

Successful Saints love their football

Written by Jim Ecker

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Duane Schulte called the Xavier football team together for the start of practice Wednesday and led the team as it jogged from the school to the practice field.

They kept coming and coming and coming.

There are 86 players on the varsity this year, the most since the high school opened for business in 1998. There are another 79 players on the sophomore and freshman teams, making for a total of 165 guys in the Xavier football program.

That represents 46.2 percent of the entire male student population at Xavier, which has 357 boys and 350 girls in grades 9 through 12.

Make no mistake about it: They love their football at Xavier.

"We all love playing for all the coaches out here, we all love working hard," said linebacker Sean Ickes. "That's why Xavier football is such a big thing."

Winning helps too. The Saints won 13 straight games last season and reached the championship game of the Class 4A playoffs before falling to Ankeny, 23-17, in the finals.

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The Saints had 76 guys on the varsity last year. Now they have 86, and Schulte knows every player by name.

"I do. And I know all these freshmen and sophomores," he said.



Xavier has the largest varsity squad in the Metro this year, by far. Linn-Mar has 60 players on its varsity. Nobody else has more than 50.

In terms of sheer numbers, you can't beat the Saints. "Hopefully it says something that we have good coaches and good men to have your son be around and play football with," said Schulte.

The Saints are loaded with experience, especially on a stingy defensive unit that allowed only 121 points in 14 games last season. That's an average of less than nine points per game, and some of those points were scored after Schulte pulled his starters with big leads.

"I think the goal for us, every game, is to not let them score," said Ickes. "We hit hard and we hit often."

Xavier started seven juniors on defense in the state championship game and should have another strong unit this year. "When you have experience like these guys have, you hope they're ready to play," said Schulte.

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Logan Claraham, Daniel Vega, Matt Nelson, Ickes, Wes Gardner, Quinton Scholer, Hunter Baldus and Miles Sullivan are all familiar names on the defensive side of the ball, although Scholer has a new role to play this year as the starting quarterback.

Reggie Schulte, the coach's son, had a phenomenal year in 2012 when he completed 70.9 percent of his passes for 2,501 yards with 37 touchdowns and only eight interceptions, writing his name into the Xavier and Mississippi Valley Conference record books. Schulte, a two-year starter, has joined the Northern Iowa Panthers and it's Scholer's job to run the club now.

"He's getting better every day," Coach Schulte reported. "He's a big kid, strong kid, can run real well. He's getting it figured out more every day."

Scholer threw only two passes last year as a junior, but he was the starting QB on the freshman and sophomore teams and has been groomed for the job.

"Quinton is a smart kid. He's a 4.1 GPA," said Schulte. "He picks things up really fast. We're going to try and keep doing what we did the past two years."

Brendan Miller returns at tailback after rushing for 1,068 yards and 10 touchdowns last season. Gardner, a sparkplug in several games, ran for 333 yards and 4 TDs last year when he wasn't excelling on the defensive unit.

Schulte said Miller is in great shape and has become a leader on the team.

"He's a vocal leader," the coach said. "I can't say enough good things about him right now. I don't want to jinx him, knock on wood."

Corbin Woods is playing baseball in college now after catching 59 passes for 1,169 yards and 15 touchdowns last year, but the Saints have several go-to guys and some promising newcomers in the receiving corp. Bryce Grimm grabbed 36 passes for 485 yards and seven

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TDs in 2012. Nelson caught only 14 passes at tight end, but eight of them went for touchdowns.

Nelson, who has committed to the University of Iowa as a defensive end, will play both ways for the Saints again this season. For the most part, however, the Saints plan to have separate offensive and defensive units to get as many players on the field as possible, including separate units for the special teams.

On top of all their other talent, the Saints feature an all-state placekicker with Ryan Persick. He converted 68 of 70 PAT's last year and hit 10 of 13 field goals with a long of 46 yards.

Everybody knows what the Saints accomplished last year as one of the smallest schools in Class 4A, based on enrollment, but Schulte said they don't talk about 2012. This is a new year, a new team, with new aspirations.

The expectations are certainly high again, but Schulte said they try to keep things as simple as possible.

"We haven't said anything to these guys about wins or losses. We never do," he said. "We always just try to get better. We've never mentioned where they got to last year.

"I'm just trying to get these guys through practice and get better, and Friday nights hopefully take care of themselves because they worked hard all week and did their jobs. We just do our routine and try to keep getting better."

The Saints know they can't simply throw their helmets on the field and expect opponents to run away in fear. "Not a chance," said Miller. "We're working harder every day. Nothing is given. You've got to earn it. You get what you earn."

Schulte has not seen any preseason rankings, but suspects the Saints will be prominently

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mentioned on most lists. "I'm guessing we'll be ranked pretty high. I don't know how high," he said.

Ankeny has split into two schools this year after winning the 2012 state title, so it's possible the Saints could be ranked No.1 in some polls. Schulte has grown accustomed to preseason rankings and knows they do not mean a whole lot.

He remembers cracking the rankings for the first time in 2003.

"At first it kind of bothered me, because I didn't want people to be gunning for us," he said. "When we got ranked I remember thinking, 'You know what? That's a good thing.' It means you're getting better and have one of the good programs.

"If we're ranked this year, that's good I guess. It's better than the other way around, let's put it that way. But we don't talk about it or tell the kids to look it up or anything."

Xavier opens the season on Friday, Aug. 30 at Dubuque Hempstead.