

Ladies of the Rings

Written by Mike Koolbeck

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MUSCATINE - Last year was one for the thumb.

This season was one for the other hand.

Xavier soccer players have four more digits to go before they'll have to start putting rings on their toes.

They are the Ladies of the Rings.

Kayla Armstrong and Annie Dale scored goals and No. 1 ranked Xavier held off No. 2 Waukee, 2-1, Saturday for the Class 2A girls soccer state championship. It is the Saints' sixth straight girls soccer title, albeit their first in Class 2A.

"It never gets old," said Xavier Coach Doug Graham, who guided the Saints to the last four state crowns. "We preach take it one game at a time, but in the back of our minds we know we want to win it."

Xavier (19-2) moved up to Class 2A when the Iowa Girls High School Athletic Union expanded soccer from two to three classes before this season. According to Dale, there were more than a few doubters that the Saints would be able to compete for another crown.

"A lot of people didn't believe in us," she said. "They barely thought we were going to make it to finals, and then to make it -- and win it -- it proves a lot. We proved a lot to ourselves, our coaches and everyone else."

The reality of competing for a sixth straight title set in during a scoreless first half.

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"It was more the reality of disappointing a lot of people," said Armstrong, a sophomore who had to sit out Xavier's semifinal round win over Glenwood after picking up a red card in the quarterfinals against Independence-East Buchanan. "I was really nervous."

Armstrong said Graham eased her anxieties with his halftime speech.

"He told us he knew we had pressure on us but that we knew how to play and no matter what, go out and have fun," she said.

"We made some adjustments at halftime and responded beautifully well," Graham said.

Armstrong got the fun going in the second minute of the second half, taking a crossing pass from Dale and tapping it past Megan Goodson, the Waukee keeper, for her team-leading 36th goal of the season for a 1-0 lead.

Dale's header off a corner kick by junior Lauren Konchar in the 52nd minute pushed Xavier's lead to 2-0. Konchar lofted the ball toward the far post and Dale got her head on it about 8 yards out, knocking it to the turf and past the sprawling Goodson. It was Dale's sixth goal of the tournament and 25th of the season.

Waukee (15-4) struck back with a goal in the 71st minute. Goodson, switched to forward, shuffled a pass to junior Katy Cavanaugh, who smoked it past Xavier keeper Tori Shepard. It was the first -- and only -- goal allowed by Shepard in five postseason games.

"I owe a lot of it to the defense," said Shepard, a four-year starter at keeper.

Waukee kept the pressure on Xavier's defense in the closing minutes. Shepard came up with one huge save off a header, hammering the ball away with her fist with about 2 1/2 minutes left.

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"When I'm out there, I don't really think," Shepard said. "I just go. If I can get there I go."

Now it is Xavier that will be going for a seventh straight title next season. With eight of 11 starters back, including the high-scoring duo of Dale and Armstrong, the Saints will be heavy favorites to repeat -- again.

"We'll relax tonight and we'll think about next year next year," Graham said.

Dale was named captain of the all-tournament team. Joining her on the squad were Shepard, senior Megan Konchar and junior Mary Levett.

CLASS 2A STATE CHAMPIONSHIP

Xavier 2, Waukee 1.

Goals -- Xavier: Kayla Armstrong (42nd min.), Annie Dale (52nd min.); Waukee: Katie Cavanaugh (71st min.). Assists -- Xavier: Dale, Lauren Konchar; Waukee: Megan Goodson.