

Solid seniors lead Xavier's quest for 7th title

Written by Sher Jasperse

Friday, 25 May 2012 00:09 - Last Updated Friday, 25 May 2012 00:16

They've never lost a state tournament game.

For the five seniors on Xavier's Class 2A No. 1-ranked girls soccer team, it's a source of tremendous pride – and undeniable pressure.

"We have an advantage because we've been there three times already," said Saints co-captain Annie Dale, who was named first team all-state and captain of the all-tournament team after Xavier secured its sixth consecutive title last year.

"It's a disadvantage because it's so much pressure to have six state championships on the line. You don't want to be the team to lose."

Co-captain Mary Levett, the heart of the Saints' defense, concurred. "It helps a little because other teams look at us and there's a little intimidation, but there's always that pressure too."

Coach Doug Graham said people underestimate the challenges faced by a team with Xavier's recent legacy.

"We're always expected to do well, but we lose players every year and have to reset just like other teams," Graham said. "Everybody comes to beat us. It's difficult getting to the top, but it's harder to stay there."

He credited his seniors, each in her own way, with setting the tone on and off the pitch for this year's 13-2 (11-2 MVC) season.

"Mary Levett is an incredible defender and captain, and she tirelessly works on and off the field. Annie is a natural talent and an exciting player. She's very instinctive and does some wonderful

Solid seniors lead Xavier's quest for 7th title

Written by Sher Jasperse

Friday, 25 May 2012 00:09 - Last Updated Friday, 25 May 2012 00:16

things with the soccer ball," Graham said.

"Lauren Konchar will give you jaw-dropping moments, being able to hit a ball from an impossible distance and impossible place. Katelyn Winker is in a lot of ways the motivator, the heart and smile of the team, always pumping up her teammates. Katie Morrissey has a tremendous work ethic and is a great teammate."

All five have scored goals this season, collectively tallying 25 goals and 16 assists, led by Dale's 11 goals and seven assists. Her production is second only to junior standout Kayla Armstrong.

Just as important, they have cultivated the focused, no-fuss attitude that has carried the Saints through their impressive season.

"We emphasize team chemistry," Dale said. "We don't need drama on our team, and the seniors try to lead in a way that there will be no negativity. We all just get along."

"I know that when it comes to state, we're going to have to take the team on our shoulders – because it's a whole different feel there – and let them know we're here for them."

Dale, who was named Xavier Athlete of the Year along with football and track star Jordan Weber, also played point guard for the Saints basketball team that went to the 4A quarterfinals this past winter. She loves both sports, she said, but will take her soccer savvy to UNI next year.

She praises Graham and assistant coach Rocki Shepard for helping her become better prepared for college – as an athlete and a person – and remolding a Saints team that lost significant talent to graduation last year.

"It's not going to be as easy this year (at state) because we have a lot of inexperienced people

Solid seniors lead Xavier's quest for 7th title

Written by Sher Jasperse

Friday, 25 May 2012 00:09 - Last Updated Friday, 25 May 2012 00:16

and we lost our goalie,” Dale said. “Our coaches have done a great job of getting us prepared and getting us to step up.”

Graham said the team has clearly lived up to its mantra:

“We have to be responsible to give our best whenever we’re on the field. If we give our best, the score is immaterial,” he said. “That’s what we do. We try our best and we work not for ourselves but for each other.”

For the underclassmen, making sure the seniors go out on top is a powerful incentive for the state tournament run.

“The seniors have really carried us through the season,” Armstrong said. “All of us are trying to get the seniors one more game so their last game isn’t a loss.”

Graham admitted that getting ready to say farewell to his seniors evokes emotions similar to those he felt when he watched his own daughter graduate and go off to college a couple of years ago.

“I’ve learned as much from them as they have from me,” he said. “We hold ourselves to a high standard. We encourage and promote each other.

“The game of soccer is a vehicle for education and life – overcoming adversity, doing our best – and we do it collectively as a team.”