

Rodriguez gives Saints rare weapon at fullback

Written by Jim Ecker

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On most high school football teams, the fullback has one primary assignment that overshadows everything else.

He's supposed to block, block and block some more.

Erik Rodriguez is certainly an outstanding blocker for the Xavier Saints, but he's also an accomplished runner and a good receiver for the No. 1 team in Class 3A.

If Xavier's opponents worry too much about tailback Maliki Wilson or quarterback Bryce Schulte, Rodriguez is very capable of making them pay a heavy price.

"Erik is a different weapon back there," Xavier Coach Duane Schulte acknowledged. "He's a nice kid, too.

"He's the perfect blend for what you need in terms of a Xavier football player," the coach said. "He's a super-nice kid in the hallways and in school and everywhere else, but he gets a little nasty in him when he crosses the line and plays football. That's what we want."

Rodriguez, a 6-foot, 200-pound senior, has carried the ball 22 times for 164 yards in four games for a healthy average of 7.5 yards per carry. He's also caught four passes for 36 yards and is an integral part of the offense.

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And make no mistake, he likes getting his nose dirty at fullback.

"It's a great position to just hit somebody," he said. "When you have a running back like Maliki and an offensive line like we do, it's really easy just to play my position and it's easier to make my blocks."

Wilson has rushed for 741 yards and nine touchdowns this season, making him one of the top threats in Iowa. The Saints also feature Bryce Schulte, who has a strong and accurate arm, so it's hard for opponents to come up with a defensive plan that accounts for everybody.

"It's always good to mix it up and take some of the pressure off Maliki," said Rodriguez. "It makes more options for the offense and makes us more versatile and makes us more of a threat. I just try to do my part."

Coach Schulte spotted Rodriguez a long time ago and counted the years until he got to Xavier. He thought Rodriguez was a versatile athlete, even as a youngster.

"I saw that in him in seventh grade, believe it or not," said Schulte. "I helped coach their seventh grade basketball team at LaSalle.

"He's got some athletic ability to him. He runs well for his size. I told him back then, 'I can't wait to coach you in varsity football at Xavier.'"

Schulte said Rodriguez began to blossom as a football player toward the end of the 2015 season and has continued to improve since then. If the Saints need a tough yard on 3rd-and-1 to keep a drive alive, don't be surprised if Rodriguez gets the call in clutch situations.

"It's great to know that Coach Schulte has confidence in me, and I can put my trust in Bryce and

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the linemen making the right call," he said.

The Saints (4-0, 2-0) travel to Decorah (2-2, 1-1) on Friday night for a Class 3A district game. Decorah upset the Saints in the second round of the playoffs last season, 30-21, handing Xavier its only loss of the year.

"I remember Decorah was a great team. Kudos to them," said Rodriguez. "They deserved to win, but it left a tough spot in our minds.

"It really stuck with us throughout the off-season, so it's good that we get to play them again, try to get our pride back and stuff like that. We are looking forward to that game."