

J-Hawks falter without Ollinger

Written by Tom Fruehling

Saturday, 20 December 2014 00:35 - Last Updated Saturday, 20 December 2014 00:43

In high-energy sports like basketball, you can compete for only so long on adrenaline alone.

In their first game without their star player Friday night at home, the Jefferson girls played their hearts out in the first half against Xavier.

Then they simply ran out of gas.

Ahead for the opening 12 minutes, the short-handed J-Hawks trailed just 18-15 at the hallway point. But as they sagged from then on, the surging Saints picked up steam and won going away, 50-22.

Jefferson (5-4, 4-2 MVC) managed only five points from center Kennedy Dighton and two from point guard Avery Guy in the second 16 minutes.

They desperately needed 6-foot-2 all-stater Amanda Ollinger, who left the team two days ago and will transfer to Linn-Mar.

"I thought the girls played great during that first half," said even-tempered Jefferson Coach Jason Edwards. "We were moving the ball, and we knocked down some shots."

But with just six girls (all juniors and sophomores) facing the relentless pressure of Xavier's patented pressing defense, they could not sustain the momentum.

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Longtime Xavier Coach Tom Lilly said his squad knew what to expect coming into the contest.

“Jefferson came out with a lot of energy and enthusiasm,” he noted. “Missing their best player, they wanted to tell the world. ‘Hey, we don’t need her.’”

“They’re a good team and they rallied around each other. They did what it took to win a basketball game.”

His girls just did way more, especially in the second half.

“We matched their energy,” Lilly said. “And we figured on getting them tired. They had kids playing a lot of minutes. With our up-tempo style of play, some of them got a little tired.”

It didn’t start out like a rout.

Guy, a steady 5-foot-5 sophomore, banged in a 3-pointer for the first score of the game. “Boom,” yelled her father Willie Guy, one of the assistant coaches sitting next to Edwards.

Guy then threaded two neat passes to fellow sophomore Dighton driving to the hoop. The 6-foot-1 center, now forced into a larger role, made six of her team-high 11 points on the opening quarter.

The always well-schooled Saints (5-3, 4-2 MVC and ranked No. 14 in Class 4A) kept pace, however, and took their first lead at 14-13 when senior sub Erin Drahozal stole a pass and took it the length of the floor.

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It was one of 20 steals of the night for Xavier, which committed just 13 turnovers to Jefferson's 26. The rebounding totals were even at 19 apiece, but the Saints shot 50 percent from the field (21 for 42) and the J-Hawks only 31 percent (nine of 29).

Xavier's senior floor leader Morgan Breitbach led a balanced offense with 14 points along with six steals, many of both coming in the third quarter when her team exploded for a 17-0 run.

"We strive for perfection," Lilly said. "We didn't get there, but we're getting better."

Edwards, too, feels his suddenly depleted squad will improve.

"We've got a lot of young kids on the team, and they'll learn from this game," he said. "Amanda (Ollinger) commands attention on the floor and that relieves some

of the pressure on everyone else. Now, the others will have to adjust.

"But I like these girls. I love them to death."

For her part, Dighton said the season is far from over.

"We'll continue to work hard and work with what we have," she said. "We came out fired up after the shock of this week, and we competed.

"We got fatigued in the second half with our short bench. But, absolutely, I'm pleased with how we played."

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XAVIER (50) – Lizzy Bailey 3 1-2 9, McKenna Andersen 0 0-0 0, Morgan

Breitbach 7 0-0 14, Amelia Ivester 3 1-2 7, Meghan Joens 3 0-0 6, Erin

Drahozal 2 0-0 4, Jennifer Dickes 0 2-2 2, Lexi Noonan 3 0-0 6, Madi

Nelson 0 0-0 0, Kiana Stanek 0 0-0 0, Brylee Bastian 0 2-3 2, Kaitlyn

Albert 00-0 0, Claire Christianson 0 0-0 0, Maddix Stovie 0 0-0 0. Totals 21 6-9 50.

JEFFERSON (22) – Mariah Robinson 0 0-0 0, Sam Kitterman 0 0-0 0, Avery Guy 3 0-0 8, Kylie Wise 0 0-0 0, Kennedy Dighton 5 0-0 11, Cassandra Veglahn 0 0-0 0, Sparkle Melton 1 1-4 3, Emma Rolwes 0 0-0 0, A'alyiah Watkins 0 0-0 0, Emily O'Brien 0 0-0 0. Totals 9 1-4 22.

Halftime – Xavier 18, Jefferson 15. 3-point goals – Xavier 2 (Bailey 2), Jefferson 3 (Guy 2, Dighton 1). Total fouls – Xavier 11, Jefferson 16.
Fouled out – Robinson.