

Diggins stars as Cougars top Saints

Written by Jim Ecker

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Derrick Diggins was invited to practice with the Kennedy varsity basketball team last year as a freshman during the holiday break to give the Cougars an extra body for their workouts and drills.

He seized the opportunity, stayed with the varsity the rest of the season and has returned this year as a budding superstar.

Diggins poured in 25 points Friday night with 3-pointers and dazzling drives to the basket as Kennedy topped Xavier, 62-46, in a Mississippi Valley Conference game at Xavier.

Diggins, 15, averaged 5.8 points last season as a ninth grader and he's already averaging a robust 18.7 points this year after three games.

"He had a specatular performance," Xavier coach Ryan Luehrsmann said. "We didn't have an answer for him. We couldn't defend him man-to-man.

"He's got a bright future," Luehrsmann said. "If he keeps working on things, he's going to have a great high school career and he'll be somebody who can play at the next level."

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Diggins popped in three 3-pointers, but was most impressive with his quick first step and explosive moves to the bucket that had the Saints grasping at air. He also cashed 6-of-8 free throws, an essential skill for a point guard who will have the ball in his hands at the end of close games.

"He's special for a sophomore right now," Kennedy coach Jon McKowen said. "He's got to keep getting better, but he's a really, really good sophomore, if you want to look at it like that."

McKowen loves his attitude.



"He just has a different passion about basketball than most kids do," the coach said. "Derrick loves the game differently. Most people don't really love the game the way he loves the game. They love to play, he loves to work."

"When he's in the gym with the ball, he's happy. And it's tough to get him out. We'll finish practice two or three minutes early and he'll look at you like he's going to knock you out, because you're taking three minutes of basketball away from him. I'm serious."

Diggins began last season as a member of the sophomore team, but he looked good in practices and games and McKowen invited him to practice with the varsity during the holidays. A few days later he was promoted on a full-time basis.

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"Oh crap," Diggins remembers thinking at the time. "I just got asked to play varsity. It was exciting. I couldn't do anything but smile.

"At first I was kind of shaky," he said. "Coach pulled me aside and told me to settle down and play my game the way I know how to play, so I did what I had to do and we're here now."

"He forced his way on there," McKowen said. "He was just too good not to be with us."

Diggins said he's grown from 5-foot-11 last year to 6-foot-2 this season. He's also developed a strong body for a 15-year-old kid. "I've been working hard in the weight room, I've hit a few growth spurts," he said.

McKowen said he has not received any calls from the Division I coaches yet about Diggins, but expects to soon. "We'll get a ton of calls this year," he predicted. "We have a lot of time."

Drake Brewster played a strong game for the Cougars (2-1) and finished with 16 points. Kennedy football star Shaun Beyer played in his first game for the basketball team and scored two points, but he displayed his tremendous leaping ability when he went for a rebound and nearly hurt himself because he jumped so high.

"We have to teach him how to not hit his head on the backboard when he goes for a rebound," quipped McKowen.

Jackson Joens tossed in five 3-pointers and scored 17 points for Xavier (2-1). Mitchell Burger had 11 points for the Saints.

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KENNEDY (62): Haynes 2 0-0 6, Brewster 7 2-2 16, Gardner 1 0-0 2, Girling 1 2-2 4, Berst 1 3-3 5, Duehr 0 0-0 0, Olejniczak 0 0-0 0, Upshaw 0 0-0 0, Krall 0 0-0 0, Diggins 8 6-8 25, Foley 0 0-0 0, Bisenius 1 0-0 2, Beyer 1 0-0 2, Wiebel 0 0-0 0, King 0 0-0 0, Wall 0 0-0 0. Totals 22 13-15 62.

XAVIER (46): Burns 0 0-0 0, Burger 5 0-0 11, Mims 2 0-0 6, Butkowski 1 0-0 2, Fettkether 0 0-0 0, Whitten 0 0-2 0, Joens 6 0-0 17, Dempewolf 0 0-0 0, Stulken 0 0-0 0, Schulte 0 0-0 0, Houtakker 0 0-0 0, Techau 2 0-0 6, Johnson 2 0-0 4. Totals 18 0-2 46.

Halftime - Kennedy 26, Xavier 21. 3-point goals - Kennedy 5 (Diggins 3, Haynes 2), Xavier 10 (Joens 5, Mims 2, Techau 2, Burger 1).