

Armstrong willed Saints to 2013 title

Written by Jim Ecker
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Kayla Armstrong was a superb soccer player at Xavier High School and a member of four state championship teams in a row, but she had only mixed results as a basketball player.

Then came the 2013 state basketball tournament and she became a star.

It all began innocently enough in the opening round of the state tournament when Armstrong scored four points in a 50-45 victory over Lewis Central. She had averaged a modest 6.9 points during the regular season, so it was no big deal.

What happened next was truly amazing.

Armstrong turned into a superstar in the semifinals with 22 points, six rebounds, six steals and five assists in a 68-57 victory over Sioux City Heelan with an astounding performance.

Then she did it again in the finals with 23 points, six steals, three rebounds and an assist in a 53-52 squeaker over Harlan for the title.

Armstrong hit 9 of 11 shots against Heelan in the semifinals, then made 10 of 12 shots against Harlan in the finals.

Nearly everything she threw at the basket in those two games went in. She'd drive between two defenders and score. She'd shoot from the corners and score. She'd steal the ball and score, all with a fiercely determined look on her face.

Armstrong was accustomed to superstar performances in soccer and knew what it was like to

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produce on the biggest stage when it really counted.

Somehow, she channeled that same determination onto the floor at Wells Fargo Arena in Des Moines to give Coach Tom Lilly and the Saints their fourth state basketball title.

Why mention all this now? Well, the Saints will be playing the Harlan Cyclones again at the state tournament Tuesday night in the opening round of the Class 4A state tournament. Armstrong was a senior in 2013 and is playing soccer now at Drake, but three of her teammates from that state tournament club are still in uniform with Morgan Breitbach, McKenna Andersen and Jenny Dickes back in Des Moines for more.

The Saints could use another Armstrong-like performance by one of their players Tuesday night and for the entire tournament. Harlan is ranked No. 1 in the state with a 23-0 record and is the defending state champions, so this is a matchup of the 2013 champs against the 2014 champs in the quarterfinals of the 2015 tournament.

Xavier has very capable players with Lizzy Bailey, Breitbach, Andersen, Dickes and many others, but Harlan is a big and talented foe. Will there be another Armstrong-esque performance this year? We'll find out Tuesday night.

Harlan is seeded No. 1 for the state tournament and Xavier is seeded No. 8, which means few people are giving the Saints much of a chance. That's perfectly OK with Lilly, who relishes being the underdog.

Harlan is bigger and stronger, so Xavier might try to spread them out and wear them down with their high level of energy and frequent substitutions. The Saints have nothing to lose, so if it's close in the fourth quarter they might be the ones who take a page out of Kayla Armstrong's playbook and turn in an improbable performance.

The Saints played a tough schedule in the Mississippi Valley Conference this year and all six of their losses were against Class 5A clubs like West Des Moines Valley, Dowling, Iowa City West,

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Linn-Mar and Johnston. The Saints have not lost to a Class 4A club all season and they don't intend to now.

Don't bet against them.