

Saints ready to join 3A football

Written by Jim Ecker

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Xavier High School's days as a powerhouse in Class 4A football are probably over, with the Saints likely headed to Class 3A next year.

That's not all. The Mississippi Valley Conference's days as a football league could be over as well, with district football looming on the horizon for everyone.

The dominoes began to fall Thursday.

Mike Winker, the athletic director at Xavier, told the Metro Sports Report that the Saints will drop to Class 3A football for 2014 if there are any significant changes in the Mississippi Valley Conference, such as Dubuque Wahlert dropping to 3A and removing its football team from the MVC.

That's almost certainly going to happen.

Tom English, the athletic director at Wahlert, told the Metro Sports Report that switching to Class 3A football is "definitely a preference" for his school. "It's just a matter of us making our final decision," he said.

English made it clear during a conference meeting Wednesday that Wahlert plans to switch to Class 3A, according to league sources. And if Wahlert does, the Saints will go as well.

"If the MVC does not exist in its current format for football, we will participate in our enrollment class for football next year," said Winker. "If Wahlert leaves or they do a hybrid schedule or anything else, we're not going to be a part of it."

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Conference officials have discussed a "hybrid" schedule that would allow interleague games between the Mississippi Valley Conference and the Mississippi Athletic Conference, another predominantly 4A league that is facing similar issues.

Class 4A football was intended to include the 48 largest schools in the state, but Xavier (52nd) and Wahlert (69th) have been playing at the 4A level as a requirement for membership in the Mississippi Valley Conference.

Mississippi Valley Conference athletic directors voted this year to let Wahlert and Xavier remove their football teams from the MVC, yet remain a conference member in all other sports, paving the way for the Golden Eagles and Saints to switch to Class 3A.

Xavier won the Class 4A football title in 2006 and reached the state championship game in 2012 and again this year, stamping the Saints as one of the top Class 4A programs in the state and one of the premier programs in Eastern Iowa.

But Xavier has consistently voted to have its teams compete at their normal classification level when it comes to postseason tournaments, rather than competing against schools that are sometimes more than twice as big.

"Every one of our other sports for the postseason plays at their classification for the tournament," said Winker. "I don't think that I can tell football - now that the MVC has dropped their requirement for schools being 4A in football - I don't think I can tell the coaches, the players and the parents that they have to play up and no other sports do.

"I'm not aware of any school in the state that is playing up," he said. "I might be wrong, but I have not heard of anybody doing that, public or parochial. We didn't advocate for anything, but when the MVC athletic directors dropped the requirement of 4A football, that's what started the events that are taking place."

Xavier has until Dec. 20 to inform the IHSAA of its intentions for next year. Winker said that has not happened yet, pending an official announcement from Wahlert.

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The Mississippi Valley Conference has 14 members and could continue as a 12-team league for football without Xavier and Wahlert, but that's unlikely to happen. Likewise, the Mississippi Athletic Conference has 10 members and could continue as a nine-team league for football without Davenport Assumption, which could drop to 3A as well, but that's not likely to happen either, according to sources in both leagues.

The eastern part of Iowa currently has 24 schools in Class 4A football, but that number would drop to 21 if Wahlert, Xavier and Assumption all leave. Meanwhile, the western part of Iowa would have 24 football schools at the Class 4A level.

Mississippi Valley Conference officials are concerned that Western Iowa might be given an extra spot in the Class 4A playoffs if Western Iowa has 24 schools and Eastern Iowa has only 21. The 32 playoff berths are currently split 16-16 on both sides, but that number could change to 17 for the West and 15 for the East to reflect lower numbers.

Faced with that possibility, the remaining Class 4A schools in the East might prefer a district format rather than a conference format to protect their 16 playoff berths. The East would be divided into four districts, and under current IHSAA rules each district gets four playoff berths.

If the MVC and the MAC stuck with conference football, they might lose a playoff berth. "We'd be shooting ourselves in the foot," said Iowa City West athletic director Scott Kibby, who has been trying to save the Valley as a football league.

If the East has only 21 teams for 4A football, they'd be split into districts that would have six teams in one district and five teams in the other three districts. The IHSAA could shift Marshalltown, Ottumwa or Mason City from Class 4A West to Class 4A East to balance the scales, perhaps leaving 23 teams in the West and 22 in the East.

A district with only five teams raises the possibility of a team with an overall record of 1-8 making the playoffs. Only district games count toward playoff berths, so two 0-8 teams from a five-team district could meet in the final game of the regular season in a battle to make the playoffs.

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Last year, Mason City made the Class 4A playoffs with a 1-8 record when Western Iowa had only 23 schools at the 4A level (before Ankeny Centennial opened this year and made 24).

Winker said the Saints would like to continue playing local Class 4A schools in the future as part of their non-district schedule if they are a Class 3A team. The Saints probably would have six district games and three non-district games as a Class 3A school, under the current format.

"We would hope we could play 4A Metro teams in our area for the travel reasons, the crowds, the traditional rivalries," said Winker. "We would love to continue playing 4A MVC Metro schools."

Winker said Xavier officials considered all factors in their decision to leave Class 4A. The Saints had one of the largest teams in Class 4A this season with more than 85 players, but he said that's probably going to change.

"I know our football numbers in our lower levels are not as high as they are right now," he said. "We're not going to have teams with 85 kids out in the foreseeable future. That was a big number the last couple of years and it was neat, but our numbers are not going to be like that."

As the 52nd largest school in the state, Xavier could return to Class 4A in the future if it becomes one of the 48 largest schools.

"We've had fun and a great time competing with the 4A schools," said Winker. "I'm sure there are some things we'll miss about that, playing so many Metro schools in town with the travel and the tradition and the excitement. That's why we hope to continue to play a couple of those games a year."

Xavier has played Class 4A football since the school opened in 1998. Before that, Regis High School played in Class 4A for six years as a member of the Mississippi Valley Conference, making 22 straight years at the 4A level for the Catholic schools.

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The Saints are ready to turn the page.

"I think it will be new challenges and new rivalries," said Winker. "Hopefully we can have the best of both worlds, a little bit, by playing some of those games (against 4A schools). That's what we hope, but we can't control that either."

Winker is confident the situation will be resolved by the Dec. 20 deadline imposed by the IHSA for schools to make their intentions known.