

Wilson packing bigger punch for Saints

Written by Jim Ecker

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Maliki Wilson used his great quickness and agility to rush for 1,273 yards as a 160-pound scatback for the Xavier Saints last season.

Imagine what he might do this year as a 200-pound tailback with more power and even more speed.

"I feel a little faster than last year. I worked hard on that," Wilson said before practice Tuesday.

"I'll be able to hit a lot harder this year. The defense will have a little tougher time trying to handle the weight with it, too."

Wilson was not boasting. He never has, never will. But he's confident heading into the big showdown with Iowa City Regina in the season opener at Saints Field Friday night.

The kickoff is scheduled with 7 p.m. with no preliminary game.

Wilson said he feels a lot stronger this season. And even though he gained about 40 pounds in less than a year, there does not appear to be an ounce of fat on him.

"I totally worked on the weightlifting part," he said. "It should all work out pretty good."

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It's not easy to gain 40 pounds of muscle in nine months, but Wilson found a way.

"A lot of eating and a lot of working out," he said, smiling.

He ate just about anything that was put in front of him, but cheeseburgers topped the list. "I love those," he said.

"I just always ate. I'd have the three main meals and then whenever I felt like I hadn't eaten - like maybe in an hour - I'd go make a sandwich or something like that."

Xavier Coach Duane Schulte likes what he's seen of Wilson in training camp.

"He looks stronger. He looks more powerful," said Schulte. "We hope he picks up where he left off last year.

"He loves the game of football," the coach said, "and he's a humble kid."

Wilson averaged a healthy 7.0 yards every time he touched the ball. He's paired in the same backfield again with quarterback Bryce Schulte, who passed for 1,516 yards last season with 20 touchdowns and only five interceptions.

Xavier and Regina have developed an interesting rivalry the past two years. The Regals won the inaugural game in 2014 at Saints Field, then the Saints staged a tremendous comeback in the second half last year and kicked a last-second field goal for a memorable 38-35 victory.

"After the game, we were all just kind of in shock," said Wilson. "We still kind of had a party in the locker room, but we were almost in shock. Hopefully it's not that way again this year.

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"We've been preparing really hard," he said. "We're going 110 percent all the time, and the coaches are making sure we do."

Marv Cook has built a football dynasty at Iowa City Regina with their six state titles in a row. Cook, a former Hawkeye All-American and NFL all-pro tight end, reached out to Schulte for some advice when he became Regina's head coach and Schulte was glad to help.

"Marv and I did meet when he first took the job, up in my classroom for about four hours," said Schulte.

"We didn't really talk schemes and X's and O's. It was more organization and how you do things. I don't know what they're doing down there, day in and day out, but whatever they're doing is right.

"Obviously the coaches know what they're doing and they've got good players," said Schulte. "And who they're playing - they're just better than them. It's pretty simple, I guess, when you put all three of those together."