

'X' marks the championship spot

Written by Jim Ecker

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The lane that leads into the Xavier High School parking lot is cleverly called the Avenue of the Saints, but it also could be called Championship Alley.

The private school on the northeast side of Cedar Rapids has won 21 state titles since 2003, making it one of the most successful schools in the state, regardless of size or classification.

Xavier has won six state titles in girls soccer, four in boys soccer, three in girls basketball, two in girls cross country, two in boys cross country, two in boys track, one in baseball and one in football.

"Some schools are known as a football school, some are known as a basketball school," said Mike Winker, Xavier's activities director. "I'm very proud of the fact that it's been multi sports."

Xavier offers 19 varsity sports for boys and girls, and the Saints have won state championships in eight of them. They've won at least one state title for eight straight years and claimed six titles in 2006.

"I am surprised that we have won that many," Winker said. "When we started putting up banners and the team pictures, we were hoping to have two or three or four, maybe, after 10 years. It's just been unbelievable. I'm pleasantly surprised."

Xavier High School opened in 1998-99, the result of combining Regis and LaSalle into one private high school. The girls basketball team won the first state title in the winter of 2003, opening the floodgates.

"When they won it, it told everyone in this school that, 'Hey, we can win it here,' " Winker remarked. "I think it gave people the confidence that Xavier can win state championships. Until you win that first one, people don't know if that's realistic or not."

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Coach Tom Lilly and the Saints also claimed state 3A titles in girls basketball in 2005 and 2007, giving them three banners.

Xavier won the girls state cross country title in the fall of 2003, giving the school two crowns for that calendar year. Xavier also won two state titles in 2004 and two more in 2005, showing the school was here to stay. Then came a truly banner year when the Saints notched those six titles in 2006.

The Saints captured crowns in girls cross country, boys cross country, boys soccer, girls soccer, baseball and football in 2006. All state titles are impressive, but the Class 4A state title in football was especially rewarding because Xavier's enrollment is much less than some of its big-school 4A competitors.

Officials at the Iowa High School Athletic Association think Xavier is the smallest school to ever win the 4A football crown in state history.

"That's pretty cool," Winker said. "It's a neat accomplishment."

Winker said former Xavier principal Jeff Henderson helped instill an attitude that the Saints could compete at the highest levels.

"It took some time," Winker noted. "We had growing pains in terms of getting everybody on the same page."

"It's so important that parents are on the same page as the coaches, administrators and the kids, because if the kids go home and hear, 'We can't compete, the other schools are too good,' that doesn't help."

Lilly's first state title in girls basketball in 2003 paved the way.

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"It told everybody else, we can do this," Winker said. "And it was almost like there was a race amongst the boys to be the first boys team to win a state championship."

The boys soccer team won the race in 2004. All told, Xavier girls have won 11 state titles and Xavier boys have won 10 titles.

Regis and LaSalle were playing in smaller conferences when the two schools combined to form Xavier. The Saints joined the Mississippi Valley Conference with larger schools from Cedar Rapids, Iowa City, Dubuque, Waterloo and Cedar Falls and had to compete in 4A football, but not everybody at Xavier thought it was a good idea.

"There were a lot of people in our community that thought we can't be a 4A school, we can't compete in the Mississippi Valley Conference," Winker said.

Winning the Class 4A football title in 2006 dispelled that notion. Many of Xavier's state titles came in lower 1A or 3A divisions, but the football team conquered the biggest schools in the state.

The banners for all 21 state titles are displayed at the top of the basketball court at Xavier. You can get a stiff neck from looking up and counting, because it's crowded up there.

"I think I have room for maybe nine more," Winker said with a smile.

STATE TITLES

2003 — Class 3A girls basketball, Class 3A girls cross country

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2004 — Class 1A boys soccer, Class 1A girls soccer

2005 — Class 3A girls basketball, Class 1A boys soccer

2006 — Class 3A girls cross country, Class 3A boys cross country, Class 1A boys soccer, Class 1A girls soccer, Class 3A baseball, Class 4A football

2007 — Class 3A boys cross country, Class 1A girls soccer, Class 3A girls basketball, Class 3A boys track

2008 — Class 1A girls soccer, Class 3A boys track

2009 — Class 1A girls soccer

2010 — Class 2A boys soccer, Class 1A girls soccer