

## Stingy Saints begin season ranked No. 11

Written by Jim Ecker

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The Xavier Saints have a stingy bunch of girls. On defense, that is.

Coach Tom Lilly likes it that way.

Xavier allowed just 33.9 points per game last season, the second-lowest yield among all 48 teams in Class 4A. Dowling Catholic was the stingiest at 33.6.

The Saints averaged 45.6 points themselves, a differential of plus 11.7 points that helped them compile a 15-8 record.

"We have traditionally put more emphasis the last few years on our defensive end," Lilly said. "In the process of doing that, it also limits our offensive capabilities. We kind of shrink the game, we slow down the game.

"We don't have a lot of games in the 70's and 80's," he said. "You've got to pick your poison."

The Saints had only one game in the 70's last year when they drummed Marshalltown, 70-18. They had only two games in the 60's and both of them were lopsided victories as well with a 64-8 conquest of Waterloo East and a 60-15 stroll past Davenport West.

The most points they allowed all season came in a 53-38 loss to Iowa City West, which played for the state title, so don't expect too many high-scoring affairs this year.

Defense wins games, and it's one reason the Saints are ranked 11th in the preseason poll by

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the IGHS AU heading into the new campaign. Xavier hosts Davenport West in the season opener Monday night with tipoff scheduled for 6:30.

Alex Bartz, who has grown an inch to 6-foot-2, set a school record last year with 39 blocks. She's able to protect the basket if somebody gets free for a shot.

"Bartz has long arms and times things pretty well," Lilly said. "So that's kind of nice to have on the defensive end."

The Saints lost three starters to graduation and all three are playing sports in college. Alex Saxen (10.1 ppg) has joined the basketball program at Missouri Western State and Krissi Tow (8.5 ppg) is playing basketball at Kirkwood, while Tyler Sampson is running track at Western Illinois.

Saxen and Tow led Xavier in scoring, but the next five leading scorers all return. Lilly plans to start five seniors in the opener Monday night, which is a rarity for him.

He plans to start Emily Walvoord, Annie Dale, Katlyn Andersen, Nicole Noonan and Bartz. "This is the first time at Xavier we've started five seniors," he said.

He thinks he started five seniors on one of his clubs 26 years ago, but isn't sure.

Katelyn Winker, another senior, will be coming off the bench, along with members of the junior class that includes Lisa Boomgarden, Sarah Dickes and Kayla Armstrong. All four gained valuable experience last year, giving Lilly nine letterwinners.

Lilly doesn't know if the Saints deserve to be ranked No. 11 in the state, but he'll take it.

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"I think sometimes your program gets rated as much as anything," he said. "I felt kind of good about the fact that enough people believe in what we're trying to do here at Xavier to give us some kind of early-season recognition."

The Saints lost at No. 2 Southeast Polk, 45-40, in a Hall of Pride exhibition game Friday night despite committing 29 turnovers.

"I felt pretty good about going to their place and staying within reason," he said. "They're pretty salty."

"I think we'll be OK. I think our ability to defend will keep us in most games. We have to find a go-to kid (on offense)."

Lilly tabbed No. 1 Iowa City West as the team to beat in the Mississippi Valley Conference. "I think Iowa City West is running out front and the rest of us are trying to get the table scraps," he remarked.