

Jelinek joins football staff at Xavier

Written by Jim Ecker

Wednesday, 01 August 2012 20:59 - Last Updated Sunday, 19 August 2012 11:22



Craig Jelinek's retirement as a high school football coach lasted exactly one season.

Jelinek, 60, will serve as a volunteer assistant coach this year with the Xavier Saints, working primarily with defensive backs and tight ends.

The move reunites Jelinek with Xavier head coach Duane Schulte, an old friend and one of Jelinek's former students at LaSalle High School more than 30 years ago.

Jelinek retired as the head coach at Prairie High School following the 2010 campaign, finishing with a 106-96 record in 21 years at the helm. He felt he needed a break after 37 years as a teacher and coach.

"I knew it was time. I was pretty tired," Jelinek said Tuesday. "I needed time to consider what it would be like away from the game, away from the other coaches and away from the kids."

He left the door open for a return to coaching at some point, however. Schulte remembers a conversation they had after the 2010 campaign, when they were at a meeting to pick an all-conference or all-Metro team.

"He said, 'I'm going to take a year off, but don't be surprised if I give you a call about maybe volunteering or something,'" Schulte recalled.

This past spring, Jelinek made that call. "I said, 'Well, I'm interested if you are,'" Schulte remarked. "The next thing you know, here we are."

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Jelinek was the sophomore coach at LaSalle when Schulte was playing for the varsity, so he was never one of Schulte's coaches on a regular basis. But Jelinek made a strong impression on Schulte in the classroom.

"I thought he was a great teacher when I had him in high school and I thought he was a great coach at Prairie," Schulte said. "They always played hard, they'd get after it. In a lot of ways, I always thought they were similar to us (at Xavier).

"Not the biggest school and not the most populous school, not the greatest athletes, but they always somehow got them to play tough."

Jelinek and Schulte learned a lot about football from Tom Kopatich, who produced strong teams at LaSalle. They took those lessons and put them to good use in their own programs at Prairie and Xavier over the years.

"I'll tell you what the similarities are," Jelinek said. "It's in the attitude and the way he (Kopatich) built the program. It's just a hard-nosed, disciplined, hard-working philosophy that both of us employ."

Jelinek checked with Prairie athletic director Rocky Bennett and current Prairie football coach Mike Morrissey to make sure both men were comfortable with him working at Xavier. Meanwhile, Schulte consulted with his folks at Xavier to make sure everyone there was on board.

"I think it will work out well for both of us," Schulte said. "I'm happy about it. I'm excited. He'll have input with a lot of things, I hope."

Jim O'Connell, the defensive coordinator at Xavier, played for one of Jelinek's sophomore football teams at LaSalle. Now Jelinek will be working for O'Connell, further cementing the staff.

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The Saints will visit Prairie for a Mississippi Valley Conference football game on Friday, Sept. 7, in the third game of the season. This time, Jelinek will be on the visiting side at John Wall Field.

"All I remember about the Prairie-Xavier games ... There was a friendly rivalry, let's put it that way," he said.

"My years at Prairie, I enjoyed tremendously."