

Luehrsmann anxious to welcome gridders

Written by Jim Ecker

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Seven members of the Xavier boys basketball team are skipping practice this week, but they have a good excuse.

They also play for the Xavier football team, which is practicing this week for the Class 4A championship game against top-ranked Dowling Catholic Friday night in Cedar Falls.

The football players will not join the basketball team until at least next week, and it could be the week after that to give them a chance to catch their breath.

Such notable football players as Matt Nelson, Quinton Scholer, Frank Hill and Matt Downey are prominent basketball players as well. Coach Ryan Luehrsmann plans to give them as much time as they need before reporting to basketball.

"We'll have to play it by ear," Luehrsmann said. "Chances are we'll give them some time off. It's a grind that they're going through. Our motto is not unlike what Coach (Tom) Lilly has with his girls team: We want to try and peak and be at our best at the end of the year.

"It does no good for us to bring those guys back and have someone get hurt," he said. "We want to make sure they're healed up and ready to go. It could be a couple of weeks. We're looking forward to getting everyone here."

The Saints faced a similar situation last season when the football team reached the Class 4A championship game, but they overcame the late start and began the season with a five-game winning streak en route to an 11-12 overall record.

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Luehrsmann and the Saints are not sitting around and waiting for everyone to show up. They've got 13 players in camp this week, led by a pair of prominent juniors in Adam McDermott and Calvin Winker, both of whom played for the varsity last season as 10th graders.



McDermott averaged 8.5 points last season. Winker averaged 4.4 points, but he's grown at least two inches to 6-foot-4 and appears ready to make a great leap forward.

"He's a legit 6-4 now," Luehrsmann said. "We may have listed him at 6-2 last year, but he's all of 6-4 now. He's got a chance to be a pretty good player."

Luehrsmann likes what he's seen of McDermott and Winker.

"Both of them have high basketball IQ's," he said. "They're gym rats. They're in every day working on their game. And they're good kids. Good, hard-working, unselfish kids that play the game the right way."

Nelson, a 6-foot-8 center, averaged 10.6 points and 6.8 rebounds last season as a junior. He's headed to the University of Iowa to play football next year, but Luehrsmann expects him to have a good year on the basketball floor before he goes.

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"He's certainly capable of doing a little bit more for us, so I would expect he'll increase his averages a little bit," said Luehrsmann, the former UI player who is entering his second year as head coach. "When he was with us over the summer, he looked very good. I think he looked a lot more sure of himself and confident."

"He's been on board with playing basketball the whole time. He loves it. He's played it a good portion of his life. He really loves the game."

Luehrsmann thinks Hill, a wide receiver on the football team, will crack the starting lineup on the basketball team. Hill appeared in 12 games last year with the varsity basketball team as a sophomore.

Luehrsmann described Andrew Bisenius as a "glue guy" who will be a factor as a defender and shooter. He said Downey has a chance to start at point guard, with competition from younger players from the 2012-13 sophomore team.

Luehrsmann likes the overall prospects for his squad.

"I feel pretty good about it," he said. "We got a lot of guys experience last year, with Winker and McDermott being two of our key contributors. They've really stepped up their games during the course of the off-season and appear to be good leaders for us, along with Matt (Nelson) and Frank (Hill) and Andrew Bisenius."

Xavier will play Kennedy in the Metro Sports Report Classic on Saturday, Nov. 30 at 5 p.m. at Kirkwood in the Pride Challenge event. The Saints will open the regular season at Mount Pleasant Dec. 3.