

Saints spike No. 14 J-Hawks, 3-0

Written by Jim Ecker

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The Xavier Saints have a talented volleyball team that appears very capable of reaching the state tournament in downtown Cedar Rapids this November.

That was obvious Tuesday night when the Saints whipped Jefferson, 25-18, 25-20, 25-21, in a Mississippi Valley Conference match at the Jefferson gym.

The Saints, who are ranked No. 12 in Class 4A, have gotten off to an impressive start this season, with two victories over ranked Class 5A opponents. First it was 15th-ranked Iowa City High last week, now it's 14th-ranked Jefferson this week.

Both matches were on the road, and it's a road that could lead to the U.S. Cellular Center for the state meet.

"One of our main goals is definitely to make it to state," junior Charlotte Richards remarked. "And not only make it to state, but try to make it to the championship.

"The team is really coming together this year," she said. "I think we're going to be really strong."

Xavier finished with a 15-22 record last season and showed promise, but it looks like the Saints are ready to make a big jump under new head coach Austin Filer, who previously was an assistant coach at Mount Mercy University.

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Filer won seven championships during his professional volleyball career and the Saints say he's added a new ingredient to the team this season.

"I think mental toughness, for the whole team," said junior Ellie McDermott. "I think we lacked that in past years."

The Saints have good size and good jumpers, along with team chemistry and experience despite being a fairly young team with only two seniors. There's a long way to go before November, but it could spell a special season and a trip downtown.



"That's our goal," McDermott confirmed. "It's been our goal since the first day of practice this summer. And with Austin's mentality, I think we're all feeding off of him in every practice."

Richards, McDermott, Lexi Noonan and Jessica Callahan are all listed at 5-foot-11, giving the Saints four big girls who are capable of blasting the ball at the net. The other starters Tuesday night were Keera Ball, Anna Parr and Emily Jasper, with Rachel Sodawasser, Akeela Jefferson, Olivia Richards and Janessa Klein coming off the bench.

Callahan and Noonan are the only seniors, but there's good leadership in the group.

"The talent is there," said Filer. "I've talked to them all year about that. But at the end of the day, talent only takes you so far."

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It takes talent and hard work, said Filer, who has both ingredients with his new club.

"They had an incredible 'growth' mindset coming in," he said. "They just want to get better every single day.

"We want to be the best team at the end of October and early November going into state, rather than right now, but it's nice to see them coming in and working hard.

"If you come in with the mindset that we're going to out-work other teams, it can take you a long way in the game of volleyball and outside of volleyball as well."

Charlotte Richards led Xavier with 14 kills Tuesday night. McDermott had 10 kills and Callahan finished with seven. McDermott and Sodawasser had two service aces. The Saints flew all over the court, with few letdowns.

"We definitely have speed on the court," said Charlotte Richards. "We're really good at coming together and not letting the ball drop, and if something does not go our way, we always come together and pick each other up."

Jefferson fell to 0-2 for the campaign.