

Wilson, Saints aiming for No. 1 Pella

Written by Jim Ecker

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Xavier football coach Duane Schulte had a hunch Maliki Wilson would have a tremendous career with the Saints when Wilson began playing for the sophomore team two years ago.

"Let me put it this way," Schulte said this week. "The first time he touched the ball as a sophomore against Assumption he went 80 yards for a touchdown and nobody touched him."

He's been running free ever since.

Wilson has broken (or tied) at least six major school records at Xavier with his remarkable quickness, strength, speed and football IQ. Here is the list:

- + Single game rushing yards (293).
- + Season rushing yards (1,805).
- + Career rushing yards (3,078).
- + Longest TD run (97).
- + Most points in one game (26).
- + Most rushing TDs in one game (4).

Wilson is proud of his accomplishments, but all of those records will shine a little brighter if the second-ranked Saints can knock off top-ranked Pella in the Class 3A semifinals Thursday night and play for the state title next week.

"I would feel a lot better (about the records) if we win it all," he declared.

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The kickoff for Thursday night's game in the UNI-Dome is scheduled for 8:21 p.m.

Xavier and Pella are both 11-0 this season on their march to the semifinals. Pella has won two straight Class 3A state titles and brings an impressive 39-game winning streak into Thursday's contest.

"It will be a challenge, just like any other week," said Wilson. "We'll just have to come out and play our game. If we do that, I like our chances, but they're a really good team."

Wilson tops Class 3A in rushing with 1,805 yards and is averaging an impressive 9.5 yards per carry. He's rushed for 19 touchdowns this season, and remarkably 14 of those TDs have covered at least 20 yards with gallops of 68, 31, 62, 71, 97, 66, 49, 43, 76, 20, 62, 34, 69 and 62 yards. He also has an 85-yard kickoff return for a touchdown and has caught three touchdown passes from Bryce Schulte.

Schulte has broken most of the school passing records during his career, giving the Saints a formidable 1-2 punch along with all the other top players on offense.

Wilson has consistently praised all of his blockers during his record-setting career and thinks his production is a by-product of the system they use at Xavier.

"Records like that will come along, as long as we keep working and do everything we can with no days off," he said. "It's kind of like Bryce with all his records. It will come from the people that work the hardest."

The Saints will be facing a formidable opponent when they face Pella Thursday night. The Dutch blanked the Saints, 27-0, in the semifinals of the Class 3A playoffs in 2014 and haven't lost a game since 2013.

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The Saints could have their hands full with Pella quarterback Nick Finney, who has passed for 2,143 yards and 27 touchdowns and rushed for 1,108 yards and 13 TDs.

Coach Schulte said Pella looks similar to the club that beat the Saints two years ago with a star quarterback who can run and throw. "There are things that you have to account for on every play," he remarked, "and hopefully you have guys who can do the job.

"No matter what happened against them in our game in 2014, really it's two different teams," he said. "They have a tremendous program and we have a tremendous amount of respect for them, but hopefully this year's group of our players can execute better than this year's group of their players and we get a win."

Glenwood (9-2) and Webster City (10-1) will meet in the other Class 3A semifinal Thursday at 5:36 p.m. The championship game is scheduled for next Thursday, Nov. 17 in the UNI-Dome at 7:06 p.m.