

Hot Saints knock off 2014 state champs

Written by Jim Ecker

Thursday, 19 February 2015 23:15 - Last Updated Thursday, 19 February 2015 23:27



Mitchell Burger plays with a scowl on his face for the Xavier Saints, a 5-foot-10 dynamo with a refuse-to-lose mentality who doesn't let bigger guys get in his way.

It's become contagious.

The streaking Saints collected another big victory Thursday night when they knocked off seventh-ranked Dubuque Wahlert, 78-74, ending the regular season with a satisfying verdict over the 2014 Class 3A state champions.

Burger poured in 25 points, Adam McDermott netted 24 and Michael Mims chipped in with 15 as Xavier won its fifth straight game heading into the Class 3A district tournament next week.

The Saints were shuffling along with an 8-8 record two weeks ago, but now they're 13-8 and riding high. They upset the Linn-Mar Lions last week when the Lions were ranked No. 4 in Class 4A and now they've got a win over a Class 3A giant.

"It was a great win," said Burger, the scowl replaced by a happy smile. "A great confidence boost going into the

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tournament."

Wahlert defeated the Saints, 70-62, in the Class 3A substate finals last year in Epworth. The Golden Eagles used that victory as a springboard to the state title and the unhappy Saints used it as motivation for this year.

"We've been looking forward to this one ever since that substate final last year," said McDermott. "They're a great team and hopefully we'll see them later in March (at the state tournament). Hopefully both of us will make it down there."

The IHSA put Xavier and Wahlert in different substates this season, perhaps sensing that both clubs deserved a shot at Wells Fargo Arena.

"Maybe we'll have a chance to see them again," said Xavier Coach Ryan Luehrsmann. "That would be nice."



The Saints began the season with three all-conference players on the squad with McDermott,

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Calvin Winker and Prairie transfer Michael Mims. Burger has made a bid to join them the last month with a string of outstanding performances, including terrific games against state powers like Iowa City West, Linn-Mar and Wahlert.

"Mitch is a catalyst, by nature," said Luehrsmann. "Just a bundle of energy, and he's definitely given us a shot in the arm with his play on both ends of the floor."

And that scowl?

"He's an angry guy," said Luehrsmann, referring to his on-court demeanor only. "And as long as he performs like this, we don't mind him having a chip on his shoulder."

Burger knows he's got that scowl. He played with reckless abandon Thursday night, relishing the opportunity to drive the ball right at Dubuque junior Cordell Pemsl, a 6-foot-8 star who has committed to the University of Iowa and already has a Big Ten body.

Burger shots well, distributes the ball, plays solid defense, gets his share of rebounds and helps inspire his teammates.

"I knew Burger could play like that," said McDermott. "I was getting on him a little bit earlier in the year to get that confidence going. Once he gets that confidence going, he's a great player."

"He's really quick, he knows how to play the game, he knows when to shoot it, he knows when to pass it. A great player."

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Burger scored seven points in the last 53 seconds of the first half, including a step-back 3-pointer to give the Saints a 38-33 edge at intermission. He helped seal the victory with a pair of clutch free throws with 7.5 seconds left for his 24th and 25th points.

"It's all a credit to my teammates," he said about his recent performances. "When they push the ball, that's how I get most of my points, going up the court. If they don't help me out I don't get the points."

The Saints zoomed to a 57-43 lead on a no-hesitation triple by McDermott with two minutes left in the third quarter, but the 6-foot-4 senior picked up his third personal foul a few seconds later. McDermott did not sit for long, but the Golden Eagles (12-9) played much better after that and stormed back into contention.

Pemsl pulled Wahlert within 68-66 with a little more than three minutes remaining as the Class 3A combatants duked it out. Nolan Timp pulled Wahlert within 73-71 with 38 seconds remaining and the Ron Thillen gym was rocking.

The Saints lead the entire state in free throwing at 77.5 percent, however, and they put their uncanny accuracy to good use in the final seconds.

Mims made two foul shots with 27 seconds left for a 75-71 lead, taking a deep breath before each shot and making them count. Wahlert missed a 3-pointer, Connor Ramlo got fouled and went 1-for-2 at the line for his only point of the night and a 76-71 edge.

Wahlert missed again, McDermott grabbed the rebound and fed Burger, who made both of his foul shots with 7.5 seconds left for a 78-71 lead.

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Xavier cashed 26 of 32 free throws for 81.3 percent, surpassing its lofty season norm. McDermott was 8-for-8, Burger 10-for-12 and Mims 6-for-8 to lead the way.

The Saints also made ten 3-pointers, with McDermott nailing four triples, Burger three, Winker two and Mims one. The Saints used only six players in the game, with Joe Welch contributing five points off the bench.

Josh Carter poured in 24 points for Wahlert. Pemsf finished with 15 points and Timp had 14.

The Golden Eagles made 30 field goals, compared to only 21 for Xavier, but the Saints outscored the visitors 26-10 at the free throw line and outscored them 30-12 on 3-pointers to grab the victory. Nearly half of Xavier's baskets (10 of 21) were 3-pointers.

WAHLERT (74): Schmitt 1 0-0 3, Wedewer 1 0-0 3, Timp 5 3-4 14, Kluck 0 0-0 0, Carter 11 1-2 24, Till 1 0-0 2, Iwowari 3 2-4 8, Adams 2 1-2 5, Pemsf 6 3-5 15. Totals 30 10-17 74.

XAVIER (78): Mims 4 6-8 15, McDermott 6 8-8 24, Burger 6 10-12 25, Ramlo 0 1-2 1, Welch 2 1-2 5, Winker 3 0-0 8. Totals 21 26-32 78.

Halftime - Xavier 38, Wahlert 33. 3-point goals - Wahlert 4 (Schmitt 1, Wedewer 1, Timp 1, Carter 1), Xavier 10 (McDermott 4, Burger 3, Winker 2, Mims 1).