

Saints bracing for big changes in 2014

Written by Jim Ecker

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There are big changes in store for the Xavier football team this year after two straight trips to the Class 4A championship game.

First of all, the Saints are now a Class 3A team following the break-up of the Mississippi Valley Conference and the shift to district football for everyone.

Secondly, most of the outstanding players who led Xavier to the 4A finals in 2012 and 2013 have graduated, putting Coach Duane Schulte in "rebuilding" mode for the first time in several seasons.

And finally, the Saints appear to have a challenging schedule even though all of their traditional 4A opponents in the Metro area declined to play them this year.

Eight of Xavier's nine opponents made the IHSAA playoffs last season. The Saints open the season on the road against Dowling Catholic, the same team that beat them in the 4A finals last November. The next-to-last game of the season is against Class 1A Iowa City Regina, which is riding a 56-game winning streak and has won four state titles in a row.

Solon reached the Class 3A semifinals last year. Davenport Assumption made the 4A playoffs. DeWitt Central, Maquoketa, Western Dubuque and Marion all made the 3A playoffs.

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Schulte scoffed at the silly notion that his club would breeze through the regular season and run away with the Class 3A state title because of their great tradition. On the other hand, he promises his team will come to play each and every night with a basically new cast of characters.

"We'll go battle," he vowed. "I'll say this: They'll fight hard."

Xavier compiled a 25-3 overall record the last two seasons. Two of those losses came in the state finals and the other was a regular-season setback to Cedar Rapids Washington last year.

The Saints won the Class 4A title in 2006 and reached the finals three times in eight years with outstanding clubs, but Schulte has no regrets about leaving 4A football behind.

"No, not at all," he said. "I think we're where we're supposed to be. We're a 3A-sized school with 3A enrollment, so we're going to play 3A."

The Saints played at the Class 4A level during their first 15 years of existence as a requirement for belonging to the Mississippi Valley Conference, but that changed following the 2013 campaign when the final dominoes fell in favor of district football.

The Saints are looking forward to the season, regardless of their classification.

"I'm just happy to be playing football another year," said Jay Kortemeyer, a running back and linebacker. "It will be my last year. I'm just happy to be playing again."

"I just want to play football," agreed linebacker Thomas Ickes. "I don't care where we are."

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The Saints have only four returning starters on their 71-man roster with Kortemeyer, Tim Otting and Louis Hasley on offense and Nic Ekland on defense. Many other players saw the playing field last year and the sophomore team went 7-2, so the Saints are not completely devoid of experience and talent.

"There's rich tradition here at Xavier," said Ickes. "We always expect to do good things.

"We lost a lot of guys who graduated last year, but we're going to get new guys on the field and do the best we can."

Bryce Schulte, who was promoted to the varsity last season as a freshman, is the leading candidate to become the new starting quarterback. The coach's son saw spot duty as a backup QB in 2013 and has a strong arm.

The Saints open the season with road games at Dowling and Davenport Assumption, followed by a home date with Solon.

"Those three games are going to be as good as any games in the state, I think, in terms of competition," Coach Schulte said.

2014 SCHEDULE

Friday, Aug. 29 - at Dowling Catholic

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Thursday, Sept. 4 - at Davenport Assumption

* Friday, Sept. 12 - Solon

* Friday, Sept. 19 - at DeWitt Central

* Friday, Sept. 26 - Maquoketa

* Friday, Oct. 3 - Western Dubuque

* Friday, Oct. 10 - at Dubuque Wahlert

Friday, Oct. 17 - Iowa City Regina

* Friday, Oct. 24 - Marion

* Class 3A District Games