

Carter led Cougars to promised land

Written by Jim Ecker

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Jon McKowen is not prone to hyperbole or exaggeration, but the new Kennedy basketball coach said something last November that leaped off the page.

While discussing Kennedy's prospects for the 2013-14 campaign, McKowen said he was optimistic about his club's chances because he had a terrific point guard running the show. He was talking about Anthony "A.J." Carter, who averaged a modest 6.8 points last season as a junior, but McKowen said he was impressed with Carter during the summer and preseason camp.

Now we know what McKowen was talking about.

The Metro area featured some good players this year - many of them talented guards - but you can make a strong case for Carter as the Metro Player of the Year for the contributions he's made to the Kennedy Cougars.

Kennedy (18-5) will face Sioux City North (21-3) in the quarterfinals of the Class 4A state tournament Wednesday night at 8:15 at Wells Fargo Arena in Des Moines, and Carter has been the glue that got them there.

The 6-foot senior is averaging 15.3 points, 4.8 assists and 4.0 rebounds, which are solid numbers across the board, especially for someone who was more concerned with leading his team than looking for his own shot.

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Rest assured, Carter was always ready - and willing - to take a big shot when needed, especially in the fourth quarter of close games, but his primary objective was making sure everything else was running smoothly on the floor.

Carter, a lefty with good quickness, has an uncanny ability of dribbling through traffic to the basket and finishing once he gets there with either hand. College coaches have grown increasingly fond of him as the season developed and he'll get a chance to play at the next level, perhaps for one of the local colleges.

Carter had the benefit of playing for two good coaches at Kennedy. He spent two years with Bob Fontana, who left after the 2013 campaign for Ankeny Centennial, and he had the good fortune of spending his senior campaign with McKowen, who won a state title in Kansas last year before returning to Iowa.

Fontana helped build the foundation for this year's club, then McKowen stepped in and molded an interesting group into a successful team. The Cougars usually start four 6-foot guards and a 6-foot-4 center, so they're not going to overwhelm anyone with their size when they step on the floor in Des Moines Wednesday, but don't let size fool you.

Kennedy has an athletic club with multi-sport athletes all over the place.

Drew Heitland, the starting center, will play football at Coe College. Cole Murdock, one of the 6-foot guards, is an accomplished golfer. Derek Jacobus, a four-sport athlete, will run track at Northern Iowa. Zach Daniels is a promising baseball player.

Carter is a multi-sport athlete as well and a good football player, but he's the only player in Kennedy's starting lineup whose best sport is basketball.

Try to think of another basketball team that has a football player, a golfer, a state champion long jumper and a shortstop/pitcher in the starting lineup, especially on a basketball team that's headed to the state tournament.

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It's an interesting blend of talents and personalities, and the leader of the band is Anthony "A.J." Carter at point guard.