

It's too bad undefeated Cougars, Saints don't meet

Written by Jim Ecker

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The Kennedy Cougars and Xavier Saints have enjoyed perfect seasons in football so far. Both of them are undefeated, both are ranked high in the polls and both are racing toward No. 1 seeds in the playoffs.

It's just a shame they won't meet on the field this year.

Kennedy is a Class 4A school and Xavier is 3A, so they won't meet in the playoffs. And when the new districts were adopted two years ago, the Cougars and all the other local 4A schools said they did not want to play a 3A opponent.

So here we have Kennedy and Xavier, located 2.5 miles apart in northeast Cedar Rapids along 42nd Street, passing each other on the street each day but not meeting in a game.

For the record, Xavier wanted to continue playing Kennedy, Washington, Jefferson, Linn-Mar and Prairie when they did away with football competition in the Mississippi Valley Conference and went to districts last season.

However, some people who wanted to preserve the MVC viewed Xavier as one of the instigators for district football and may have held a grudge when it came time to scheduling non-district games.

Maybe it truly was not in their "best interest" to play Xavier, but you have to wonder why it's such a good idea to play Class 4A non-district games against Clinton, North Scott, Davenport West, Davenport North and Pleasant Valley and not such a good idea to play a non-district game against Xavier.

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The local 4A schools are spending a lot of money for buses for those non-district trips, and those MAC schools rarely bring a good crowd to the games in Cedar Rapids and Marion. Athletic directors cry all the time about tight budgets, yet they are sacrificing significant gate receipts by not playing a quality opponent that resides right under their noses.

The Saints would be a major threat to win those games -- just ask Kennedy about that -- but high school sports are supposed to be about competition, not guaranteed victories. Ask the kids from Kennedy who they'd rather play and I guarantee most of them would pick Xavier every time. They know those kids, grew up with those kids and competed with those kids when they were younger, but they don't play in high school.

Xavier has done a terrific job with its non-district games the past two years with home-and-way contests with Dowling, Davenport Assumption and Iowa City Regina. Unfortunately, this year's home game against Dowling was canceled due to weather, but nobody can accuse the Saints of looking for soft competition.

Dowling has been a multiple state champion and is currently ranked No. 1 in Class 4A. Assumption is a Class 3A power and Regina has won numerous Class 1A titles and is ranked No. 1 again.

Xavier plays at Regina on Friday night in an intriguing battle. But imagine if the Saints were playing Kennedy on Friday night, either at Saints Field or Kingston Stadium. They might have set a modern attendance record for that one.

Xavier and Dowling agreed to a two-year deal for games in 2014 and 2015, but Xavier athletic director Mike Winker indicated that it's unlikely they'll sign another two-year deal.

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Winker also is not sure about more non-district games with Assumption, especially since Assumption and Xavier might be placed in the same district for the next two-year cycle in 2016 and 2017. He's also not sure about future games with Regina at this point.

On the other hand, Winker would love to put some of the local 4A schools on the schedule.

"Our stance has not changed," he said Thursday. "We would look forward to playing a couple of Metro games. We would be excited about playing Metro games."

The Metro Sports Report has heard rumblings that local athletic directors might be re-evaluating the possibility of games against Xavier. That would be terrific for the schools, the fans, the players and the community. We hope it happens.

The new football districts will be released in January. Once that happens, the athletic directors will have about a month to talk to each other and see if they want to play each other. Each school will send a list of preferred non-district games to the IHSAA, which will have the ultimate authority in setting all the schedules.

There's another wild-card factor in all this as we move forward. The IHSAA will trim the number of playoff qualifiers from 32 teams to 16 teams starting next year, but they also might juggle the number of districts.

In Class 4A, for instance, the IHSAA is considering the possibility of dividing the 48 schools into six districts of eight teams apiece, rather than eight districts of six teams apiece. If they do, the champion and runner-up from each of the six districts would advance to the playoffs along with four "wild-card" teams.

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With "wild cards," many of the teams that tie for second place in a particular district could make the playoffs instead of somebody being left out. It might not resolve all the fairness issues, but it could be a move in the right direction.

The IHSA has decreed that the 48 largest schools by enrollment will be classified in 4A for football in 2016 and 2017, as compared to the 46 schools that are playing 4A football this year. Western Dubuque has been told that it's being promoted from 3A to 4A for the next two-year cycle and somebody else will be promoted to make it 48.

If there are six Class 4A districts with eight teams apiece, everybody would play seven district games and two non-district games. The same formula could be used in Class 3A.

No matter how they do it, one thing is certain: It would be a good idea for the local Metro schools to play Xavier. It's simply the right thing to do.