

Gerke helps Saints pin their opponents

Written by Jim Ecker

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Josh Gerke likes to run, he likes to wrestle and he likes to knock people down.

That makes him one of the most versatile high school athletes in Iowa and a three-sport star for the Xavier Saints.

Gerke, a senior, placed in three events at the Class 3A state track meet last spring as a premier half-miler. He's already collected 115 victories as a top wrestler for the Saints, making him only the fourth grappler at Xavier to top 100 wins with another full season to go.

And right now he's a big contributor for the Xavier football team that is undefeated and ranked No. 2 in Class 3A heading into the opening round of the playoffs Friday at 7 p.m. against Davenport Assumption at Saints Field.

He's fast, he's tough and he's talented.

"He excels in everything he does," said Xavier wrestling coach Ryan Chambers. "One of the most dedicated athletes I have ever coached."

Not a lot of guys can crack 2 minutes in the 800 meter run, pin 72 opponents in wrestling, and excel as a defensive back and kick return specialist for one of the top football teams in Iowa.

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"And he's a great kid," said Xavier football coach Duane Schulte. "He'll run through a brick wall if you ask."

Gerke finished sixth in the 800-meter run at the state track meet in 1:58.07. He also helped the Saints take second in the 4x800 relay and place eighth in the distance medley.

He placed fifth at the state wrestling tournament last season at 145 pounds and he's currently tied for second in tackles for the Xavier football team with 31.5, just a half-tackle behind Jack Lemke.

But Gerke is not thinking about individual stats these days. He's focused on helping the Saints beat Davenport Assumption on Friday night. The Saints were upset by Decorah in the early part of the playoffs last season and they are determined that it's not going to happen again.

"It's kind of an unspoken thing," Gerke said this week. "We try not to talk about it, but in the back of our minds, we don't want to let it happen again and go out that way this year."

Decorah came to town last year with a .500 ballclub and ambushed the Saints, who were undefeated at the time - just like they are right now at 9-0.

"It definitely hurt, because it was our home field," said Gerke. "And for our seniors to go out that way was not the way we wanted to. It stuck with us the whole summer."

Gerke has intercepted two passes this season for 27 yards. He's returned seven kickoffs for 104 yards and has nine punt returns for 150 yards for a healthy 16.7-yard average.

He's especially fearless on punt returns, where he's been known to catch a punt at full speed in traffic and break loose for a nice return. "I just go for it," he said simply.

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It's part of his mentality in sports.

"He's a wrestler, so he's tough," said Schulte. "I love having wrestlers, because they generally are tough. And to me, wrestling is like tackling."

Takedowns and tackles are similar, Gerke said. "Especially with open-field tackling, I feel like wrestling helps me a lot."

Gerke was the only returning starter in the defensive backfield for Xavier this season at cornerback. He's meshed with Nolan Butkowski, Bryce Schulte and Quinn Schulte to form an effective unit.

"He's kind of the cornerstone - no pun intended - of our defensive backfield," said Coach Schulte. "When the year started, you could tell he had that senior 'feel' about him.

"He's been very coachable and just playing like a senior."