

Young Saints roll to state volleyball

Written by Jim Ecker

Tuesday, 01 November 2016 04:45 -



Austin Filer does not show a lot of emotion during Xavier volleyball matches, but the first-year head coach had to battle back some tears after the young Saints earned a spot in the Class 4A state tournament Monday night with another impressive performance.

Filer sat alone on the Xavier bench while his players celebrated on the floor at Ron Thillen Gymnasium, his face a little flushed and some moisture around the eyes.

The sixth-ranked Saints swept eighth-ranked Clinton, 25-11, 25-12, 25-22, to claim the fifth trip to the state tournament in school history and the first since 2012.

"It's been a great season," Filer said after collecting his thoughts. "It's great to know that it's not over, but it's always fun to hit goals. I'm really, really proud of my group tonight."

Xavier (31-9) will face Marion (34-9) in the quarterfinals of the state tournament next Tuesday, Nov. 8 at 6 p.m. at the U.S. Cellular Center in downtown Cedar Rapids. The semifinals are scheduled for Thursday, Nov. 10 at noon and the finals are Friday, Nov. 11 at 12:15 p.m.

Filer inherited a club that finished with a 15-22 record last season and completely turned things around despite having only two seniors on the varsity.

"It's a great feeling to have, just knowing that our team put everything out there and gave

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everything we have," said Charlotte Richards, the kills leader for the Saints as a junior. "Knowing that we're going to state now is a great feeling that I'll never forget."

The Saints have already set big goals for the state tournament, despite a star-studded field that features top-ranked Pella, second-ranked Dubuque Wahlert, third-ranked Marion, fourth-ranked Sioux City Heelan and fifth-ranked Charles City.

"I think we're going to win," proclaimed junior Ellie McDermott, one of the leaders on the club. "I have confidence in this team that we're going to win it. We're going to come out stronger than the other team."

That was the case Monday night against Clinton. The Saints jumped to big early leads in all three sets, although they had to survive a rally by the River Queens in the final set.

The Saints posed for pictures with their regional championship banner and celebrated with family and friends on the gym floor, but Filer planned to pull them together before they left the building and start talking about next week.



"They're going to feel good about this for about 15 or 20 minutes," he said, "and then we're going to talk about what our next set of goals are. There's a lot."

"Xavier has a rich tradition in all sports, including volleyball, but there's a lot left on the table that we want to be the first to do."

Winning the state title would top that list.

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"After this we're going to go back in the gym and work hard every single day until it comes to state and we'll be ready to go," proclaimed Richards, who finished the match with her 17th kill.

By the time next week is over, all four girls in the Richards family will have experienced the state volleyball tournament with the Saints. The two oldest Richards sisters, Audrey and Madsy, played in the state tournament in 2012. And now the two youngest sisters, Charlotte and Olivia, are members of this state tournament club for 2016.

Charlotte Richards watched her older sisters play in the state tournament at the Cedar Rapids Ice Arena in 2012.

"I was just a little kid," she said, smiling. "I don't remember much. I remember them playing and they had a great time."

Extending the Richards family tradition is "kind of cool" she remarked after giving her sister Audrey a piggy-back ride.

The Saints became battle-tested this season in the tough Mississippi Valley Conference against a string of talented Class 5A clubs. They won their first 18 matches, hit a slight lull against stiff competition, rebounded and now are headed to state.

"We've had our ups and downs," said Charlotte Richards. "We really had to learn to come together as one team and really figure out how to work well together."

Filer appreciates the way his players listened and learned.

"Every single night we got better and we found out something different about ourselves," he said. "We played bigger, stronger, faster athletes. It's such a blessing to be in that conference."

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"They've opened their minds to learning and getting better and growing as players. And every single day they come into the gym eager to learn."

Lexi Noonan and Jessica Callahan are the only seniors on the varsity. The juniors are Charlotte Richards, McDermott, Anna Parr, Rachel Sodawasser and Janessa Klein. The sophomores are Akeela Jefferson, Emily Jasper, Olivia Richards and Keera Ball.

Marion defeated Xavier earlier this season, but McDermott did not play in that match due to an injury. Marion is seeded No. 3 in the tournament and the Saints are seeded No. 6.

CLASS 4A STATE TOURNAMENT With Seedings

TUESDAY, NOV. 8

4 p.m. - No. 1 Pella (36-4) vs No. 8 Nevada (29-13)

4 p.m. - No. 2 Wahlert (25-6) vs No. 7 Lewis Central (30-8)

6 p.m. - No. 4 Bishop Heelan (34-8) vs No. 5 Charles City (37-5)

6 p.m. - No. 3 Marion (34-9) vs No. 6 Xavier (31-9)