

Saints hang tough, but Linn-Mar prevails

Written by Tom Fruehling

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It wasn't a real pretty game.

Linn-Mar's Lions, the state's top-ranked boys team, weren't as sharp as usual.

The gritty Xavier Saints, meanwhile, played tough as always. They tested the visitors in their home gym Friday night but fell to the better team, 52-33.

"The thing about Linn-Mar is that they always seem to be in control," said Xavier Coach Matt Jenkins.

"Even when they're having an off night like tonight, you never get the feeling that they're going to lose. They're just a great team."

Linn-Mar Coach Chris Robertson saw some good things from his squad despite the sub-par overall performance.

"Defensively, we played really well," he said. "We were aggressive and made them work for their shots. But we were a little stagnant on offense."

Neither team shot well to start the game, and Linn-Mar (16-0, 11-0 Mississippi Valley Conference) led by only 10-5 at the end the first quarter.

Then, in a three-minute stretch in the second quarter, Linn-Mar scored nine straight points to stretch its lead to 21-9.

"We had good looks around the basket," Jenkins said. "We just couldn't connect. We couldn't

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buy a bucket.”

For the game, the Saints (4-13, 3-9 MVC) made just 11 of their 30 shots.

Not that the Lions were blistering the nets.

Matt Bohannon, held for the night to just three field goals, said his team seemed sluggish on offense, perhaps because of a week’s layoff.

“Our shots weren’t going in like they usually do. Luckily, it was maybe our best game on defense all season.”

He had nothing but praise for Xavier.

“They really play well together and work hard. And they made us work hard.”

Linn-Mar’s magical point guard Marcus Paige was the one consistent offensive threat for the Lions, scoring 12 of his game-high 21 points in the first half.

He seemingly scores at will, on long left-handed jumpers or blitzing through the lane for lay-ups. But he’s even better at spotting teammates for no-look passes.

“I try to get everybody involved,” the junior play-maker explained. “On our team we have a lot of unselfish players.”

Jenkins calls Paige “the perfect point guard.”

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"We tried to stop him," the Saints coach said. "But he always does exactly what his team needs. And he plays with respect for the game and his opponents."

Xavier's rugged 6-foot-6 senior center Ryan Mains said his team gave it their all in an expected losing effort.

"We know we're not the most skilled team," he said afterward. "But we play hard and feel we can play with anyone."

"Our execution wasn't what it should be, and we're working on that. But our effort is always there."

Xavier won the sophomore game in an upset, 57-43.

LINN-MAR (52) – Shane Benton 0 0-0 0, Marcus Paige 9 1-2 21, Matt Bohannon 3 1-2 8, Ian McBrayer 6 0-0 12, Josh Montague 4 1-1 9, Josh Malone 1 0-0 2, Michael Thul 0 0-0 0, Nick Soyer 0 0-0 0, Matthew Lassen 0 0-0 0, Mason Krusie 0 0-0 0, Nate Johnson 0 0-0 0, Braxton Lancial 0 0-0 0, Nick Gentzler 0 0-0 0, Derik Gogg 0 0-0 0, Jacob Hutchins 0 0-0 0. Totals – 23 3-5 52.

XAVIER (33) – Mitch McLaughlin 0 0-0 0, Ben McDermott 1 1-2 4, Kevin Hosch 0 0-0 0, Alec Clasen 0 0-0 0, Ryan Mains 1 2-4 4, Nolan Dunkirk 1 0-0 2, Carter Valentine 3 2-3 8, Brian Ropp 1 0-0 3, Mark Mattke 4 4-4 12, Peter Kokantis 0 0-0 0. Totals: 11 9-13 33.

Halftime – Linn-Mar 25, Xavier 13. 3-point goals – Linn-Mar 3 (Paige 2, Bohannon), Xavier 2 (McDermott, Ropp). Total fouls – Linn-Mar 13, Xavier 12.