

No.1 Saints playing air-tight defense

Written by Jim Ecker

Tuesday, 24 September 2013 20:00 -

Xavier High School coaches and players give the same stock answer when you ask about their incredible defensive performances this year.

"We're doing OK" ... "We could do better" ... "There's room for improvement."

If that's true - if the top-ranked Saints can play even better than this on defense - then opponents might not score another point against them all season.

The Saints have allowed just one touchdown and seven points all year, and that came with four seconds left in the fourth quarter of a 35-7 victory over Dubuque Hempstead in the season opener.

That's it. Seven points in four games.

Perhaps just as impressive, the Saints have allowed only 92 yards per game - less than one trip up and down the field.

"They're doing OK," said Xavier defensive coordinator Jim O'Connell, never one to boast about his teams. "We have a lot of areas to improve on."

"There's always stuff to improve on," echoed defensive end Hunter Baldus. "We watch film over and over again, just to see what we're doing wrong and just try to improve every week."

"We definitely have things to work on, but so far we're doing a pretty good job," allowed Miles

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Sullivan, a defensive back. "There's always room for improvement."

Hempstead scored its touchdown after Xavier's top defensive unit had retired for the night, so that means the starters have not allowed a point all season.

The Saints are proud of what they've accomplished on defense in their victories over Hempstead (35-7), Jefferson (44-0), Prairie (23-0) and Dubuque Wahlert (38-0), but they won't brag and they won't look too far ahead.

There are challenging games on the horizon, beginning Friday night against Kennedy at Kingston Stadium. The Cougars are 3-1 and hungry for a victory.

Xavier Coach Duane Schulte does not allow any chest-thumping in his program, not from him or anyone else. "We'll just try to do the talking on Friday nights," he said simply.

The Saints had a strong defensive team last year when they reached the championship game of the Class 4A playoffs. Many of those guys returned this season, so it's no surprise they have another stellar group.

"They've got a lot of experience, so that should help them be better this year," said Schulte. "When you get to play a lot as an underclassman, hopefully by your senior year you've got things figured out."

O'Connell relishes his unit's approach to the game. Every day, not just on Friday nights.

"The one thing I like is the enthusiasm," said O'Connell, who has been churning out strong defensive teams for a long time. "When they come to practice, they're ready to go all the time. That's what I like."

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Matt Nelson, a 6-foot-8 all-state defensive end who has committed to Iowa, gets most of the attention on the defensive side of the ball at Xavier, but there are outstanding players all over the place - on the defensive line, linebacker and in the secondary. It's a long list of quality athletes.

"Big-time players," said Schulte. "You can't win in this league unless you have some players who can do the job at the things you're doing. It's not just one individual. It's the entire defense."

And yet, they feel they can get better.

"I think everybody in every position needs to get a little bit better at what we're trying to do, as a whole team concept of what we're trying to accomplish," said O'Connell.

None of the Xavier defenders have gaudy statistics, because they're not on the field long enough with all the lopsided scores, continuous clocks in the second half and short possessions. Prairie gave the Saints a tough game, but the other three contests were lopsided by halftime.

Sullivan, who has gotten feelers from Iowa and Iowa State, thought the current senior class had a chance to be pretty good when they were younger if they worked hard, got bigger and stronger and listened to the coaches.

"When you're little, you always have those big hopes and dreams," he said. "You look up to the varsity team when you're little and go, 'Wow, I want to be like that.'"

"We've wanted to work hard, and we want to keep working hard," said Sullivan. "That way, maybe we can be a pretty good defense."

The Saints are always looking for an edge.

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"There's always stuff to improve on," said Baldus. "We watch film over and over, just to see what we're doing wrong and just try to improve every week. I like looking at what we did wrong and what we can improve on."

The Saints also study their opponent. This week it's Kennedy, with its Stack-I formations and a seven-man offensive line that features two tight ends at times.

You don't see power formations like that too often.

"It's kind of old-school," said O'Connell. "We're going back to old-school. So we'll see how that turns out."

The Saints have a powerful front-7 on defense, so there could be a lot of head-knocking Friday night at Kingston. Kennedy also has some track stars on its team and could spread things apart, if they choose.

"They have a bunch of athletes who are doing a good job," said Schulte. "They're quick, and their offensive line is big. They're the real deal."

So is Xavier's defense.