

## Lilly sees state champs as underdogs

Written by Jim Ecker

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Xavier girls basketball coach Tom Lilly has modest goals for his team, but they often translate into monumental achievements.

He's won four state titles with the Saints, including a surprising run to the Class 4A crown last year, but it starts with the basics.

"Our goal has always been kind of simple," Lilly said Monday on the first day of practice. "First of all, we want to be competitive. We don't want anyone sitting their starters down in the fourth quarter because we weren't competitive. That's the worst thing in the world as a coach."

The Saints are a Class 4A school in a predominantly Class 5A league, so Lilly likes to use Mississippi Valley Conference games as a way to prepare for the postseason tournament. It worked perfectly last year when the Saints compiled a modest 12-9 record during the regular season, then won five straight postseason games and stunned Lewis Central, Sioux City Heelan and Harlan at the state tournament.

"I think what we were able to accomplish surprised some people," he remarked.

"The goal is to allow the conference to improve our skill sets, figure out what we're good at and what we need to work at. And then get to state and see what we can do.

"I'm not a fool," he said. "Our conference is brutal. There are some exceptional players in our conference. I think it's all preparation for the tournament."

Kayla Armstrong, the darling of the 2013 state tournament and captain of the all-tournament team, is playing soccer at Drake these days. Ashley Stulken, their 6-foot-2 center who showed

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tremendous improvement as a senior, is playing at Coe. Sarah Dickes, a savvy point guard and defensive whiz, also is gone.

Lilly said all three players will be hard to replace, but he has eight lettermen on the squad and several girls who played key roles for the 2013 state champs.

Hayley Deutmeyer (7.5 points per game) and Maddie Bertsch (5.7) return to the starting lineup, with McKenna Andersen (5.5), Morgan Breitbach (3.7), Abby Watson (1.6) and Lizzy Bailey (2.0) ready for bigger roles. Hannah Chute (1.4) and Jenny Dickes (0.9) also gained valuable experience last season.

Lilly said several players from the 2012-13 sophomore team could be ready to help as well.

Deutmeyer, Bertsch and Andersen displayed some firepower last season. "And I think Breitbach is going to surprise some people," Lilly said. "She's a great penetrator.

"We'll see what we can scrap out of Abby (Watson) and we'll go from there. As usual, we'll put our hat on our defense. And if we can defend, we'll see how many we need to score each night out."

Lilly knows how to win state titles, but he thinks it would be a mistake to have that as your primary goal each year. "I think that's a pretty lofty goal," he said. "That's just asking for trouble."

The Saints do not have an abundance of size, especially in the MVC. Watson is 6-feet tall, but Maddie Bertsch will probably have to play near the basket again this year at 5-foot-9.

In addition to a tough conference schedule, Xavier will face a strenuous non-conference slate that includes Johnston, Davenport Assumption, West Des Moines Valley, Dowling and Decorah.

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"We're not going to be as good as some of the teams we're going to play," Lilly said. "They're just going to have bigger basketball players than we are. I know that. I'm not a fool. But that doesn't mean come February we won't be battle-tested."

Bailey Dorrington, who helped Xavier win state titles in 2005 and 2007 as a player, has joined the basketball program as a volunteer assistant coach with the varsity. Dorrington coached Xavier to the girls state soccer title last season.