

Saints hope to finish job in 4A finals

Written by Jim Ecker

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Sean Ickes remembers the pep assembly. Colton Turner remembers the swift bus ride to Cedar Falls. Logan Clarahan remembers his butterflies. Matt Nelson remembers the noise in the UNI-Dome.

"It was loud at the Dome," Nelson said. "It was really loud last year."

It will get loud again Friday night when the fourth-ranked Xavier Saints (12-1) face top-ranked West Des Moines Dowling (13-0) in the all-Catholic school finals of the Class 4A playoffs.

The Saints lost to Ankeny, 23-17, in a memorable championship game last year when the officials made a major blunder in the final seconds with the down box, hindering Xavier's chances of scoring the tying touchdown.

The down box indicated "1st down" when it was really "4th down," creating all sorts of confusion. The Saints threw an incomplete pass on their final play and had to settle for the runnerup trophy.

The Saints have good memories (mostly) of the state finals last year. It began at Xavier High School that Friday and included a pep assembly, followed by the ride to Cedar Falls and the game itself.

"It was a great experience," said Clarahan, one of Xavier's linebackers. "The whole day, it's really hard to focus. All you can think about is that night."

Clarahan's stomach will be churning by kickoff. "Oh yeah," he said Wednesday, with the game more than 48 hours away. "The stomach is starting to get the butterflies right now."

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Turner remembers stepping on the bus for the 60-minute trip to Cedar Falls last year. Within a few minutes, it seems like they were there.

"It seems like it flew by in a blur," said Turner, an offensive lineman. "It seemed like we were in Cedar Falls before we knew it.

"It seems like the game lasted five hours instead of 2 1/2. It was exciting. It was a great event."

The Saints won the Class 4A state title in 2006 and are making their third trip to the championship game in the last eight seasons, the most appearances in the Class 4A finals of any team in the state. Bettendorf, Ankeny, West Des Moines Valley, Iowa City High and Dowling have all made two trips to the championship game in the last eight seasons, but Xavier is the only school with three berths since then.

The Saints trailed, 23-17, in the final minutes of the championship game last year when a few untimely penalties and the mistake by the officials on the down-box contributed to them falling short against Ankeny. They've used that near-miss as motivation for the past 365 days.

Many of the guys on this year's team played in the state finals as juniors, whereas Dowling's last trip to the championship game came in 2010 when this year's seniors were just freshmen.

Nelson thinks Xavier's experience in the 2012 state finals could help them this year.

"There are only a few teams every year that can play for a state championship, and only a few that have played back-to-back," he noted.

The Saints know where the doors to the UNI-Dome are now. They know where the locker rooms are located. They know where to look for the game-clocks and play-clocks and everything else.

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"We've been there once. It's just like last year," said tailback Brendan Miller, who has rushed for 1,428 yards and 17 touchdowns. "We have to come ready to play.

"It was a fun atmosphere. It's going to be exciting to do it again."

It's still the state finals, however, so their stomachs will be churning as the kickoff at 7:06 p.m. approaches.

"There's definitely nerves whenever you're in a game that big in front of that many people," Turner acknowledged. "It's a great atmosphere. I wouldn't trade it for anything."

Turner's stomach has been churning for several weeks now.

"It hasn't stopped since the playoffs started," he said. "I'm always excited for the next game."

Xavier Coach Duane Schulte has a 1-1 record in state championship games, beating Southeast Polk (21-6) in 2006 and falling to Ankeny (23-17) last year. He thinks Xavier's experience in championship games could help his club Friday night.

"I think it does a little bit," he allowed. "I don't want to say there's less pressure, but it seems different than the first time."

The Saints have outscored their four playoff opponents this year by a tidy sum of 131-7, with victories over Clinton (45-0), Iowa City High (34-0), Kennedy (21-0) and 10th-ranked Bettendorf (31-7).

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Xavier boasts the stingiest defense in the state, allowing just 5.23 points per game with eight shutouts in 13 outings. The Saints also boast some of the best special teams in the state, led by placekicker Ryan Persick and punt-return specialist Wes Gardner.

Dowling defeated Sioux City West (63-10), Southeast Polk (38-14), No.5 Waukee (14-9) and No.6 West Des Moines Valley (17-3) to reach the state finals. The Maroons are led by quarterback Ryan Boyle, who has passed for 1,546 yards, run for 1,254 yards and accounted for 39 touchdowns.