

Burns has been a big catch for Saints

Written by Jim Ecker

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Brett Burns has been a secret weapon for the Xavier football team for most of the season, but the secret is out now.

Burns, a lanky tight end, has caught four touchdown passes in the last five games for the Saints and is tied for the team lead with those four TD grabs.

Burns did not catch a single pass for Xavier last year as a junior. And he did not catch any touchdown passes in the first three games this season, but he's become a big threat for the Saints now.

Xavier (8-0, 6-0) will finish the regular season at South Tama on Friday night, then steam into the Class 3A playoffs with a home game next Friday night, Oct. 28.

Burns was a wide receiver for the Saints last year, but he moved to tight end this season and has eight catches for 108 yards. He's tied with Nolan Butkowski and Quinn Schulte with his four TD passes from quarterback Bryce Schulte.

When Coach Duane Schulte sends in the plays, he generally gives Bryce the option of finding an open receiver and throwing the ball to him, rather than picking a receiver in advance.

"Coach Schulte has been calling good plays that get us in areas where we can succeed," Burns said Tuesday before practice. "I'm just glad that Bryce has some trust in me that he's throwing me the ball."

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Burns began his string of touchdowns when he caught a 5-yard TD pass against Charles City in Game 4. Then came a 7-yard touchdown reception against Decorah in Game 5, an 11-yard strike against Waverly-Shell Rock in Game 7 and a 26-yard touchdown against Vinton-Shellsburg last week in Game 8.

Until recently, opposing teams probably overlooked Burns in their scouting reports while they focused on Xavier tailback Maliki Wilson, fullback Erik Rodriguez, the Schulte boys and Butkowski. Now opponents have another offensive weapon to worry about when they face the Saints.

"We have such a dynamic offense," said Burns. "It's like Coach (Craig) Jelinek says, 'We have all six shots in our revolver.' We have different ways that we can attack the defense."

Burns played on special teams last year as a junior but did not get much action as a wide receiver.

"At the end of last season I talked to Coach Schulte and asked him what I could do that would be the most benefit to the team and he said 'tight end.' And so I've just tried to do the best I can to learn that spot," he said. "The linemen have been really good to teach me the blocking part of it."

Burns stands 6-foot-3 and 195 pounds, making him big enough to knock defenders out of the way. It took awhile, but now he's arrived as a blocker and receiver.

"He's kind of like a lot of these guys around here," said Coach Schulte. "He kind of bided his time, if you will, and gave up some stuff for the team, but he made a concerted effort that he wanted to play."

"He put in the time, like a lot of these guys, in the weight room. And I think he kind of realized that a spot on the offensive or defensive side for him would be at tight end."

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"He's kind of grown into his body. He's gotten bigger and taller and stronger in the last couple of years, so that's been the slot he's kind of morphed into."

Burns was a member of the Xavier basketball team that won the Class 3A state title last winter and he's also a good student.

"He's a typical Xavier kid," said Schulte. "He is a really nice kid. We've tried to get more 'ornery' out of him. When he crosses that line (onto the field), you have to turn into a little different animal. And he's starting to get that."

Burns has enjoyed all of the team's success this season and has been happy to become a bigger part of the offense.

"It is a good feeling," he said. "I'm just glad that I can help out the team in any way that I can."

Xavier has already clinched its district title and a No. 1 seed for the playoffs. The playoff pairings will be announced on the Iowa High School Athletic Association website at 10 a.m. Saturday.

Wilson still leads Class 3A in rushing with 1,370 yards this season. Quinn Schulte has climbed to seventh in Class 3A receptions with 37 catches after making 10 grabs last week.