

O'Connell bracing Xavier's defense for No. 2 Iowa City High

Written by Jim Ecker

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Jim O'Connell is getting cranky, but it has nothing to do with Xavier's big football game with Iowa City High Friday night.

O'Connell is Xavier's defensive coordinator, but he's also a local farmer with 1,000 acres of corn, beans and stock cows on the west side of Cedar Rapids.

It's getting closer to harvest time. That means more work and longer hours on the farm, in addition to his duties of running a high school defense that has not allowed a point all season.

"I'm getting a little crankier," O'Connell said before practice Tuesday afternoon at Xavier. "The kids understand, the later we go, the crankier I get. I don't get as much sleep."

O'Connell, 45, puts in long days. He doesn't shirk his duties on the farm or on the football field.

"I just got done filling a grain bin up," he said. "I came here, go to practice. From here I'll go back and go to 10 or 11 (p.m.), then watch film until 12:30 or 1 o'clock, then go to bed and get up and do the same thing."

O'Connell was not complaining. In fact, he described his day with a smile.

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He's been doing this for 18 years, first at LaSalle High School and now at Xavier, working side-by-side with Xavier head coach Duane Schulte all those years. He's perfectly happy and has no great desire to run a program of his own.

"It's kind of like the athletes that come through here," he said. "We're kind of programmed the same way. I don't know if I could work for other people.

"I love what I do," he said. "Duane gives me so much freedom to do what I can do to get the defense going. I just love it.

"Right now I'd say no," he said about pursuing a head coaching job. "You never say never, but probably not."

The Saints have a tradition of playing solid, smart, hard-nosed football. They don't have the biggest players in the Mississippi Valley Conference, but they compensate with their attitude and hustle.

"We just try to get better every play and get as many people to the ball as we can," said O'Connell, breaking it down to its simplest level.

"Sometimes athletes have to be athletes and get to the ball," he said. "I believe it's between your backbone and your breastbone. Are you going to get him down or aren't ya?"

"That's how we kind of approach it and try to get as many people there to the ball."

The seventh-ranked Saints opened the season with a 28-0 shutout against Kennedy. They followed with a 14-0 blanking of Prairie, then pitched a 34-0 shutout against Dubuque Hempstead last Friday.

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Three games, three shutouts. O'Connell and Schulte think it's a school record, but aren't sure. Neither seems particularly concerned, one way or the other.

"That's not our goal," O'Connell said about shutouts. "Our goal is to try and get to the playoffs and get as far as you can in the playoffs. I'm not going to dwell on what we've already done. We've got to move on."

The competition gets much stiffer the next two weeks. The Saints host second-ranked Iowa City High Friday night, then host top-ranked Cedar Falls next Friday night.

"These next couple of weeks are going to be a bear," O'Connell said.

The City High Little Hawks are averaging 40.7 points and 409.3 yards rushing per game. The Saints are allowing 0.0 points and 58.7 yards rushing per game.

Something has to give.

"My goal is to try and slow them down," O'Connell remarked. "They're good in everything they do, so hopefully we can slow them down and our offense can put some points on the board and we'll see where we end up. Hopefully it will be a good game."

Iowa City High tailback Ronald Thompson ran for a school-record 362 yards and scored four touchdowns in a 42-24 victory over Iowa City West last Friday. He's rushed for 623 yards and scored eight touchdowns in three games, averaging 9.2 yards per carry.

"That Thompson kid is a man among boys," Schulte said.

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The Saints know what's coming Friday night. They just hope to stop it, or slow it down.

"City High is a really, really good team," Xavier linebacker Jack Boland said. "They have a lot of good players. Their quarterback and running backs are really good. They like to run it and power it down our throats.

"We just have to do our job and get a push up front and hopefully we can make some plays."

City High quarterback Jasper Washington has rushed for 283 yards with an 8.8-yard average and four TDs. The Little Hawks (3-0) have thrown only 15 passes in three games, but Schulte is wary.

"I'm sure they're saving stuff that they haven't used in the first three games," he said. "I'm sure they've got some throwing stuff they're going to do. I'm sure it's coming."

The Saints are preparing for a slugfest.

"They're a quick team and their offensive line can get off the ball really well," Xavier defensive end/tight end Kevin Hosch said. "We just have to come out and be ready."