

Butkowski assumes big role with Saints

Written by Jim Ecker

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Nolan Butkowski has developed into one of the top multi-sport athletes at Xavier High School in football, basketball and baseball, but he sometimes struggles to keep up with his own mother when they go for a long run.

"I always brag that I can beat her in short distances," Butkowski said with a smile before football practice this week, "but she always comes back that she can beat me in long distances."

Butkowski worked extra-hard to prepare for his final year at Xavier. That included going on four- and five-mile runs with his mother, Cori, who is an attorney and avid runner who sometimes goes nine or 10 miles, which is a little too long for her athletic son.

Butkowski's mother has been known to tease Nolan a little about that. "Yeah, a little bit," he acknowledged.

All that running, along with all his time in the weight room, have helped Butkowski fill some important roles for the Xavier football team, which is ranked No. 1 in Class 3A heading into Friday night's district opener at Benton Community.

Butkowski had a big game last Friday when the Saints defeated Linn-Mar, 45-17, at Linn-Mar Stadium. He caught three passes for 73 yards, made four solo tackles and returned an interception 33 yards to set up a touchdown.

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He also caught a long touchdown pass, but the play was nullified by a penalty.

Butkowski, who checks in at 6 feet, 165 pounds, saw spot duty for the Saints last season as a receiver and defensive back, but he's one of the main players for the team this season.

"I was really looking forward to this year and I'm happy with the way we've started," he said. "I can't wait to get better with the team and to see us grow as a team and get better every day."

Xavier Coach Duane Schulte was looking for another top receiver this season after losing two of his best pass-catchers to graduation. He likes what he's seen from Butkowski so far.

"We said as a staff, if he could turn it on his senior year and be like Blake Whitten and Nick Stark last year, that's really something we need out of this group," said Schulte. "Knock on wood, hopefully he keeps going."

"He's getting better and better," the coach said. "He's kind of put his nose to the grindstone. He's bearing down, not worrying so much about the flash and all that stuff, just playing solid and trying to do his job."

"That's good," said Schulte. "It helps him and his team."

Butkowski was a key reserve and spot starter on the Xavier basketball team that won the Class 3A state title last year, averaging five points per game. He hit .290 and drove in 18 runs for the Xavier baseball team this past summer, and now he's gotten off to a good start with the football squad.

"I love it. I love all three sports," said Butkowski. "I love the grind, I love being part of everything. It's a lot of fun. I wouldn't trade it for anything."

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Xavier quarterback Bryce Schulte was also a key reserve for the Xavier basketball team last season, so now Schulte and Butkowski have a chance to win a state title in football as well and graduate with crowns in two sports.

"That's our ultimate goal," Butkowski said, "but we're taking it one step at a time. We look forward to whatever's in store for us. We're working hard and we'll see if it pays off, which I think it will."

Like all of his teammates, Butkowski enjoyed their ride to the state basketball title last season.

"It was a lot of fun," he said. "I was glad to be a part of it and I can't wait for my senior year."

There's a long way to go in the football season before Butkowski will turn his attention to the hardwood. The Saints (2-0) have earned tough victories over Iowa City Regina and Linn-Mar in non-district competition, but the next seven games on the schedule are all district affairs. The Saints are grouped this season with Benton Community, Charles City, Decorah, Independence, Waverly-Shell Rock, Vinton-Shellsburg and South Tama.

Only two teams from each district will make the Class 3A playoffs now that the playoffs have been sliced in half, compared to four qualifiers a year ago.

"It's kind of like it was in the old days," said Coach Schulte. "You have to earn it. They say you get what you earn, so if you're good enough you'll earn it."

Xavier has district road games at Benton, Decorah, Waverly-Shell Rock and South Tama for some lengthy bus trips.

"When they said they were going to go to district play, one of the reasons was reduced travel time. And I don't know if that's exactly what happened," said Schulte. "I'm not complaining about it. I'm just saying ... we're traveling and a lot of teams are traveling to us. In a way it doesn't

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make sense."

The district assignments are changed every two years. Last year, the Saints were grouped with Solon, DeWitt Central, Maquoketa, Western Dubuque, Dubuque Wahlert and Marion.

Xavier tailback Maliki Wilson leads the state in rushing with 554 yards in two games. He gained a school-record 291 yards against Iowa City Regina and followed with 263 yards against Linn-Mar last week. He has scored seven touchdowns so far.

Benton Community enters Friday's game with a 1-1 record. The Bobcats beat Oelwein, 49-6, in their season opener, then lost to Marion, 45-22, last week when Marion snapped its 18-game losing streak.