

## St. Ignace stops Lady Trojans on way to state title

Written by Peter Nocerini

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ESCANABA—St. Ignace had the upper hand on Forest Park all night March 12, ending the Lady Trojans' season with a 68-45 win at the Class D state quarterfinals here.

The Saints, unbeaten and ranked the top Class D team in Michigan—Forest Park was No. 3—moved on to the state semifinals and then the finals, defeating Waterford Our Lady on March 16 in the state championship game. \_\_\_PUBLIC\_\_\_

But Forest Park didn't do so badly. The Lady Trojans finished with a 22-2 record, a Skyline Conference title, a district title, a regional title and an all-state player.

That's a season to really be proud of, even if the girls didn't get to East Lansing.

Question of balance: All-state Class D first teamer junior center Lexi Gussert—it's now official—scored 30 points in the quarterfinal game, including four three-pointers. She supplied two-thirds of the Lady Trojans' point total.

Only one other Lady Trojan had more than five points (Maria Stankewicz scored six on a pair of triples), and that was part of their problem.

Leading the Saints was Sarah Cullip, with 18 points, but three teammates also reached double figures: Kelley Wright at 16, Emily Hinsman at 14 and Margo Brown at 12. "That's tough to defend," Coach Jeff Syrjanen said.

It meant the Saints could focus most of their attention on Gussert, while FP's defense scrambled to stop several different scoring threats in white and gold.

The scorebook tells all:

--Just two Trojans (other than Gussert) made more than one basket in a quarter—Adel Isaacson in the first, and Kendra Campbell in the second.

--Samantha Nylund and Stankewicz were the only other Trojans who scored in more than one quarter.

St. Ignace had no such problems. It quickly became obvious which was the better team.

Saints storm out: The Trojans stayed with the Saints for one quarter. Stankewicz's three opened scoring, and Gussert hit a triple late in the quarter for a brief 16-15 FP lead.

But Cullip scored from the lane and then Brown was fouled while attempting a three at the horn. She made two of three free throws, and the Saints led 19-16 after one.

St. Ignace took charge in the second eight minutes, scoring the first seven points for a 10-point lead. Forest Park was plagued by turnovers, even on inbounds plays, due to the Saints' press and up-close defense.

"That was our fear," said Syrjanen. "When they played Posen [in their regional final game], that's when they jumped out to the same kind of lead. They play that second quarter very well."

Syrjanen also said the foul on Brown as the first quarter ended changed the game's momentum.

"Until then, we were playing our game with them. We came out in that second period, and we weren't able to get the ball inbounds. That took Lexi out of the game for the whole quarter."

Gussert went scoreless in the second quarter, but threes by Campbell and Nylund kept FP within 11 (35-24) at halftime.

Taking over: Early in the second half, the Trojans rallied. Gussert and Stankewicz hit threes

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and Sierra Robarge made a two during an 8-2 rally that got the Lady Trojans within five, 37-32. Gussert kept the Lady Trojans close for most of the quarter, scoring 13.

But Brown's three and two launched another 10-0 Saints run. Cullip scored on a drive, and Wright's three helped them to a 54-42 lead after three. "That was the game right there," the Trojans' coach said. "We gave them that window—once they got that, we were forced into a different game."

Syrjanen reluctantly switched to a man defense. "I didn't like our chances: They were a little bigger, and we had foul trouble with Stankewicz and Sam Nylund. But there was no other way to go at it."

Free throws increased the Saints' lead to 18 early in the fourth quarter, but it never got above that. Gussert scored all 12 of FP's points in the team's final quarter of the season.

Fewer chances: The stat sheet held a surprise—the Lady Trojans shot better from the field than St. Ignace, 41% to 32%. But the Saints shot nearly twice as often—82 attempts to FP's 47, who usually get 60-some shots.

Syrjanen said he was satisfied with how the Lady Trojans' zone defense worked. "It seemed to be pretty effective against their shooters. They seemed to score most of their points on layups off their press."

FP's 33 turnovers for the night was much above normal. "The difference in the game was their press and us not handling it."

Gussert finished with 30 points despite only 19 shots from the floor. "Usually she's between 25 and 29. But we couldn't get the shots for her. At the end of the game, they were triple-teaming her. When she would bring the ball up, they had three people on her."

Pressure points: Syrjanen said Stankewicz, a freshman guard and a big asset for Forest Park all season, tried hard to break the press and help Gussert. "That's going to pay dividends for her down the road. She's going to get better and better."

Isaacson finished the game strong. Nylund stepped up and played well, even with foul trouble, and had eight rebounds. "We had different opportunities," the coach said. "It seemed a lot of things didn't go our way, but mostly it was because of the pressure they were putting on us."

It was the final game for seniors Gina Graff and Ronnie Jaeger. The rest of the Lady Trojans will return, backed up by the top players from Jackie Giuliani's 19-1 junior varsity team. And the Saints? They just lose two seniors.

Numbers: FP team: 19-47 (40%) FG, 8-20 (40%) 3's, 6-8 FT, 16 fouls, 33 turnovers. Stl team: 26-81 (32%) FG, 4-12 (33%) 3's, 12-24 FT, 13 fouls, 15 turnovers.

FP stats: Lexi Gussert, 30 pts, 4x3, 7 rebs; 4 asts; Maria Stankewicz, 6 pts, 2x3, 3 asts, 2 stls; Kendra Campbell, 5 pts, 8 rebs; Samantha Nylund, 5 pts, 8 rebs. Stl stats: Sarah Cullip, 18 pts, 7 rebs, 4 stls; Kelley Wright, 16 pts, 2 asts, 2 stls; Emily Hinsman, 14 pts, 6 rebs; Margo Brown, 12 pts, 2x3.

Trojans	16	8	18	12	--	54
Saints	19	16	19	16	--	70