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Senior middle linebacker Axel Bernal is 'truly South Elgin tough.' He credits his brother, Dylan, and his father for being role models

By Paul Johnson for the Aurora Beacon-News



South Elgin's Axel Bernal, a senior linebacker, has been named the Upstate Eight Conference's defensive player of the year. (Paul Johnson / The Beacon-News)

Upon learning he had been named Upstate Eight Conference's defensive player of the year, **South Elgin's Axel Bernal** brought the news home to his parents.

"They were telling me about how when I was little, I would always complain about practice and stuff," Bernal said. "It finally all paid off for me."

The senior middle linebacker went from disliking practice to turning into a workout fiend for the Storm, and he's seeing the dividends.

Bernal became the leader of a South Elgin defense that allowed only 29 points in the regular season, second fewest in the state to Warren.

“We’re real happy with Axel,” South Elgin coach Dragan Teonic said. “He’s a tough kid, smart kid and a nonstop competitor who is undersized but strong.

“He’s been committed to the weight room since he was a freshman. Obviously, he’s earned it.”

The 5-foot-10, 175-pound Bernal is following in the footsteps of his older brother Dylan, who was the conference’s lineman of the year in 2019.

“I look up to him,” Axel said of Dylan. “He’s a big influence in my life. He’s always been my role model — him and my dad. I just look up to them.”

Even though they played different positions, Teonic sees a lot of the same characteristics in Axel that he witnessed in Dylan.

“The Bernal family has been very good to us,” Teonic said. “Dylan never missed a day and Axel hasn’t either. They’re truly South Elgin tough.”

Led by Vince Clinite, the conference’s defensive player of the year, the Storm also had a dominant defense in 2019, but that season ended with a tough loss at Brother Rice in the second round of the playoffs.

Teonic thinks this unit, backed by an offense that has scored 454 points in 10 games, may be even better.

“This defense is at another level right now,” he said. “We feel like we’re special teams first, defense second, offense third. The points scored on offense will sometimes look great, but that’s because you’re playing good on special teams and stopping people.

“It’s kind of a team concept to us. We really believe that.”

The Storm (10-0), who had a tough draw to start the Class 8A playoffs last week, handled Edwardsville 24-13. The challenge gets even tougher at 1:30 p.m. Saturday as they travel to face Marist in the second round.

South Elgin has never advanced past the second round in program history. The Storm will put a 16-game winning streak on the line Saturday.

“To me, it’s a win-win for us,” Teonic said. “It’s a real test to find out the status of our program. Where are we right now? We’re obviously going down there with the intent to win this ballgame, there’s no question about it.

“A win takes us to the quarters, which we’ve never done before, takes this team a little bit further. But a loss is also going to expose us in some ways and give us stuff to work on to get better in the future. We want to test ourselves against the best, and they’re certainly one of the best.”

The Storm hasn’t lost since that Brother Rice game in 2019, and Bernal said this team is ready for the challenge.

“As long as we play our game and we prepare, we’ll be ready,” Bernal said. “I think (a win) would be a huge step up and a huge confidence booster for the juniors for next year so they know what to expect.

“I’m pretty confident in our abilities.”