

Lilly nears 500 wins as Xavier begins

Written by Jim Ecker

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Every year, the Xavier girls basketball team seems to graduate its leading scorer after another successful campaign. And every year, a new senior seems to step forward and grab the reins.

"I can't remember the last time we had our leading scorer coming back," legendary coach Tom Lilly said Thursday. "It seems like every year our leading scorer or leading rebounder is somebody who puts on the cap and gown. So we take the next kid with the most experience and we flip roles."

The system has worked just fine.

Lilly has captured four state titles at Xavier and begins his 31st year as a head coach in the local Catholic school system with an impressive record of 496-216 overall, including a 308-114 mark in 17 years with the Saints.

He hears rumors about his impending retirement every year, but has no plans to step aside anytime soon.

"Staying around young people keeps you young," he remarked. "I might learn some new hip-hop moves."

Lizzy Bailey and Morgan Breitbach led the Saints to a 17-7 record and the Class 4A state tournament last year as seniors, with Bailey at 13.5 points per game and Breitbach at 10 points. Now a new senior needs to take their place atop the scoring charts and it could be McKenna Andersen, who averaged 8.0 points last year as a junior.

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"I certainly think she's physically ready and mentally ready as a senior to go," said Lilly. "The leadership is there."

Andersen began playing for the varsity as a freshman, but missed her sophomore campaign with a knee injury. She bounced back last year and has the skills to become the leading scorer.

Lexi Noonan averaged 4.7 points and could be ready for a bigger role as a junior this year. Lilly said the coaches have been encouraging Andersen and Noonan to take more shots and put the ball in the basket.

"The other kids are happy for them to do it, but they have to think that way," he said.

Xavier is a Class 4A school in a predominantly 5A league in the Mississippi Valley Conference, but Lilly likes it that way because it helps his club prepare for the postseason. There's no telling when he'll notch his 500th victory, but the Saints have nine games in November and December so he might reach the milestone before Christmas with four more wins.

The Saints begin the season Tuesday night at Decorah.

Meghan Jones, Amelia Ivester and Jenny Dickes could join Andersen and Noonan in the starting lineup, based on experience. Brylee Bastian, Maddix Stovie, Kylie Brown, Kiana Stanek and Maddie Kadlec all played in at least half of the 24 games last year and are battling for playing time in Lilly's deep rotation.

Lilly likes to see his players go as hard as they can for a few minutes and then take a break, something he borrowed from Dr. Tom Davis and the Iowa Hawkeyes a few years ago. "I've never believed in the Ironman 5 and that kind of stuff," he said.

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Lilly said the Saints have been working on "situational" basketball in practice to get the players thinking for themselves on the floor. "We've got to get them thinking basketball and thinking like coaches and I think that will help us down the road," he said.

Lilly thinks the Mississippi Valley Conference will offer plenty of tough competition again this year and offers no specific predictions for his team.

"I'm thinking we can be competitive," he said. "That's really a simple goal we have that we walk in with every year. We want our starters on the floor at the end of the game. If your opponent's starters are sitting on the bench with a towel on their head and yukking it up, that's not a good sign.

"Do your best to win at home, try to steal one or two on the road and then kind of see where it's at."