

IGHSAU adds Class 5A; Xavier staying put

Written by Jim Ecker

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DES MOINES -- Xavier High School will not have to battle bigger schools like Linn-Mar, Kennedy or Washington for berths in the girls state basketball, volleyball, softball or golf tournaments in the near future based on new rules adopted Saturday.

The 40 biggest schools in Iowa will be moving into a new Class 5A next summer in those four sports, but Xavier officials say the school is not interested in making a special appeal to tag along.

The Board of Directors of the Iowa Girls High School Athletic Union (IGHSAU) voted Saturday morning to approve the new Class 5A for the 40 largest schools in the state. Currently, the top class for girls in Iowa contains 48 schools, so eight schools - including Xavier - will drop from the largest class to the second-largest class.

The change will begin with the state softball tournament in 2012.

The Board of Directors made the change to give more teams and more students a chance to participate in state tournaments by adding a fifth class. The move also could generate more revenue for the IGHSAU.

Xavier ranks 47th in student population and falls into the Class 4A, but the Saints have the option of filing a petition with the IGHSAU and requesting a move to 5A so they can continue to compete with the 40 biggest schools and with other members of the Mississippi Valley Conference.

Xavier is not interested in moving up, however.

"We've never petitioned to play up in a class, and I don't anticipate us doing that," Xavier activities director Mike Winker told the Metro Sports Report before the vote.

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The Saints intend to stay in Class 4A, but the remodeled 4A will have 48 schools that are ranked 41st through 88th in attendance.

"I think it would be a good situation for us, instead of being in a class with the top schools," Winker said. "It will be a good situation for our schools and our coaches and kids."

There is currently a big disparity among Class 4A schools. West Des Moines Valley is the biggest school in Iowa with 2,038 students in grades 9 through 11, but Xavier has less than one-third as many students with 578 in grades 9 through 11.

Xavier is the smallest Metro school in the Mississippi Valley Conference, compared to Kennedy (1,320), Linn-Mar (1,285), Jefferson (1,209), Washington (1,070) and Prairie (984).

The IGHSAU likes a five-class system because it will give more teams, more students and more communities a chance to participate in a state tournament and also will decrease the enrollment gap among schools in the largest class.

Marion High School will be moving from Class 3A to Class 4A in the four girls sports, but it will be more of a cosmetic change than anything else. The Indians will remain in the second-largest class according to student population, only now it will have a new name and eight new schools at the top.

As it stands now, the eight largest schools that will become part of the new Class 4A are Des Moines Hoover (796), Indianola (767), Davenport North (747), Lewis Central (688), North Scott (687), Newton (642), Xavier (578) and Boone (574). Those are the schools that are currently ranked 41 through 48 in student population. Any of them can petition the IGHSAU to join Class 5A.

There also will be changes in the three smaller classes. Class 3A will have 64 schools, 2A will have 96 schools and 1A will have all the rest (approximately 115 to 120 schools).

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Xavier High School has been bounced around in recent years between the largest class (4A) and second-largest class (3A). The Saints were a Class 3A school when they won state titles in girls basketball in 2003, 2005 and 2007, but they moved to Class 4A in 2009 and have an 0-1 record in state tournaments since then.

Xavier Coach Tom Lilly is delighted with the IGHSAU's plan to add Class 5A and put the Saints in the second-largest class.

"I think we have seen historically that it would take a great individual effort by a school that's 780 students or less, in grades 9 through 12, to compete with the likes of 2,100 and 2,200 kids," Lilly said before the vote. "It's a large disparity. We've seen a lot of teams that have not had a chance to experience state tournament play because of the numbers game."

Lilly said competing in Class 4A the last three years has been frustrating and disappointing.

"The fact is, most of those schools that are competing for tournament titles - and winning them - are loaded with Division I athletes," he said. "And any more in Class 4A, you have to have Division I athletes to win, the way it currently sits right now. You look at the likes of Kiah Stokes; you can only get one."

Xavier had to face Linn-Mar star Stokes, a prep All-American, in the regional playoffs this year and lost.

"There are always one or two teams you hope you don't get paired with," Lilly said. "I don't think people were standing in line to play Linn-Mar or Washington. Or last year (2010), it was Cedar Rapids Kennedy."

"It becomes a pretty monumental task when you've got to beat Jade Rogers (Kennedy), Tia Dawson (Washington) or Kiah Stokes, year after year after year, unless you're throwing the same kind of kids on the floor, and we have not."

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Lilly said it would be possible for Xavier to make the new Class 5A state tournament on occasion, but added it would be difficult on a regular basis against the larger schools.

"The difficulty we run into is trying to sustain it, year after year after year after year," he said. "That's the thing that becomes the most difficult part. I think we would look forward to the opportunity to play in a class with schools of similar size and capability."

There are 14 schools in the Mississippi Valley Conference. All of them will be switched to Class 5A for girls basketball, volleyball, golf and softball except Xavier and Dubuque Wahlert (423 students in grades 9 through 11).

Lilly does not mind competing in the MVC during the regular season, as long as he does not have to face them in postseason tournaments. He thinks facing the bigger MVC schools during the season will help prepare his club for the tournament.

He said he's not worried about winning the conference title, because playing stiffer competition enhances his chances of winning a state title.

"When we were in Class 3A, we took that particular mindset," he said. "If we were pretty solid in conference play, we oftentimes found ourselves more successful in the state than we were in our own conference, because of the 4A competition."

The IGHSAU board of directors postponed a vote on Class 5A in early March, requesting more information about the logistics of moving to five-class tournaments in terms of facilities, television rights and scheduling. The directors received that information and proceeded with the vote Saturday morning. The motion carried unanimously.

Marion Principal Greg Thomas, who serves as president of the IGHSAU directors, said the board also wanted to make sure the move to five classes would not become a financial burden on the girls union. He's confident it will not.

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"We weren't out to get rich, and we're not going to get rich, which is okay," he said Saturday.

The 2012 girls state volleyball tournament is scheduled to be held at the remodeled U.S. Cellular Center in Cedar Rapids in November of 2012. It will have five classes instead of four. The 2011 state volleyball tournament will be held at the Cedar Rapids Ice Arena with four classes.