

Superstitious Lilly aims for 4th title

Written by Jim Ecker

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Tom Lilly needs a new shirt and tie. Maybe a new suit, too.

Lilly and the Xavier Saints are headed to the girls state basketball tournament Wednesday and the veteran coach does not want to jinx his team by wearing old clothes that have been tainted by state tournament defeats.

"I won't wear anything I've been beat in," he declared. "It's just a superstition I have.

"In years past, I'd go out and buy a new suit. I wouldn't go to a tournament with a suit that had a loss in it."

Lilly, 57, figures he has 100 shirts, 200 ties and a multitude of suits.

"If I know the tie has bad losses in it, I'll never wear it again. I'll just give it away."

He has a pair of favorite saddle shoes, which went out of vogue a few decades ago, but refuses to toss them aside.

"They're the most comfortable pair of shoes I have. I'm not superstitious in that," he said.

"They've lost as many games as they've won.

"The shoelaces are worn. I've had them for a long time."

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He's worn those saddle shoes quite a bit this season, so it's nothing he trots out for state. He's modeled a variety of footwear in Des Moines, with varying results.

"Some Italian two-tone wingtips," he said, smiling. "I still have those, but I'm almost too embarrassed to pull them out again."

Lilly has rolled up a 277-95 record in 15 years as Xavier's head coach with 10 trips to the state tournament, so perhaps the clothes do make the man. He also served as the girls basketball coach at Regis High School for 13 years and has an overall mark of 465-197 in 28 campaigns.

Lilly used to dress in the other team's colors for games, but has abandoned that particular piece of strategy. "For awhile it worked and we won some games," he remarked, "and then all of a sudden it quit working."

He's tried just about everything over the years.

"I've done a lot of quirky and weird stuff in my day, and I've come to find out it really doesn't mean a lot," he confessed. "It's kind of cool at the time."

Lilly led Xavier to state titles in 2003, 2005 and 2007, so he apparently likes odd numbers. Maybe 2013 will be lucky, too.

Lilly's superstitions go beyond his wardrobe. Just ask the neighbors.

"I burn my Christmas lights until we get beat in the tournament, so they're still going," he said. "So when the lights go out in front of the house, that means the season is over and the party is over."

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By the way, Lilly teaches psychology at Xavier High School. Go figure.

The Saints (14-9) will face Council Bluffs Lewis Central (20-3) in the quarterfinals of the Class 4A state tournament Wednesday at 10 a.m. at the Wells Fargo Arena in Des Moines.

The Saints do not have a pretty record, but don't be fooled by that. They faced a series of Class 5A teams in the Mississippi Valley Conference this season and more than held their own, and now they'll be facing schools with comparable enrollments instead of playing teams that have twice as many kids in the building.

Xavier won its three state titles in Class 3A, back when 3A was the second-largest class. They got bumped to Class 4A for several years when 4A was the largest class, but they stayed in 4A this year when the IGHS AU added Class 5A at the top.

Lilly thinks competing in Class 4A after playing a 5A schedule could give the Saints an edge in Des Moines.

"What it's allowed us to do is see good coaches and good basketball night-in and night-out," he said. "There's a lot of teams in the tournament now that have played some good competition, but there are nights that they played people that aren't very good and they're capable of blowing them up."

The Saints drew Ankeny, one of the biggest schools in the state, in the first round of the tournament last year and were held to 25 points in a first-round defeat. Lilly likes his odds better against Lewis Central.

He also likes the fact his team played in the state tournament in 2012, because several of the girls on this year's team got a taste of the big stage and maybe won't be as nervous this time.

"That's huge. That makes a big difference," he said. "Anytime you've heard the horn go off and

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you looked up and the lights are going around, it's different."

Lilly knows that good players, teamwork, hard work, defense, experience and taking high-percentage shots are more important than the color of your socks.

Just to be sure, however, he plans to wear a new shirt and a new tie on Wednesday.

You can't be too careful.