

Saints free to choose 3A football

Written by Jim Ecker

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The Xavier Saints have until Dec. 20 to inform the Iowa High School Athletic Association if they want to drop from Class 4A to Class 3A for football next season.

There will not be any penalties attached if the Saints decide to switch to Class 3A.

Xavier has received permission from the Mississippi Valley Conference to switch from 4A football to 3A and still retain full membership in the league in other sports, although it would no longer play an MVC football schedule at the 3A level.

When Xavier joined the Mississippi Valley Conference in 1998 with the opening of their new school, Saints officials agreed to play Class 4A football as a condition for being in the league, even though Xavier's student population places it at the 3A level.

That has now changed.

"The MVC athletic directors have decided not to make football a requirement for MVC membership," Xavier athletic director Mike Winker said Monday. "This was done at the request of Dubuque Wahlert.

"Xavier can also elect to play football at our enrollment classification if we decide to do so," he said.

Class 4A football is ostensibly intended for the 48 largest schools in the state, but it's never been a neat and clean format. Xavier ranks 52nd in student population, Wahlert is 69th and Davenport Assumption from the Mississippi Athletic Conference is 87th.

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The winds of change are swirling around the Mississippi Valley Conference and Mississippi Athletic Conference as the two leagues ponder their football futures. There appear to be three main options:

1. Preserve the status quo with all 24 schools from the MVC and the MAC continuing to play Class 4A football within a conference structure.
2. Xavier, Wahlert and/or Assumption opt for Class 3A district football and the remaining MVC and MAC schools decide to form Class 4A districts and forego league affiliations in football.
3. The two leagues stay together for football, but allow for interleague games for the first time with MVC schools facing MAC schools during the regular season.

The clock is ticking with the Dec. 20 deadline looming for Xavier, Wahlert and Assumption. All of the other schools are waiting for the three parochial schools to make a decision. Wahlert appears to be leaning the heaviest toward Class 3A.

"We're waiting for confirmation from the schools that can drop, if in fact they're going to drop," said D'Anne Kroemer, the athletic director at Pleasant Valley in the MAC and previously the A.D. at Iowa City High in the MVC. "There's so much speculation and so many different scenarios based on if they elect to drop or if they elect not to drop.

"It's tough to look at what's in the best interest of your program and your school, community and conference (until the other schools make their decision)."

There are two major forces at work. Xavier, Wahlert and Assumption are pondering the possibility of playing against schools their own size, although Xavier and Assumption have fared very well at the Class 4A level.

In addition, the MAC schools are interested in a new scheduling format that would allow for

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games outside of their own league. With 10 schools in their conference, MAC teams play the same nine opponents every year during the regular season.

Inter-league play could help preserve both conferences as football leagues and help resolve the issue.

"It could. I don't know that it will," said Paul James, the athletic director and football coach at Cedar Rapids Washington. "That's a plan that's out there. It depends on how people respond to the decisions that other schools make."

James said he'd be willing to play MAC schools during the regular season. "Sure," he said. "I think a number of conference schools would feel that way, at this point."

"I would like to see the conference stay intact," he said. "If that means that we schedule some inter-league games, that's OK."

Kroemer said MAC schools are very interested in inter-league play. "I think it's definitely a possible solution," she said.

"I think that would allow our athletes to experience different brands, different styles of football as well as experience different venues," she said. "All of those things are part of building and growing a program."

The Mississippi Valley Conference is currently split into two divisions with seven teams apiece. One possible scenario would call for six games within your own division and three inter-league games against MAC opponents. Of course, that format would change if Xavier and Wahlert elect to play at the Class 3A level and leave the MVC with only 12 football schools.

The specter of district football for Class 4A teams in Eastern Iowa looms over the entire situation and it could get tricky if Xavier, Wahlert and/or Assumption drop to Class 3A. If all

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three schools opt for Class 3A, that would leave only 21 schools for Class 4A districts and create a numerical imbalance among the districts.

Some districts would have six teams and some would have only five teams. Only district games count toward making the playoffs under IHSAA rules, so the five-team districts would play only four games that count toward the playoffs.

The IHSAA does not plan to "promote" the largest Class 3A football schools to Class 4A to take anyone's place next year, so Council Bluffs Lewis Central (46th), Newton (47th) and Norwalk (48th) are safe for the next two-year district cycle that begins in 2014.

However, the IHSAA could shift Class 4A schools like Marshalltown, Ottumwa or Mason City from 4A West to 4A East to balance the sides. There are currently 24 schools in 4A West, split neatly into four divisions of six teams apiece.

The IHSAA also could allow a geographic imbalance - 24 teams in the West, 21 teams in the East - and give the West extra playoff berths. There are 32 playoff berths in Class 4A, with currently 16 from each side of the state, but the IHSAA could make it 17 from the West and 15 from the East to reflect the overall number of teams.

The first step is for Xavier, Wahlert and Assumption to make their intentions known.

"Until the schools that can drop make their decision and clear the air, I don't think the rest of us can really make a decision until we know for sure," said Kroemer.

The MVC and MAC schools are the only schools in the state that have not adopted a district format in football.

"Districts at some point may be the best available plan. I don't know," said James. "But my preference would be to stay with the conference at this point."

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