

Saints aiming for 3A state title

Written by Jim Ecker

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The Xavier Saints need to slow down Dubuque Wahlert star Cordell PemsI on Saturday night to have a realistic chance of winning the Class 3A state basketball title.

If they cannot contain PemsI, they might have to settle for second place.

The 10th-ranked Saints (18-8) face the second-ranked Golden Eagles (21-5) in the state finals at 6:05 p.m. Saturday at Wells Fargo Arena in Des Moines.

PemsI, a 6-foot-8 beast, has led Wahlert to two straight 3A titles and will be aiming to finish his all-state career with another crown before heading to the University of Iowa.

He's one of the favorites for the Mr. Basketball Award this season and a third straight title might clinch the deal.

PemsI destroyed the Saints in their only meeting this season on Feb. 18 in Dubuque. He made 15 of 19 shots, poured in 35 points and snared 11 rebounds in a 68-56 victory by the Golden Eagles in a Mississippi Valley Conference game.

"Wahlert is a heck of a team, is what we learned," Xavier coach Ryan Luehrsmann said. "We

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got humbled up there pretty good. They were clicking on all cylinders. It probably didn't help that it was Senior Night."

The Saints were reeling after that loss to Wahlert, which saddled them with their sixth straight defeat heading into the postseason tournament. The Saints began the year with a sparkling 13-2 record, but the six-game losing streak left them with a 13-8 mark for the regular season.

The six-game slide included losses to state powers Iowa City West, Cedar Falls and Linn-Mar in addition to Wahlert, but the Saints were questioning themselves a little as they headed into the postseason.

"It kind of humbled us," senior Ryan Stulken said.

The Saints also battled injuries to star guards Mitchell Burger and Matt Mims during the losing streak. Burger and Mims are healthy now, but guard Nolan Butkowski sprained an ankle Thursday night against Pella in the Class 3A semifinals and could be limited in the finals.

Stulken and Max Techau, a pair of lanky 6-foot-7 forwards, will have the primary responsibility of trying to defend PemsI, although the Saints are likely to stick with a zone defense that has carried them thus far in the playoffs.

Xavier finished third in the state tournament last year, which at the time was the highest finish in school history. Now the Saints will finish first or second, depending on what happens against PemsI and the Golden Eagles.

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This makes two straight highly successful campaigns.

"We've got a pretty good culture that's been established," said Luehrsmann, in his fourth year as Xavier's head coach. "Basketball at Xavier now is a year-round thing. The culture now is that we play this game year-round."

The Saints defeated third-ranked Spirit Lake, 58-47, in the first round Tuesday night and clipped top-ranked Pella, 70-65, in the semifinals Thursday. Luehrsmann likes the schedule of having a day off between games.

"I think it's perfect," he remarked. "It gives you a chance to rest. I think the quality of the games are better because of it than if you played three days in a row. Plus it gives you time to try and put together a game plan."

Luehrsmann thought Xavier's rugged schedule in the Mississippi Valley Conference helped prepare them for the state tournament games against Spirit Lake and Pella, but the Saints will not have that advantage tonight when they meet MVC neighbor Wahlert for the title.