

Winker will be UI lecturer, ad salesman

Written by Jim Ecker

Tuesday, 31 May 2016 04:45 - Last Updated Tuesday, 31 May 2016 04:47



Mike Winker will be leaving Xavier High School in a few weeks with 30 state titles in the trophy case and a lifetime of memories as the only athletic director in school history.

Winker is justifiably proud of all the success, but says he's proudest of the students, coaches, families and administrators who have given the Saints a chance to compete at such a high level.

Winker, 51, will retire from Xavier in June and has accepted two jobs that undoubtedly will keep him busy in the years to come. He'll be a lecturer at the University of Iowa in the Sports Management and Recreation Department, and he'll also serve as sales director in Eastern Iowa for the Varsity Group, a company that sells advertising for high school scoreboards.

"I'm excited about both ventures," he said last week. "I've kind of got the best of both worlds. Both of them are going to keep me in contact with the high schools. I'm excited about both opportunities, I'm excited about the change."

Winker decided it was time in his life to step away from those incredibly long hours as a high school athletic director, days that often stretch from early in the morning until late at night. He announced his retirement last May to give Xavier a chance to conduct a thorough search for his replacement to keep the department functioning at a high level.

Steve Lueck, currently the principal and activities director at St. Mary's High School in Storm Lake, will officially succeed Winker on July 1, although he's expected in town a little earlier than that.

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Winker has prepared a folder for Lueck with key names, contact information and other pertinent information, working meticulously until his last day to keep the Saints humming along. He'll continue to support Xavier as a fan - "That will be fun," he said - but his days of leading 19 varsity sports along with all his other duties are coming to an end.

It's nearly time to turn out the lights and lock the door, but perhaps the Saints will win another soccer title before it's time to go.

"It's going to be emotional and difficult, but it's time," he said. "I'm ready, I'm excited. But I'm going to miss everybody at Xavier.

"The thing I'm going to miss are the people - the students, the faculty, coaches, parents. I'm going to miss the people, but it's time to move on from this job and this responsibility."

Winker was the athletic director at Regis High School when Regis and LaSalle merged to form Xavier High School. He helped usher Xavier into the Mississippi Valley Conference, even though the Saints would be much smaller than most of the other MVC schools, contending it would be best for Xavier in the long run to compete at the highest level.

"There was a lot of debate, there was a lot of discussion," he said. "Some people weren't happy."

Xavier struggled in some sports in the early years, but the Saints battled and quickly caught up. They have won 30 state titles in 10 different sports, including the Class 4A football title in 2006 against the biggest schools in Iowa.

"Once we turned that tide and built that mentality that we could compete and win, it created a friendly and positive environment where we can have success and we can have high goals in our athletic department," said Winker.

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In many sports, the Saints compete against the largest schools in the state during the regular season and then drop down a class for postseason competition, battle-tested and ready for success. The latest example came this past winter when the boys basketball team captured the Class 3A state title.

Xavier has won 16 state titles in soccer, with nine in girls soccer and seven in boys soccer. The girls soccer program won eight titles in a row, the longest streak in any sport in state history.

The Saints have four state titles in girls basketball; two apiece in girls cross country, boys cross country and boys track; and one each in football, boys basketball, girls golf and baseball.

There also have been 13 teams that finished as state runner-up since 1998, making for a total of 43 state champions or runners-up in 18 years.

"Our kids are so goal-driven, whether it's academics, their spiritual life and then their activities," said Winker. "I'm just thankful and proud of the people I've worked with. It's been outstanding."

The trophy cases are filled with handsome awards and great memories, a tribute to Winker's fine work at Xavier High School. Now one of his new jobs will be helping non-teachers become certified high school athletic directors in his role as a lecturer at Iowa, where he'll teach two classes this fall and two more in the winter semester.

Winker was a classroom teacher at St. Jude and Regis before becoming an athletic director. Now he'll be returning to his roots as an instructor at Iowa, where he received his master's degree in sports management.