

## Metro football teams should play Saints

Written by Jim Ecker

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The Iowa High School Athletic Association is not going to force any of the Class 4A football teams in the Metro area to play Xavier next season, so that ends the remote possibility of Kennedy or anyone else facing the Saints in 2014.

That's a shame. Not that the IHSAA won't make them do it, but rather because none of the local 4A clubs are willing to do it.

There's enough responsibility on all sides.

Xavier elected to drop from 4A to 3A football next season to play in its proper enrollment category, so the Saints can't really blame the 4A schools for their attitude.

At the same time, you'd think one of the local 4A clubs - Kennedy, Washington, Jefferson, Linn-Mar or Prairie - would be able to find a spot on its non-district schedule to play the Saints on a home-and-away basis the next two years.

Xavier wants to play, but the others do not. And the IHSAA will not force a Class 4A school to play a 3A school against its will.

"It would be rare that we would assign that contest," said Todd Tharp, an assistant director at the IHSAA. "We try to respect the priority list that schools give to us and use the teams on the list (for scheduling)."

"Now, if both teams were looking for games because they did not have teams on their list, we have scheduled those games against each other."

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That's not going to happen in this case. The Class 4A schools have plenty of other 4A teams to play in non-district games, and Xavier athletic director Mike Winker says none of them want to play the Saints.

It did not have to come to loggerheads like this. Xavier could have stayed in Class 4A after reaching the 4A state championship game in 2012 and 2013, but the Saints did not want to be the only Class 3A team in the state to play "up" a classification.

Xavier officials have cited declining squad sizes in the future as one reason for making the switch. That may be true several years from now, but it does not appear to be significantly true for the next two years.

The Saints had 87 players on the varsity this past season. If all of the juniors and sophomores who played in the program in 2013 return this fall, they'll have 84 players on the varsity (including sophomore Bryce Schulte, who was promoted to the varsity as a freshman). And if all of the sophomores and freshmen who played this year stick with it, the Saints will have 76 players in 2015.

A decline from 87 to 84 to 76 players is not an alarming trend, especially since most of the Class 4A programs in the state would love to have numbers like that. Perhaps Xavier's numbers will begin to drop significantly in 2016, but if that's the case they could have waited for the next two-year district cycle to make the move to 3A.

On the surface, it looks like the Saints seized the opportunity to drop to Class 3A to improve their chances of winning a state title. That may not be true, but it looks that way, and sometimes perception becomes reality in the public eye.

The essence of sports is competition. The Saints were doing very well in Class 4A, and there does not seem to be a compelling reason for making the switch to 3A at this time.

Having said that, there's no compelling case for all the Metro 4A schools to shun the Saints and not put them on their schedule. All of the 4A teams will have four non-district games in 2014 and

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they could have easily put Xavier on the schedule. The non-district games have no bearing on the playoffs, so there would have been no harm in facing the Saints.

The athletic directors at the Class 4A schools all said the same thing, essentially: "Xavier decided to drop to Class 3A and we want to play a Class 4A schedule. We respect their decision and we want them to respect our decision."

But is that the entire reason?

Maybe some of the Class 4A schools are tired of losing to Xavier. Kennedy, Linn-Mar, Jefferson and Prairie all have losing records against the Saints. Not only that, the Cougars have not scored a single point against the Saints in four straight games, including two this past season.

Maybe some of the Class 4A schools don't like squeezing themselves into the cramped visitors locker room at Xavier. Kennedy had to park some of its players on the team bus during halftime of a game this season so everyone else could fit inside.

Maybe some of the Class 4A schools don't like playing on the real grass at Xavier, which can get choppy during games. All of the other Metro teams play on Field Turf at Kingston Stadium, Linn-Mar or Prairie.

Or maybe - just maybe - there's a little retribution in the Class 4A schools not wanting to play Xavier because the Saints are perceived as one of the schools that led to the dissolution of the Mississippi Valley Conference as a football league.

It's true Xavier decided to drop from Class 4A to 3A, but the Saints waited until after Dubuque Wahlert made the same decision. In any case, the Mississippi Valley Conference did not die because Wahlert and Xavier decided to leave. The MVC died as a football league when the Mississippi Athletic Conference voted to switch to district football, leaving the Valley on an island.

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If anyone is punishing Xavier for its decision, they are making a mistake and blaming the wrong people.

There could be another factor at play in the whole situation. Athletic directors and coaches at some of the public schools think private schools have an advantage in the type of students who walk through their doors. Public schools have to accept whoever shows up, for the most part, whereas private schools can be more selective.

Public schools have defined geographic borders, but private schools do not. Public schools have students from all income levels, while private schools do not seem to have a high percentage of students from families in need. That makes a difference, in terms of the support and nurturing a kid might get from his family.

Some people think private schools like Xavier can "recruit" players, but there is no evidence of that. Rather, families simply decide to enroll their children in a private school like Xavier because they prefer a private Catholic education. That's their choice, whether they live in Cedar Rapids or Marion or Fairfax.

The football schedules for the 2014 season will be released later this winter. It will be interesting to see who's on those schedules, but don't be surprised if you see a certain number of local non-district games at the Class 4A level against Burlington, Marshalltown, Muscatine, Clinton or somebody from the Quad Cities. It's going to happen.

School administrators are fond of saying they're in business "For the kids ... We want to do what's best for the kids ... Adults should stay out of the way." But we don't need to conduct a formal survey to know that the kids from Kennedy would rather play the kids from Xavier instead of the kids from Burlington.

Aaron Stecker, the activities director at Kennedy, correctly notes that Xavier benefits more from a home game against Kennedy than Kennedy benefits from a home game against Xavier at Kingston Stadium, because the Cougars have to split the pot three ways with Washington and Jefferson according to school district rules. But would you rather split a big pot or a small pot? How many fans do you think Burlington or Ottumwa will bring to Cedar Rapids?

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Life will go on. Xavier will find success and happiness at the Class 3A level and the local 4A schools will find other 4A teams to play, but it's a shame they won't be playing each other.

It's similar to all those years when the Iowa Hawkeyes and Iowa State Cyclones did not meet in football. They don't have to play, but it's sure a lot more fun when they do.