

Xavier girls stick it to Kennedy

Written by Tom Fruehling
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With a lineup full of new players, wily Xavier girls basketball coach Tom Lilly is going back to some old ways that worked in the past.

“We learn from former players who come back and ask about some ins and outs we used to use,” Lilly said Tuesday night after his novice Saints patiently used an old-school inside/outside game to turn back the visitors from Kennedy, 60-51.

Since senior starting guard Kayla Armstrong is the only player on the roster who had extensive court time last year, Lilly runs fresh legs in and out like a traffic cop.

And to keep track, the replacements (sometimes two or three at a time) carry a baton to hand off to teammate that’s coming out.

“The concept is like a track team where the baton is passed and the next one in takes over,” Lilly explained. “And inside the baton are written the pillars we need to reach our team goals. Things like communication.

“We haven’t used that system since our 2005 title season. It’s just something a little different to create success.”

It worked like a charm against the Cougars as freshman McKenna Andersen came off the bench and hit four 3-pointers in the first half to spark her team to a 33-26 halftime lead.

“That was a key,” said Xavier’s Sarah Dickes, who sealed the victory with five free throws in the final minute of the contest. “McKenna hit some big shots. We just sort of fed off that and gained some momentum.”

And while the frosh sharpshooter was coolly knocking down long shots, rapidly improving center

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Ashley Stulken was working inside. She also had four first-half buckets, all of them bunnies from under the basket.

"Our plan was to drive and dish," said Andersen, the game's high scorer with 14 points. "I got open, and my teammates got me the ball."

The match started out slowly, with Kennedy ahead 10-5 with a minute to go in the opening quarter.

"It was like a heavyweight fight," Lilly said. "Both teams were kind of feeling each other out. We expended a lot of energy early on."

After trailing at the half, Kennedy (6-4, 3-2) tore off on a 10-0 run and took a one-point lead midway through the third quarter.

"We got in some foul trouble in the first half and we had to make some adjustments," said Kennedy Coach Tony Vis. "But I thought we answered the bell at the start of the third quarter."

Just when they fell behind, however, the Saints came back with a flurry. They mounted a 12-0 run of their own over a six-minute period stretching into the last quarter.

Nursing an 11-point lead with 6:27 to go, they finished out the game at the foul line. Nine of Xavier's last 11 points were scored on free throws.

"We practice them a lot every day," Dickes said. "One of our problems this year has been finishing games at the end. So we put a lot of emphasis on making our free throws."

Xavier out-rebounded Kennedy, 33-27. And the Saints out-shot the Cougars, hitting 19 for 42

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(45.2 percent) against the visitor's 14 for 43 (33.3 percent).

"We're putting kids on the floor without a lot of experience," said Lilly, whose squad (7-6, 5-2 MVC) cracked a four-game losing streak but is still ranked sixth in Class 4A. "Every game out for us is a learning experience."

Paige Hendrickson led Kennedy with 13 points.

KENNEDY (51): Madison Meier 1 5-6 7, Jordan Holmes 4 0-1 9, Brianna Vis 1 7-8 9, Paige Hendrickson 5 3-4 13, Stephanie Botkin 1 3-4 5, Mariah Vis 1 0-0 3, Madison DeLong 1 3-4 5, Abigail Hellweg 0 0-0 0, Brinley Milbrath 0 0-0 0. Totals 14 21-27 51.

XAVIER (60): Kayla Armstrong 3 1-3 7, Hayley Deutmeyer 0 0-0 0, Sarah Dickes 1 6-8 8, Maddie Bertsch 4 2-3 10, Ashley Stulken 4 4-4 12, McKenna Andersen 5 0-0 14, Abby Watson 0 2-2 2, Morgan Breitbach 2 3-5 7, Allison Chorzempa 0 0-0 0, Lizzy Bailey 0 0-0 0. Totals 19 18-25 60.

Halftime – Xavier 33, Kennedy 26. 3-point goals – Kennedy 2 (M.Vis 1, Holmes 1), Xavier 4 (Andersen 4).