

Saints inspired by 2006 state football title

Written by Jim Ecker

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Matt Hansen sat in the stands in the UNI-Dome when the Xavier Saints beat Southeast Polk, 21-6, to capture the Class 4A football title in 2006. It was a win for the ages.

"We started yelling," he said.

Jordan Weber was there, too.

"Great game," he recalled. "It gives you something to work for. You want to get to that point where you can be that team in the Dome."

Carter Valentine won't ever forget it.

"It was an inspirational game," he said. "It was awesome."

Hansen, Weber and Valentine were in the seventh grade in 2006, but they were in Cedar Falls that day when the Saints went marching to the state crown.

"Everyone was there," said Valentine.

Hansen, Weber and Valentine are seniors now, three of the leaders on the 2011 edition of Xavier football. Nobody is predicting another state title, not with only four starters back from a club that finished 7-3, but they can dream.

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"The goal is always the state championship," said Valentine. "That's what we go for every year."

The Saints like to think big.

"We have one saying in our locker room: You get what you earn," said Xavier Coach Duane Schulte. "You've got to earn it. They buy into that and work hard."

This year's seniors went 9-0 on the sophomore team two years ago. This year's juniors were 8-1 last year as 10th graders, so these players are accustomed to success.

This season marks the fifth anniversary of Xavier's improbable state title. The Saints compete in Class 4A, where some of the schools have twice as many students. Or more.

That's why the 2006 state title was so stunning. The Little Saints conquered the world.

"If there's one man in this town that everyone respects, it's Dick Breitbach Sr.," Schulte said, referring to a legendary figure in Xavier and Regis athletics. "After we won that state championship, he said that in his opinion that was the greatest high school athletic achievement in the history of Cedar Rapids. For someone like him to say that, I think that's pretty cool."

The Saints graduated a ton of starters last year, but Schulte always tries to develop depth during the season and plays as many guys as possible. So even though they don't have a lot of returning starters, they do have a nucleus of players who saw the field.

Hansen, Weber and Valentine all played last year. They'll be three of the leaders this season.

The Saints will have a new quarterback, however, with junior Reggie Schulte the likely starter.

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He's the coach's son.

"It's been fun coaching him," Schulte said. "He was a ballboy on that 2006 state championship team. He's been involved with it forever - waterboy, ballboy. He's been around it his whole life and he loves it."

Hansen is the starting fullback. Schulte said he's fast and strong. Valentine is the tailback, a sprinter on the Xavier track team. Weber is another sprinter who doubles as a defensive back and receiver. Schulte considers him one of the most talented players on the squad.

"We think he's a legit Division I player," he said. "When you see this kid run and move, he's the real deal. He ain't slow."

Kevin Hosch, Jack Boland and Weber are returning starters on defense. Chad Gilmer, a solid place-kicker, is the only returning starter on offense. He went 28-for-28 on PATs and 5-for-8 on field goals last season and is a weapon.

Schulte thinks he has a half-dozen receivers who can catch the ball, complementing the backfield of Reggie Schulte, Valentine and Hansen.

Xavier opens the season on Friday, Aug. 26 against Kennedy at Kingston Stadium. The Saints whipped the Cougars, 35-7, in the season opener last year, but Kennedy handed them a stinging 11-7 defeat in the first round of the playoffs.

"We tried to learn from that and move on," said Schulte.

XAVIER FOOTBALL SCHEDULE

Friday, Aug. 26 - at Kennedy (Kingston Stadium), 7:15 p.m.

Friday, Sept. 2 - Prairie, 7:15 p.m.

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Friday, Sept. 9 - at Dubuque Hempstead, 7:15 p.m.

Friday, Sept. 16 - Iowa City High, 7:15 p.m.

Friday, Sept. 23 - Cedar Falls, 7:15 p.m.

Friday, Sept. 30 - at Iowa City West, 7:15 p.m.

Friday, Oct. 7 - Waterloo East, 7:15 p.m.

Friday, Oct. 14 - at Jefferson (Kingston Stadium), 7:15 p.m.

Friday, Oct. 21 - Linn-Mar, 7:15 p.m.