

Saints stun Wahlert for 3A title

Written by Jim Ecker

Saturday, 12 March 2016 21:27 -



DES MOINES - Their head coach was called for a dubious technical foul that forced him to sit in his chair for most of the game and only one of their players made the all-tournament team, but none of that matters now.

The Xavier Saints are the Class 3A state champions and they finally have a banner to hang in their gym alongside all the other state championship banners from all their other sports.

Ryan Luehrsmann had tears in his eyes when the final buzzer sounded in Xavier's stunning 62-57 victory over Dubuque Wahlert in the finals of the boys state basketball tournament Saturday night at Wells Fargo Arena.

Wahlert was seeking its third state title in a row, but the Saints found a way to slow down 6-foot-8 all-star Cordell Pemsl and shock the world.

"It's just a surreal moment," said Luehrsmann. "People tell you to savor it and enjoy the moment. That's what I'm trying to do right now.

"It's so emotional," he said. "You get connected with these kids."

Luehrsmann got slapped with a technical foul with 5:01 left in the second quarter, so according to the rules he had to sit in his chair the rest of the game except for timeouts and other stoppages of play.

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Luehrsmann said he doesn't know what the technical was for. Xavier assistant coaches insisted there was no foul language or anything that was out of line or uncommon.

"You'd have to ask the ref," said Luehrsmann. "I've done a lot worse, I can tell you that. I didn't get a warning or anything. It was really a surprise."

Luehrsmann said it was "brutal" to have to sit in his chair the rest of the night, reminiscent of the old seat-belt rule that was revoked before the season.

Absolutely brutal," he said about having an assigned seat. "You can't coach your team as well if you can't get up and be able to interact a little more with them."

Luehrsmann credited his players for ignoring the technical and sticking "perfectly" to the game plan.

"At the end of the day," he said, "basketball is a player's game. And tonight they were big-time players."

Sophomore Jackson Joens led Xavier for the second straight contest with a game-high 18 points and made the all-tournament team, but none of the other Saints were selected by the media. Chariton, MOC-Floyd Valley and Pella also put one man on the all-tournament team and Dubuque Wahlert had two, including Pemsl as the MVP.

Luehrsmann said he was not bothered by the all-tourney selections.

"Not at all. We're a true team," he remarked. "Cordell Pemsl is one of the greatest players in Iowa high school basketball history. Just a terrific kid. He's very deserving of that honor."

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Pemsl, who will join the Iowa Hawkeyes next season, destroyed Xavier with 35 points and 11 rebounds when the Golden Eagles whipped the Saints 68-56 in the final game of the regular season on Senior Night in Dubuque, handing the Saints their sixth loss in a row, but the Saints were ready for the big guy this time with a variety of defensive alignments.

Pemsl finished with only 15 points this time, although he did grab 13 rebounds.

"They were mixing it up a lot," said Pemsl, who remembered seeing the Saints in a 2-3 zone, a 3-2 zone, a 1-3-1 zone and a man-to-man. "It seems like every time we came down the floor it was something new. We had a hard time adjusting to it.

"You have to tip your hat to them for being clutch and hitting shots and kind of taking us out of our rhythm the entire game."

Ryan Stulken, a 6-foot-7 senior, said communication was the key on defense. "It felt like we had him in control," he said.

The Saints may have tricked the Golden Eagles by not using all their defensive alignments during that first meeting in Dubuque.



"To be honest, we didn't want to show our hand in that game," said Luehrsmann. "We played it pretty vanilla. We were hoping we'd have a chance later on down the line. And we were blessed

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to get that opportunity tonight.

"We just paid more attention to Cordell," he said.

The Saints got contributions from all seven of their players. Mitchell Burger collected 16 points, four rebounds and three assists. Matt Mims scored 11 points and made a huge steal and layup for a 56-49 lead, followed by his two clutch free throws with 22.6 seconds left for a 61-57 advantage.

Stulken contributed nine points and six rebounds. Max Techau had six points and five boards. Bryce Schulte gave the Saints nine valuable minutes off the bench, with his typically strong defense, and Nolan Butkowski contributed two minutes despite suffering a severely sprained ankle in Thursday's victory over Pella in the semifinals.

Xavier ended the regular season with six straight losses, then turned things completely around with six straight wins in the playoffs to finish 19-8.

"Just a heck of a year that these guys were able to put together," said Luehrsmann. "We knew we were capable of having a special year, but never in our wildest imagination did we think we'd end up playing on Saturday night and be able to come out with a win. But when you work hard and surround yourself with good people, you have a chance, in life and in moments like these in sports.

"It's just a real special moment."

Joens and Mims showed uncommon poise and composure in the championship game for 10th graders.

"It was just like any other game," Joens claimed. "Coach Stovie (assistant coach Brad Stovie) told us before the game, it was just like any other game. We just had to go out and treat it like a

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normal game and do what we do."

The Saints whipped third-ranked Spirit Lake, top-ranked Pella and second-ranked Wahlert at the state tournament.

"It was nice playing the underdog role," said Stulken, whose club was ranked 10th by the Associated Press. "Everyone thought we wouldn't win.

"Spirit Lake was a higher seed, Pella was a higher seed and Wahlert, they're a juggernaut too. It was great coming in as the underdog."

Regis High School won five state basketball titles in 1962, 1979, 1982, 1983 and 1984, but Xavier had never won a boys basketball title since Regis and LaSalle merged to form the new Catholic school in 1998.

Luehrsmann, in his fourth year as head coach, led the Saints to the promised land this season despite having four new starters in the lineup.

"We've built a lot of special relationships here during the past four years," he said. "You're preaching to them that some day we want to hang a banner in the Xavier gym, because there isn't one for boys basketball. That's kind of been a mantra for our program early on.

"To these guys' credit, they believed in us as a coaching staff and what we had to sell."

Josh Schmitt popped in five 3-pointers and scored 15 points for Wahlert (21-6). The Golden Eagles led 35-29 with three minutes left in the third quarter and they held a 47-43 lead early in the fourth period, but the Saints took over from there.

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Stulken gave Xavier a 48-47 lead with a 3-pointer on a feed from Burger, Techau made it 50-47 with a layup on another dish from Burger and Stulken made it 52-47 with two free throws with 2:58 left to finish a key 9-0 spurt.

Joens gave the Saints a 59-51 margin with two foul shots with 54.7 seconds left, but Wahlert clawed within 59-57 on a three-point play by Pemsl with 23.6 seconds to go.

Mims hit two free throws to make it 61-57 with 22.6 seconds left. Wahlert missed two 3-pointers on the same possession, then Burger got fouled and made one free throw with 5.6 seconds left to clinch it.

"This one is really hard for us," said Wahlert Coach Tom English. "It's hard for us to stomach, because we're a senior-dominated team. These guys have been together for many, many years.

"They've had quite a run, and it's tough to have it end abruptly like this."

XAVIER (62): Burger 6 2-4 16, Mims 4 2-2 11, Joens 5 6-6 18, Stulken 2 3-4 9, Techau 2 2-2 6, Butkowski 0 0-0 0, Schulte 1 0-0 2. Totals 20 15-18 62.

WAHLERT (57): Schmitt 5 0-0 15, Wedewer 2 2-2 8, Kluck 4 0-0 10, Till 4 1-2 9, Pemsl 6 3-6 15, Iwowari 0 0-0 0, Timmerman 0 0-0 0. Totals 21 6-10 57.

Halftime - Xavier 23, Wahlert 20. 3-point goals - Xavier 7 (Burger 2, Joens 2, Stulken 2, Mims 1), Wahlert 9 (Schmitt 5, Wedewer 2, Kluck 2).