

Saints face big obstacle in No. 1 Pella

Written by Jim Ecker

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The Xavier Saints were quickly made the early favorite to win the Class 3A football title this season after they dropped from Class 4A following the 2013 campaign.

The Saints (9-3) still have an excellent shot of winning the championship as they head into the semifinals against top-ranked Pella (12-0) Thursday night at 8:21 at the UNI-Dome in Cedar Falls, but they are no longer the prohibitive favorite.

Creston (10-2) faces No. 3 Sioux City Heelan (11-1) in the other semifinal Thursday at 5:36 p.m.

There have been several twists and turns for the Saints on their way to the UNI-Dome. They lost their season opener to Dowling in a rematch of the Class 4A finals from last year, which was no big surprise. Dowling has reached the Class 4A semifinals again this year and has a powerful team.

The loss to Dowling was not especially troubling, but a month later the Saints had problems moving the ball and lost to Western Dubuque, 7-6, in a district game at Xavier. Then two weeks later the Saints had trouble moving the ball again and lost to Class 1A powerhouse Iowa City Regina, 21-7, for their second loss at Saints Field in three weeks.

Those setbacks left Xavier with a 5-3 overall record, but the Saints rebounded and have whipped No. 4 Waverly-Shell Rock and No. 6 West Delaware in the 3A playoffs the last two weeks to earn a date with No. 1 Pella in the semifinals.

Pella has an impressive 12-0 record, but the Dutch's only victory over a ranked team this season came against No. 5 Dallas Center-Grimes. The Saints, meanwhile, have played a tougher schedule and own victories over No. 2 Solon, No. 4 Waverly-Shell Rock and No. 6

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West Delaware as well as a victory over a Davenport Assumption club that was ranked earlier in the year.

Pella has a better record, but Xavier has played a much tougher schedule and is battle-tested.

The Saints knocked off West Delaware last Friday despite Jay Kortemeyer and Nic Ekland, two of their top players, missing the game with injuries. Coach Duane Schulte does not like to talk about injuries, so everyone will find out Thursday whether they can play or not.

Sean Murphy has subbed for Kortemeyer the last two weeks and done a fine job, rushing for 112 yards against Waverly-Shell Rock the night Kortemeyer got hurt and gaining 111 last week against West Delaware. Kortemeyer has rushed for 1,174 yards and seven touchdowns this season and Murphy now has 444 yards.

Pella has better statistics than Xavier in most respects, but the quarterbacks from both schools have nearly equal numbers. Noah Clayberg has passed for 1,055 yards and 14 touchdowns for the Dutch, while Bryce Schulte has thrown for 1,099 yards and 14 touchdowns for the Saints. They both have thrown only three interceptions.

The numbers become lopsided in Pella's favor from there. The Dutch have scored 79, 69, 61, 56 and 54 points in games this season and are averaging 46 per game. The Saints are averaging 29.5 points, but against stiffer opponents.

Pella has won all 12 of its games by double-digits. The tightest game came against Carlisle, 17-6.

Pella has surrendered an average of seven points per game and Xavier is not far behind at 10.7. Nobody has scored more than 14 points against Pella all season.

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Pella has featured a powerful rushing attack that has piled up 3,541 yards and 56 touchdowns on the ground. Clayberg, a dual threat, has rushed for 1,365 yards and 18 touchdowns. Quinton Murphy has 814 yards and 14 touchdowns while Nathan Henry has 800 yards and 17 touchdowns.

Xavier has rushed for 2,405 yards and 26 touchdowns, but Kortemeyer collected nearly half those yards himself and his status is uncertain. Schulte has run for 12 touchdowns.

The Saints do not have the numbers in their favor, but they do have an important intangible. Xavier reached the championship game of the Class 4A playoffs in 2012 and 2013, despite facing much bigger schools along the way. They embrace the role of underdog and relish proving other people wrong.

Simply put, the Saints expect to win and they know their way around the UNI-Dome.

Thursday night's game will be broadcast by Cedar Rapids radio stations KMRV and KCRG.