

Saints in line for a 3-peat

Written by Jake Koolbeck
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Defending champion Xavier is kicking it into high gear just in time.

The Saints found their game at the right time, carrying late-season momentum into the postseason.

"It's huge to get to get a couple wins at the end of the season and keep riding that momentum," Xavier senior Chad Gilmer said. "Each day we got better and better. At the end is where it counts."

Xavier has passed part one. The Saints are going back to defend their Class 2A state title after a 4-0 win Saturday afternoon against the 13th-ranked Benton Bobcats.

The Saints had a rough regular season and finished with an unfamiliar sub .500 record at 6-8-1. Two postseason wins have evened their record at 8-8-1.

The regular season means nothing now and the Saints look dangerous.

"We didn't start the season well, but I never lost hope in this team," Coach Amir Hadzic said. "I knew once we got going we would be just as dangerous as any one else in state. Hopefully, for us, we timed it out to be in our best shape in late May and early June."

The Saints set the tone early in the game. Senior Chad Gilmer found the back of the net off a free kick from fellow senior Eli Smith with just less than nine minutes gone by.

"It was really big to get on the board early. It kind of sends a message to the other team," Gilmer said. "Tom had a perfect ball, I just touched it right and got lucky."

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"It's huge especially in substate finals. We know that is a confidence builder and sets how the game goes," Hadzic said. "It was a (pregame) goal to score in first 15 minutes."

The rest of the first half saw nothing else beat the Benton keeper, but the Xavier attack was in control and continued to put pressure on a stingy Bobcat defense.

The Saints broke through in the second half for three goals and left no doubt that they would be back to defend their back-to-back titles.

"We knew they (Benton) were stingy on defense," Hadzic said. "Once we opened them up we were able to get more goals."

Smith took a short pass from Gilmer and scored with 24:15 remaining to put the Saints in total control.

Xavier didn't stop there as Gilmer got a second goal and Smith follow with a second of his own to cement a victory and a chance at a three-peat.

"We kind of cruised a little bit and then once we saw our opportunities we capitalized on them," Gilmer said. "We saw they were getting a little tired so we played so more through balls and poked some in."

The win sends the Saints to Des Moines with great momentum as they try to continue their recent dominance in the state tournament.

The seventh-ranked Saints are the six seed in the tournament. They play third-seeded Norwalk on Thursday at 2:30 p.m. at Cownie Park.

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“Regardless of seeding we are ready to embrace the challenge,” Hadzic said.

XAVIER 4, BENTON 0

Goals: CRX – Chad Gilmer 2, Eli Smith 2. Assists: CRX: Tom Bales, Connor Ramlo, Gilmer.