Dubuque Hempstead on Tuesday.

XAVIER (39): Kayla Armstrong 3 1-3 9, Annie Dale 1 2-6 5, Katlyn Andersen 1 5-8 7, Emily Walvoord 2 1-2 5, Alex Bartz 2 2-5 6, Nicole Noonan 1 0-0 2, Sarah Dickes 0 0-0 0, Lisa Boomgarden 1 1-3 3, Ashley Stulken 1 0-0 2, Hayley Deutmeyer 0 0-0 0, Katelyn Winker 0 0-0 0. Totals 12 12-27 39.

LINN-MAR (34): Courtney Major 4 0-0 9, Mykaela Brandt 4 4-6 14, Sara Strauel 0 0-0 0, Hannah Yearling 2 0-0 5, Kristen Eiles 0 0-0 0, Alexis Libenguth 0 0-0 0, Kelsey Duggan 0 0-0 0, Jenna Harms 0 2-2 2, Carly Ryder 0 0-0 0, Lannie Nietert 2 0-0 4. Totals 12 6-8 34.

Halftime – Xavier 16, Linn-Mar 14. 3-point goals – Linn-Mar 4 (Brandt 2, Yearling, Major), Xavier 3 (Armstrong 2, Dale). Fouled out – None.