

## Dynamic Guards “Press the Issue” to Give Rice Freshman Title

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Jeremy Gregg hit the biggest two of his 28 points on a pull up jumper with just under 6 minutes to go in the final period. That basket put the Raiders ahead to stay at 58-56. On their very next possession, the Raiders swung the ball around with quick passing to Melvin Johnson who hit a left corner trey to put them up five and propel them ultimately to a 72-60 win and a second consecutive freshman championship over Xaverian at Holy Cross on Sunday

Both teams came out shooting in the first quarter and Xaverian, behind their own terrific back court prospect Brian Bernardi took an 18-16 lead. In the second quarter the other Clippers joined him thanks to great ball movement and passing. Shakell Kemp overcame a slow start to score inside. Dillon Burns, who was terrific in the Clippers' semi-final win over Holy Cross made some nice plays and the Clippers got a boost from reserve Jad Dayekh, who scored 6 of his 8 points in the period. All of this good work gave Xaverian a 39-28 halftime advantage even though Gregg and Da'Shawn Suber were having strong games for the Raiders.

As the third quarter began, the Raiders found the part of their game that had been missing; defensive pressure. They used what appeared to be either a 2-2-1 press, or a 1-2-1-1 or “diamond” press. And while it did not create many turnovers at first it made the Clippers play at a tempo faster than they were comfortable with. The results were quick shots, and missed layups by Xaverian and transition opportunities for Rice. Gregg and Suber's speed and quickness were essential to the defense but the ability of both those kids to make shots cannot be underestimated. They're both guys who have the ability to hit from middle distance. While Suber creates room for that shot with good strength and the “built in” advantage of being left-handed, Gregg is very quick can change direction and has the ability to stop on a dime to get that shot.

Xaverian might have survived that third quarter surge by Rice were it not for Suber's momentum changing play at the end of the third period. With Xaverian up 41-35 Suber swished a shot from three quarter court as time expired. The basket of course, counted for just three points but it meant much more in terms of the game's outcome. As good as Rice's defense had been in the third quarter to begin the comeback, that play helped them ratchet it up to an even greater level of intensity. And then, in addition to hurried shots Xaverian committed some costly some turnovers. After Gregg's go-ahead basket, and Mitchell Johnson's long triple Rice pulled away comfortably.

Xaverian's second year freshman coach Chris Alesi, who has led the freshman Clippers to finals appearances in each of his seasons at the helm, let frustration get the better of him by picking up his second technical foul with 16 seconds left in the game. It's unfortunate that some fans attending the game will remember that before they'll remember the great effort his team had despite the loss. Bernardi, who finished with a team high 23 points, showed more than the deadly jumper for which he's already well known. Kemp, the 6'6" lefty who finished with 10 points showed flashes that indicate that he'll develop into a fine prospect as well.

Suber, who finished with 22 points, and Gregg showed that with continued hard work they can be worthy successors in the rich tradition of Rice guards. Johnson, who finished with 12 points, figures to be a hard working but smooth wing player who fits perfectly into the transition game that Coach Moe Hicks has made the Raiders' trade mark. He'll have Coach Charles Reid, who has won two straight titles at the freshman level, to thank for helping him continue his great run of success.

Rice was a worthy victor in a great game that demonstrated that the future of both of these programs is very bright. Don't be surprised if the core of both these teams isn't competing for a varsity championship at Fordham soon. If that happens, the intensity they played with in this game will be a big reason why.