

Wantock's injury mars night for Linn-Mar

Written by Jim Ecker

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The Linn-Mar Lions finished the regular season with a 9-and-0 record Friday night and earned a No. 1 seed for the Class 4A playoffs, but the Lions were crying in their locker room after they defeated the Xavier Saints, 28-7.

They were not tears of happiness.

Linn-Mar tailback Mitch Wantock hurt his right ankle late in the third quarter and was taken to a local hospital for treatment. The initial report was not good.

"I'm pretty sure Wantock's ankle is broken," Coach Bob Forsyth said somberly at Saints Field.

Wantock carried the ball 14 times for 102 yards before he was injured on a running play. That raised his season total to 1,094 yards, but the 6-foot-1, 195-pound senior probably will be watching from the sidelines when the playoffs start.

Linn-Mar (9-0) will host Clinton (3-6) in the first round of the playoffs Wednesday night. Xavier (5-4) plays at Pleasant Valley (7-2) Wednesday night. Both games start at 7 p.m.

Mark Atwater and Andy Henry, the stars of Linn-Mar's potent passing attack, were on the same wave length again Friday and gave Xavier fits all night. Atwater completed only 10 passes, but all 10 went to Henry for 176 yards and three touchdowns.

Henry made a sliding catch in the end zone for a 6-yard touchdown in the second quarter, wrestled the ball away from a Xavier defender for a 27-yard TD in the third quarter and hauled in a perfect fade pass from Atwater for a 12-yard score in the final stanza.

"I did not throw the ball very well tonight and he made spectacular catches," Atwater said. "He's a spectacular player and he makes me look pretty good."

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Henry, a fleet 6-foot-3 senior, has caught 17 touchdown passes this season and scored two other TDs on kick returns.

Henry and Atwater appeared to have ESP. Every time Atwater needed a completion, Henry was there to comply.

"We hang out a lot, so I don't know," Henry said about his special connection with his quarterback. "We've practiced a ton, so I think that helps a lot, too."

Atwater and Henry have been a special combo this season.

"Really special," Forsyth said. "Andy's done a great job and Mark's done a great job. Mark does a really good job of running our offense."

The Xavier Saints (5-4) squandered several golden opportunities and ended up being their own worst enemy, mostly with two costly penalties.

The run of bad luck began in the first quarter when Linn-Mar fumbled a punt inside its own 25-yard line. Drew Scott appeared to recover for the Saints, but the Lions managed to regain control and avoid a costly turnover.

Xavier appeared to take a 6-0 lead in the first quarter on a 64-yard screen pass from Reggie Schulte to Nick Ball, but an illegal block negated the touchdown.

The Saints appeared to have another touchdown on a trick pass from Corbin Woods to Jordan Hoffman, but Linn-Mar defensive back Travis Kvach wisely committed pass interference in the end zone to stop the TD and give Xavier a first down at the 8-yard line instead. The Saints stalled, tried a field goal and had it blocked.

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Xavier was the victim of rotten luck again late in the first half when Cal Stovie broke loose for a 56-yard punt return, scurrying all the way to the Linn-Mar 1-yard line, but the play was nullified by another penalty.

"Our kids played hard and just couldn't fight through some unfortunate breaks that didn't go our way," Coach Duane Schulte remarked. "I can't explain it.

"We had some plays that just didn't go our way that maybe would have put us on top and won this game."

The Saints lost a 33-yard touchdown run by Matt Hansen due to another penalty, but they ended up scoring on that drive anyway on a 9-yard pass from Schulte to Hoffman.

Meanwhile, Linn-Mar built a 21-0 lead in the fourth quarter on the three touchdown passes from Atwater to Henry. The Saints cut it to 21-7, but Atwater scored on a 2-yard run with 4:35 left in the game to ice the victory.

Linn-Mar has talked all season about having a strong "finish" to the season. The Lions have finished the regular season in style with a perfect record and No. 1 seed.

"I feel really good about that," Henry said. "We've finished the regular season, and now it's time for the postseason."

Atwater finished the regular season with 23 touchdown passes and eight TD runs, accounting for 31 scores in nine games. Now he's looking forward to the next phase of the campaign.

"This is what we wanted to do right now. This is the point we wanted to be at," he said. "The hay is in the barn, as we say. It's playoff time."

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Forsyth originally did not want to speak with reporters after the game and said his players were off-limits as well, then changed his mind and answered questions. He and the Lions were upset about Wantock's injury, leading to his reluctance to talk.

Ten minutes later, he agreed to answer questions about his team's perfect regular season.

"Listen, it's a great accomplishment by our players and assistant coaches," he said. "It's a great thing for the program, there's no doubt about that.

"We worked hard to get this done. It's really tough to do this in this league."

Xavier tailback Carter Valentine carried the ball 13 times for 72 yards, raising his season total to 1,043 yards.

Xavier defensive back Jordan Weber suffered a sprained ankle in the first quarter, returned briefly but then watched the rest of the game on crutches. Coach Schulte said he wasn't sure if Weber could play Wednesday night or not.

All four of Xavier's losses this season were to ranked teams, including No. 1 Cedar Falls, No. 2 Iowa City High, No. 3 Linn-Mar and No. 9 Iowa City West, according to the AP rankings when they met.

"All the teams we played are good football teams," Schulte said. "We'll see if it prepared us Wednesday or not."

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LINN-MAR 28, XAVIER 7

LM CRX

First Downs	18	10
Rushing	42-227	31-171
Passing	10-14-1	12-19-0
Passing Yards	176	115
Punts	3-43.3	4-33.8
Penalties	8-69	5-50
Fumbles/Lost	3/0	1/1

Linn-Mar	0	7	7	14	- 28
Xavier	0	0	0	7	- 7

SCORING PLAYS

LM - Andy Henry 6 pass from Mark Atwater (Quinn Treiber PAT)
LM - Henry 27 pass from Atwater (Treiber PAT)
LM - Henry 12 pass from Atwater (Treiber PAT)
CRX - Jordan Hoffman 9 pass from Reggie Schulte (Chad Gilmer PAT)
LM - Atwater 2 run (Treiber PAT)

INDIVIDUAL STATISTICS

LINN-MAR

RUSHING: Wantock 14-102, Atwater 16-89, Trabucco 8-42, Ophoff 2-minus 4, Team 2-minus 2.

PASSING: Atwater 10-14-1, 176.

RECEIVING: Henry 10-176.

XAVIER

RUSHING: Hansen 8-84, Valentine 13-72, Schulte 7-14, Ball 3-1.

PASSING: Schulte 12-19-0, 115

RECEIVING: Hoffman 4-51, Ball 3-55, Hansen 2-12, Hosch 1-4, Woods 1-3, Schulte 1-minus 10.

SOPHOMORE GAME: Xavier 49, Linn-Mar 0