

Ekland helps Saints get bigger, stronger

Written by Jim Ecker

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Tom Ekland gets up about 5 o'clock every morning, Monday through Friday, and heads to Xavier High School to help supervise the weight room.

He's been doing this for 20 years, first at LaSalle High School and the past 16 years at Xavier since the school opened in 1998.

He loves working with the guys and has played an important role in Xavier's success on the football field - and other sports as well - but there have been times when he's wondered what in the world he's doing so early in the morning.

"There's many times, in the dead of winter, when it's minus 20, pitch dark, and I ask the very same question: Why I am doing this?"

Ekland, 53, said those words early Tuesday morning in the Xavier weight room with a smile and a chuckle.

"They're just great kids," he said, answering his own question of why he does it. "We've dealt an unbelievable hand: Kids that work hard, they're very disciplined, very smart kids."

Ekland does not coach players on the football field, although you'll find him on the sideline on

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Friday nights enjoying the fruits of his labor in the weight room.

Xavier football coach Duane Schulte said there's a direct correlation between his team's success in the weight room and its success on the field. He gives a lot of the credit to Ekland.

"It's been huge," Schulte said. "Football is all about being bigger, faster, stronger. And the work that Tom Ekland and his staff do carries over."

The Saints (11-1) will face Bettendorf (10-2) in the semifinals of the Class 4A playoffs Friday at 4:06 p.m. at the UNI-Dome in Cedar Falls.

Ekland does not teach at Xavier. He and his brother own Seltec Sales, which represents electronic manufacturing in five states, but he's a LaSalle High School graduate and cares deeply about the Catholic school system.

"Coach Ekland, he really pushes us in the weight room in the mornings," said Xavier senior Daniel Vega, a rock on the team's defensive line. "He really prepares us."

All high school football teams have weightlifting programs, but not all of them have dedicated volunteers like Ekland. "Amazing," Schulte said. "He is one of those people who makes a difference."

John Tursi, Kevin Malloy, Tom Miller and Dave Schreck all help Ekland in the weight room. They tease each other, work out together, teach the kids, monitor what's going on and enjoy what they're doing, despite the early hours.

The heavy lifting for football players takes place during the off-season and summer. Typically during the summer, 60 or 70 football players will trek to the weight room by 6 a.m. for their daily regimen of grunts and groans.

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It gets competitive in the room, with players vying to see who can do the most. "That's the nature of the beast," Ekland said.

"It just emphasizes toughness," offered Xavier senior Matt Nelson, who has committed to the Iowa Hawkeyes and is a devoted lifter. "Getting up at 6 o'clock in the morning and lifting with Coach Ekland, that's a treat in itself because Coach Ekland is such a unique guy. It just builds work ethic, I guess."

The Saints have a strong defensive unit, with eight shutouts in 12 games this season. They believe it starts in the weight room.

"If you know you're strong enough to do the job the coaches want you to do, then you feel confident to do it," Nelson remarked.

Three of Ekland's sons have played football at Xavier. Tommy Jr. was a quarterback in 1998 and '99, Ryan played on the Class 4A state championship team in 2006 and Nic is a junior on this year's club.

Ekland's wife, Terry, also has played an important role with the football program, helping to provide meals for the players.

Ekland has developed a few routines with the players.

"For about 12 years, Tom arrives after every Tuesday practice and gives the varsity football players and coaches a treat," Schulte related. "It's almost like T-ball with their snacks."

Ekland leads Xavier students in daily prayer in the weight room. He also volunteers at Tanager Place in Cedar Rapids and supervises weightlifting there, working with troubled youngsters.

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Ekland is happy to give of his time at Xavier, feeling he gets plenty in return. "I get a ton out of it," he said. "The kids are great. It's a good feeling. It does my heart some good."