

Richardson goes to Xavier, swims for Cougars

Written by Jim Ecker

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John Richardson is a man with two high schools, and not just any two schools.



They are Xavier and Kennedy, the northeast Cedar Rapids neighbors, the Battle of 42nd Street and all that jazz.

So that's exactly what he does. He goes to Xavier, but swims for Kennedy. Richardson is a full-time student at Xavier, but he loves to swim and Xavier does not have a team. Thanks to school rules, he's eligible to swim for Kennedy because he lives in the Kennedy district.

Richardson also plays football and runs track. Xavier has those sports, so he doesn't have to look elsewhere, but it causes a little confusion.

He's a Saint in the fall (football), he's a Cougar in the winter (swimming), then he's a Saint again in the spring (track). He's a Saint at heart and doesn't wear his Kennedy varsity letter at Xavier, but he's got a varsity "K" at home and he's proud of that, too.

It's not easy, wearing the green-and-gold when you're swimming for Kennedy, when you bleed silver-and-black the rest of the time at Xavier.

"It was hard at first," Richardson said before practice at the Kennedy pool. "I got a lot of flak from kids at my school, and I got flak from kids at Kennedy. But they've really accepted me here, and I've really enjoyed it."

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"I thought it was going to be worse, personally," he said with a smile. "But it's turned out really well."

Football and swimming overlapped in the fall, which made things awkward. Richardson played on Xavier's sophomore football team, but he's one of Kennedy's top swimmers and is on the varsity down the street.

"You're teammates one day, and then you're fighting against each other on the football field the next day," he said. "It's kind of weird."

Kennedy swim coach Shawn Thomsen said there's no problem having a so-called outsider on the team. As far as Thomsen is concerned, they're all Cougars.

"Honestly, you wouldn't even know there's a difference," he said.

Richardson's parents — Dr. Tom and Diana Richardson — blend in, too. "They wear Kennedy apparel when they're at a meet," Thomsen reported.

Richardson's biggest problem is with logistics, not school colors. One of the schools has semesters, the other trimesters. And it takes a few minutes to get from one place to the other, especially for the first class of the day in potentially heavy traffic.

The Kennedy swimmers practice from 5:45 a.m. until 7:15 a.m. before school, but Richardson needs to scoot before it's done. "I get out a little early so I can make it to Xavier for classes on time," he said.

His first class is at 7:45 a.m., and he's a 4.0 student who doesn't want to be late. He takes all honors-level classes, including upper-level math, then has to race back to Kennedy for practice

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after school, swimming from 3:45 p.m. until 6 or 6:30 when there isn't a meet. Then he heads home.

"Eat dinner, do my homework, go to bed," he said.

Bed-time varies, depending on homework.

"If I'm done at 10, I go to bed at 10," he said. "If I'm done at midnight, I go to bed at midnight."

There were two Xavier students on the Kennedy swim team last year with Richardson and Michael Lyon. Richardson was an apprehensive freshman, Lyon a savvy senior who introduced him to the other swimmers and helped him feel at home.

"That really helped," Richardson said. "Last year I didn't know anybody but Michael."

Lyon graduated, leaving Richardson as the only Saint in Cougar country, but he has friends at Kennedy now and everything is fine, for the most part. There are those intense Kennedy-Xavier football games to consider.

"I love playing Kennedy. It's a great game," he said. "I think the rivalry is good to have, but I don't think it's that big of a deal."

"In football, we always love to beat Kennedy, and I'm sure Kennedy loves to beat Xavier. But we're really the same person, I've come to find out. Just because I go to a Catholic school and they go to a public school, it doesn't mean we're all that different."

Richardson might get the Nobel Peace Prize for all this.

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"I think Kennedy thinks we're just the stuck-up Catholic kids, which is what I've been told at least," he said, smiling. "I think it's good to have rivalries, but I think we're a lot more similar than other people think we are."

Richardson is not the only Saint in a foreign land. Nick Durin, a freshman at Xavier, competes with the Washington swim team, because he lives in the Wash district. That's how it works.

Since Xavier does not have a team, you can swim for the public school in your district. If you live in the Kennedy district, you swim at Kennedy. If you live in the Washington district, you swim at Washington. And if you live in the Jefferson district, you can swim at Jefferson.

"Given the current situation, it makes the most sense," Thomsen said. "If it gives a kid a chance who wouldn't have it, and we can find a way to make it work, all the better."

Richardson is one of Kennedy's top swimmers and earned a varsity "K" last year. He's proud of that "K," but not crazy enough to wear it at Xavier.

"That wouldn't have worked out well if I walked into Xavier with a Kennedy letter jacket on," he acknowledged.

Mike Winker, the activities director at Xavier, gave Richardson a varsity "X" in honor of his work at Kennedy, even though Richardson earned his varsity letter as a Cougar, not a Saint.

"I thought it was very nice of him," Richardson said. "It was really cool, I thought. I kept the 'K,' though. So I have both."

Richardson loves swimming and is delighted to compete at Kennedy.

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“It’s better than nothing,” he said. “If it wasn’t for this, I wouldn’t be swimming in high school. So I’m thankful for the opportunity. I’m really happy that they opened their arms and let me on the team.”

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