

Gardner sparks No. 3 Saints by Hawks, 28-7

Written by Jim Ecker

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The Xavier Saints hopped aboard a red-headed comet Friday night and soared into the semifinals of the Class 4A playoffs.

Wes Gardner rambled for 173 yards and scored two touchdowns as the third-ranked Saints topped Prairie, 28-7, before an overflow crowd of approximately 4,500 fans at Saints Field.

Xavier (12-0) will play Cedar Falls (11-1) in the semifinals next Friday at 7:06 p.m. in the UNI-Dome in Cedar Falls. Ankeny (12-0) will meet Southeast Polk (10-2) in the first semifinal at 4:06 p.m.

The Saints got off to a sluggish start against Prairie and trailed 7-0 in the second quarter when Gardner replaced Brendan Miller at tailback. They took off from there, with Gardner attacking the line of scrimmage.

The Saints were a different club with the red-headed tailback in the ballgame.

"Wes played a great football game," Xavier Coach Duane Schulte said. "The offensive line started to get off the ball a little better and get a little more surge and he took advantage of it. That helps."

Gardner did not begin the season as a tailback. He was strictly a defensive back when practice began in August, but began working in the offensive backfield after Cal Stovie suffered a torn ACL during a 48-14 victory over Prairie in Week 3.

Gardner had run for only 187 yards all season, but he nearly matched that in the biggest game of the year so far.

"I'm just excited to keep playing hard and get to the Dome," said Gardner, a 5-10, 165-pound

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junior. "Work hard for the seniors. Get them there."

Gardner scored on a 5-yard run with 4:38 left in the first half to get the Saints on the scoreboard and Ryan Persick's PAT made it 7-7.

Persick gave Xavier a 10-7 lead with he drilled a 46-yard field goal with 21 seconds left in the half. Persick made it 13-7 when he hit a 38-yard field goal with 8:35 remaining in the third quarter as the Saints scored on three straight possessions.

Meanwhile, Xavier's defense tightened the screws on Prairie quarterback Jace Hanna and made it tougher and tougher for the Hawks to move the ball. Hanna finished 17 of 47 for 190 yards and absorbed several strong hits from the Saints.

"We knew what their routes were going to be," said Gardner, who played the entire game on defense in addition to his work at tailback. "Good job by our line to get up there and pressure him."

Hanna normally hits 59 percent of his passes, but he completed only 36 percent against the stingy Saints. Xavier kept changing its assignments in the defensive backfield, giving Hanna different looks all night.

"We mix it up, because they're such great athletes and Jace Hanna is a great quarterback," said Xavier defensive back Trey Sampson. "We had to keep moving around and switching it around."

Xavier quarterback Reggie Schulte, the most accurate passer in the state at 75 percent, also had a tough night and finished 11 of 20 for 106 yards, but he made several big plays and scored on a 12-yard run in the fourth quarter for a 19-7 lead. Gardner's conversion made it 21-7.

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Gardner sealed the victory with a 2-yard touchdown with 6:21 left in the game.

Corbin Woods caught eight passes for 82 yards for Xavier, including a sensational 20-yard grab when he leaped between two defenders to help set up a touchdown.

Schulte and Hanna had combined to throw 63 touchdown passes this season, but neither QB had a touchdown pass Friday.

The Hawks hurt their chances by committing seven personal fouls in the contest, mostly for a series of late hits. Three of those personal fouls by the Prairie defense came on one drive and helped Xavier march 88 yards for the tying touchdown in the second quarter.

Prairie was whistled 10 times for 110 yards, a big factor in the outcome.

The Hawks looked like the sharper team in the first quarter, but they couldn't sustain it and their surge through the playoffs came to an end. Prairie (8-4) upset Dubuque Senior in the first round and shocked No. 2 Iowa City West in the Sweet 16, but they ran out of steam on Saints Field.

Prairie Coach Mike Morrissey held an emotional meeting with his players on the field after the game and broke down in tears as he hugged his players. He told the Hawks to be proud of their accomplishments this season after finishing with a 2-7 record last year.

"Thank you from myself and the rest of the coaches for letting us be part of it," Morrissey told his club.

Jarred Edmonds caught seven passes for 128 yards for the Hawks.

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Xavier defeated Cedar Falls, 24-7, in the UNI-Dome on Oct. 12. A big contingent of approximately 1,500 Saints fans made the trip to Cedar Falls that night and know the way.

"It will be a tough game," Coach Schulte said. "It's tough to beat Cedar Falls in the Dome.

"We were able to do it before and we'll try and do it again. But they're a good football team, obviously. We'll give it a shot."

Cedar Falls rallied to defeat Pleasant Valley, 28-21, in the quarterfinals Friday night at Pleasant Valley.

The Class 4A championship game will be played in the UNI-Dome on Friday, Nov. 16 at 7:06 p.m. The Saints won the state title in 2006 in the UNI-Dome to finish with a 13-0 mark that year.

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