

Saints, Cougars could win state titles

Written by Jim Ecker

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The Xavier Saints and Kennedy Cougars could win boys state basketball titles this week in Des Moines if they play well and take advantage of the big 94-foot court at Wells Fargo Arena.

On the other hand, both teams could lose in the first round if they get stage fright and kick it around.

Here's betting it will be a fun week in Des Moines for Xavier and Kennedy, which have more in common than simply a campus that borders 42nd Street NE in Cedar Rapids.

The Saints and Cougars are mirror-images of each other in many ways.

Both teams have balanced attacks with lots of explosive players who are capable of scoring 20 points in a ballgame (and have).

Both teams have proficient 3-point shooters (the Saints have made 170 3-pointers this season, the Cougars 168).

Neither team has great size, but they make do in the rebounding department by attacking the backboards with gusto.

Both teams are riding eight-game winning streaks into the state tournament. Neither team has lost in more than a month, and both clubs are playing with great confidence.

Both teams have a pair of excellent point guards who can handle the ball and get it to the right people at the right time, with Mitchell Burger and Michael Mims sharing the job for Xavier and

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Cole Murdock and Zach Daniels doing likewise for Kennedy.

Both teams have excellent coaches who instill confidence in their players, and do not underestimate that key intangible in a big game.

Both teams are No. 6 seeds and will face a No. 3 seed in the opening round, making them slight underdogs but nothing they have not dealt with before.

Xavier (16-8) plays Pella (21-2) in the opening round of the Class 3A state tournament Tuesday night at 8:15. The semifinals are Thursday night and the finals Saturday night.

Kennedy (18-5) meets Pleasant Valley (21-2) in the opening round of the Class 4A state tournament Wednesday night at 6:35. The semifinals are Friday afternoon and the finals Saturday night.

Williamsburg is the No. 1 seed in Class 3A, but the Saints just finished a march through the Wamac Conference with lopsided postseason victories over Benton Community, Solon and Mount Vernon and would be facing the Wamac Conference champs in the finals if both teams get there.

Iowa City West, seeking its fourth state title in a row, is the No. 1 seed and favorite in Class 4A, but Kennedy gave the Trojans a good game Jan. 30 before falling by 10 points. The Cougars had a chance to win that game and would love a rematch with a championship at stake.

Xavier features an explosive attack with Adam McDermott (17.7 points), Burger (13.9), Calvin Winker (12.7) and Mims (10.3). All four of them have been all-conference players during their careers.

Kennedy features a lethal attack with Brendon Manning (14.8 points), Daniels (12.9), Bryton Heisler (11.2) and Murdock (9.9), with Drake Brewster (7.9) and Derick Diggins (6.0) also

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capable scorers.

Kennedy has a deeper bench than Xavier, but the Saints make do with versatile fifth man Conner Ramlo and Joe Welch as the primary sub. All of the starters for Xavier are capable of playing several positions, so Coach Ryan Luehrsmann is able to mix and match and keep things humming.

Kennedy Coach Jon McKowen likes to rest his top players for short stretches, to make sure they are playing with great energy in the fourth quarter. Matt Gardner and Derek Girling allow McKowen to go nine-deep in games.

Both clubs could go all the way in Des Moines this week. It won't be easy, but winning a state title rarely is.

This could be the year for a big parade down 42nd Street, from one school to the other.