

Staple's Test Xavier's Grit as the Knights Earn a Win  
By Mike LiVigni

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“They were a physical team,” said Xavier senior lock Hanoi Nelson describing Staples High School after a match played in slippery conditions at Aviator Field in Brooklyn. “They ran at us hard, wouldn’t go down easy, and they tested our grit.”

Although the Knights scored a 39-12 victory over the Connecticut state champs and perennial rugby powerhouse, there was nothing but admiration for the Staples Wreckers who brought the Knights their biggest physical challenge of the season. “We knew they were a big team . . . and they certainly were,” said Xavier head coach Greg Norris, “and we also knew with their size and level of coaching that we needed to treat them with respect.” Assistant coach Ski Bailey agreed. “They had a large and formidable pack that wasn’t afraid to grind us down up front. It took us a while to adjust in the breakdown,” Bailey said “but ultimately, our ability to take away their lineout, thanks to varsity debutant Malachi Young and the Xavier forwards, gave us an edge in a vital aspect of the game.”

Xavier’s first try came nine minutes into the match, as senior center and captain Max Wyckoff crossed the try-line. Wyckoff scored again four minutes later. That was followed by two more tries, one by Senior flanker Frank Ancona, and the other by senior center Connor Gangemi, whose conversion kick left the score in Xavier's favor 22-0 thirty minutes into the match. The third try was one that Xavier battled for. According to Nelson, the Knights pushed at the goal line in the face of a tough Staples defense. “It was pick and go, we kept running it at them, and it

took at least 2-3 minutes to get the ball in there. It was brutal, but when we scored it was satisfying.”

Two yellow cards in the first half left Staples down a man for twenty minutes in what turned out to be costly penalties that Xavier took full advantage of. But the Wrecker’s senior full-back, Callum McLean, got one across the line right before the half. This left the score at 22-7 after Staples’ senior fly-half Mattius Bassler’s conversion kick went through the uprights.

Staples coach Jack Corcoran noted that Xavier did exactly everything the Staples coaches teach their players, but added that the Knights executed their game plan better. “Staples started off the game reacting and not taking control,” Corcoran said, “Xavier hit the wide channels and folded faster on defense faster than Staples. That made the biggest difference in the game.”

The Wreckers came out of half-time determined to score and did so within the first ten minutes when junior flanker/lock Mike Wang punched one over to make the score 22-12. But the Knights would add three more tries to seal the deal. Junior lock Gianni Jeudy scored 56 minutes in, and senior prop and vice-captain Nick Son added another try four minutes later with Gangemi kicking the conversion. Junior eight Rob Milacci added a final try at the 70-minute mark.

“Staples played flat in the beginning, didn’t take control of the game or exploit the early mistakes Xavier made,” Corcoran said. “Once Xavier settled into the game, they exploited the weaknesses Staples showed: not connecting on defense, leaving wings on an island for not folding properly, and being too obvious with their backline attack.” But Norris noted that from Xavier’s perspective, the Staples squad was relentless. “Staples were big and they did exactly what we thought they were going to do. They were going to run at us at their first and second

channel and they certainly came back and put us under pressure in the first half. As the season progresses, they will be formidable.”

Xavier junior flanker Malachai Young, stepping in for an injured Liam Averil, earned his first varsity cap in style with man-of-the-match honors. According to captain Max Wyckoff, “Malachi Young stepped up and did incredible in the lineouts, and deserves to get the man of the match.” Young noted that it was Xavier’s line speed that gave the team the edge over a very strong Staples pack. “Having constant line speed when defending, and staying in their faces all game gave us success,” Young said. Throughout the match, Young was able to recognize and attack Staples’ lineouts, leading to several turnovers and increased Xavier possession. But Staples played a full game and stayed physical the entire match.

Corcoran, while disappointed at the outcome, expressed pride in his team. “The players' response after the game was the best part of the day. The boys knew they did not play their best but the issues we had in that match are fixable. Xavier taught Staples what their weaknesses were and how to hold themselves accountable. The Staples boys are eager at practice to learn and improve themselves and their game plan. They will learn from these mistakes, and it will make a huge difference when their next game comes up this Sunday vs. Greenwich.”