

## Saints get cold shoulder from Metro foes

Written by Jim Ecker

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None of the Class 4A football teams in the Metro area want to play the Xavier Saints next season.

Not Washington, not Jefferson, not Linn-Mar, not Prairie. And not even Kennedy, which is just a long punt from Xavier High School on 42nd Street Northeast.

That's the word from Mike Winker, the athletic director at Xavier, and confirmed by several athletic directors at other Metro schools.

The Saints are dropping from Class 4A to Class 3A next year. The Mississippi Valley Conference is dead as a football league - everyone is moving into districts - and the Metro 4A schools don't want Xavier on their schedule as part of their non-district alignment.

"I've visited with all of the 4A schools in one form or another and it doesn't sound like any of them are interested in playing us," Winker said Monday. "You'd have to ask them why they don't want to. I don't want to speak for them.

"Our stance is we would love to play the Metro 4A schools. We just think it makes sense with no travel for all of the schools involved, big games, great games for our community.

"So we're disappointed that that's the stance they're taking," he said, "but we're also excited about some opportunities we have with other schools as well."

Xavier has played the other Metro schools on a regular basis in the Mississippi Valley Conference, but that's apparently going to change unless the Iowa High School Athletic Association steps in and forces them to play the Saints. The IHSA will be arranging the

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schedules for all teams, but nobody at the IHSAA was available for comment Monday.

Each school has until Feb. 3 to submit a "preferred list" of teams they'd like to face in non-district games, but the local Class 4A schools are not interested in Xavier.

"No, they wouldn't be on our list," said Scott Mahmens, the athletic director at Linn-Mar. "We're trying to hook up with 4A schools.

"We respect them for being 3A - going down to 3A and wanting to play 3A - and we want them to respect us to play a 4A schedule. That's what we're looking at, just playing a 4A schedule."

Linn-Mar was placed in a Class 4A district with Kennedy, Jefferson, Cedar Falls, Waterloo East and Waterloo West. That leaves four non-district games and Mahmens said he'd like to play Prairie, Washington, Clinton and somebody else.

"We definitely want to play Prairie. That's kind of our rivalry," he said. "We'd like to play Washington again. We've contacted some MAC schools as well and hopefully they'll be putting us on their list, just like we're putting them on our list."

The Mississippi Athletic Conference (MAC) played a major role in leading the move from conference football to district football for Class 4A schools in the eastern part of the state. Dubuque Wahlert also played a major role, electing to leave the Mississippi Valley Conference and drop to Class 3A, and Xavier followed suit when it became clear where everybody else was headed.

Aaron Stecker, the athletic director at Kennedy, declined to reveal who might be on his school's preferred list of opponents - and who won't be. "I'm not ready to share that," he said.

Stecker acknowledged the popularity of Kennedy's games against Xavier.

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"There's no doubt there's very good history and tradition there," he said. "We're going to do what makes the most sense for our kids and our school and our program. If that includes making the community happy, great. But that can't be my top priority."

Stecker noted that Kennedy's games at Xavier are more lucrative for the home team than Xavier's games against Kennedy at Kingston Stadium. When Xavier plays at home, the Saints keep all the gate receipts and concession revenue. But when Kennedy plays at home at Kingston, it shares gate receipts with Washington and Jefferson at the district facility. The same is true for all the Kennedy, Washington and Jefferson games at Kingston.

In addition, the Jefferson Booster Club runs the concession stands at Kingston Stadium and profits from that venture.

"There is a big difference between Xavier hosting one of us at their place, and one of us hosting Xavier at Kingston," said Stecker. "I fully understand why Xavier would be interested in playing as many Metro schools as they can."

Paul James, the athletic director and football coach at Washington, confirmed his school is not interested in putting Xavier on its preferred list of non-district opponents.

"From my perspective, we're a 4A school and that's the kind of schedule we want to put together," he said. "We're looking to fill our schedule with 4A schools."

Washington was placed in a district with Prairie, Burlington, Iowa City High, Muscatine and Ottumwa. James said the Warriors would like to play Kennedy, Jefferson and Linn-Mar in non-district games, which leaves only one more non-district game to fill, perhaps against a MAC opponent for variety.

Xavier was placed in a Class 3A district with Solon, Marion, DeWitt Central, Western Dubuque, Maquoketa and Dubuque Wahlert for six district games. That means the Saints are looking for

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three non-district games, but Winker declined to reveal who might be on his list.

He's not sure if he should put the Class 4A Metro schools on his list or not. The IHSAA is going to look at that list when it schedules games, but Winker isn't sure if it makes sense to put the Metro clubs on there or not.

"That's something we'll talk about internally," he said. "If we know people don't want to play, do we still put them down? Or do we put down other people that we're visiting with that think they might have an interest in playing us? That's a great question."

Xavier has a winning record against all the Metro teams except Washington. Winker said the Saints will have smaller squads in the future, but he anticipates having a solid program for years to come. Xavier won the Class 4A state title in 2006 and finished second in 2012 and 2013.

"We think we'll be competitive," he said. "Competitively, I think we match up very well to have exciting games with the Metro schools."

"We feel it would be great for the community to continue some of those games. But if not, we'll deal with that."

Prairie athletic director Rocky Bennett and Jefferson athletic director Chris Deam were not available for comment Monday.