

Defense looms large for Saints, Warriors

Written by Jim Ecker

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Tom Lilly was not fond of playing defense when he was a senior at Regis High School 30 years ago, which is kind of ironic.

These days, Lilly prides himself on having strong defensive clubs at Xavier High School and it's one of the reasons the Saints have made the state basketball tournament for the 10th time in 15 years under his guidance.

When Lilly was a junior at Regis, his main assignment in practice was to play tough defense to help get the senior-laden squad ready for games. All of the juniors had that assignment as members of the junior varsity, as he recalls.

"But when I became a senior, I kind of packed that old defensive concept away and decided that the best thing about basketball was jacking up shots, as many as you can," he said.

If any of his players try that in the state tournament in Des Moines, they'll be assigned a nice seat on the bench for the rest of the day.

The fifth-ranked Xavier Saints (14-9) face No.7 Council Bluffs Lewis Central (20-3) in the opening round of the Class 4A tournament at the Wells Fargo Arena at 10 a.m. Wednesday.

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The Washington Warriors (17-6) meet No.2 Ankeny (19-4) in the first round of the Class 5A tournament at 1:30 Wednesday.

Defense could be the story of the day for both Metro teams.

The stingy Saints allowed only 12, 15 and 18 points in games this season and feature a pair of premier defensive guards in Kayla Armstrong and Sarah Dickes. The Saints play good defense but so does Lewis Central, which allows 34.5 points per game.

Xavier has allowed 42.5 points per outing, but the Saints played a stronger schedule than Lewis Central with numerous games against Class 5A opponents in the Mississippi Valley Conference.

They'll find out which team plays better defense Wednesday on the biggest stage in the state.

Armstrong and Dickes are premier soccer players for Xavier and have helped the Saints win a string of state titles. Lilly feels their soccer skills, particularly their footwork and anticipation, translate onto the basketball floor.

"Kayla Armstrong has the ability to jump a passing lane as good as anybody, just in terms of natural first-step quickness," he said.

Dickes has the knack for harassing an opponent's point guard. "She's probably as good as anybody I've ever coached at being able to do that," he said.

Armstrong and Dickes have forced 158 turnovers this season, an average of nearly seven per game. Their job today will be to pester Lewis Central and not let 5-foot-10 senior Aubrey Norville get her normal 16.8 points per game.

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On offense, the Saints feature a balanced attack with six girls all averaging between 5.7 and 9.6 points per game. Ashley Stulken leads the way at 9.6 points and 7.4 rebounds.

Defense also could play an important role in Washington's game against Ankeny. Washington boasts the highest scoring average in the Class 5A tournament at 63.4 points, but Ankeny boasts the best defensive norm at 30.7 points per game.

Washington features three explosive scorers in Dani Franklin (17.1 points), Abby Herb (14.0) and Aleena Hobbs (11.3). Madison Kramer (7.1), Colby Bjornsen (4.6) and Devin Glenski (4.2) also have proven they can score points at key moments, although Kramer tweaked her knee in the regional finals and could have to regain her confidence.

Brittany Hedrick leads Ankeny at 12.1 points per game. Jaali Winters contributes 11.7 points.

Washington and Ankeny both played Waukee this season with similar results. Washington beat Waukee in the regional finals 61-54, and Ankeny swept Waukee in CIML games 51-48 and 45-38. Based on those results, Wednesday's game could be a tossup even though Ankeny is ranked No.2 in the state and has several key players who helped the Hawkettes finish second in the state tournament last year.