

Cougars could be surprise team in 2015

Written by Jim Ecker

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It's always interesting to visit the high school football camps and try to gauge what might be in store for the new season.

It's just a snapshot of the big picture, of course, but sometimes you can get a good vibration from a team that might be flying a little under the radar.

That's the sense I got from watching the Kennedy Cougars in their intrasquad scrimmage at Kingston Stadium last Thursday night. They looked like a team that could be headed for a good season and I'm picking them as my "surprise" team for 2015.

The Washington Warriors have another strong club and probably will be the class of the Metro area again this year. The Xavier Saints have an elite program and have been remarkably successful over the past 15 years under Coach Duane Schulte, even when they were playing schools twice their size in Class 4A (before their shift to 3A last season).

I'll rank Washington and Xavier at the top of the Metro as we begin the season this week, but I'll rank Kennedy No. 3 despite its disappointing 3-8 mark last year and six-game losing streak to begin the season.

The Cougars had the look of a winner in that scrimmage last week, even though they were playing against themselves. They have an experienced offensive line, bolstered by Jackson Behn's return from playing in Omaha the last two years. They have a budding superstar in Shaun Beyer, one of the most versatile players in the state, and they have a solid tailback in Tyler Dralle.

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Kennedy Coach Brian White, starting his second year at the helm, raved about linebacker Johnson Mator, who moved here from Pennsylvania this year after starting for his high school team as a sophomore.

One of Kennedy's new quarterbacks will have to prove himself in a hurry for the Cougars to beat Iowa City West Thursday night at Kingston Stadium and get off to a good start, but the ingredients appear to be there for a successful club.

Most of the Metro teams are breaking in new QBs this season. Xavier is one of the exceptions, where Bryce Schulte returns for his junior campaign after a summer of visiting the Iowa, Iowa State and UNI camps. The Saints know how to win football games and should be a major force in their district.

Xavier hosts Class 4A power Dowling Friday night, so it won't be fair to make a rash judgment about the Saints based on that encounter. None of the Class 4A schools in the Metro area will agree to play Xavier anymore, so the Saints had to look elsewhere for their non-district games and landed Dowling, Class 1A power Iowa City Regina and Davenport Assumption.

Let's hope the Metro schools relent and agree to play Xavier in the next two-year cycle. It's a shame those games are not taking place right now, especially when those same Metro schools are perfectly happy to hop on a bus for a 90-minute ride to play an opponent that few local fans care about.

Washington has a new starting quarterback in TJ Vogel, but he gained valuable experience last season as the No. 2 QB when the Warriors were blowing some people away. The Warriors have one of the best 1-2 tandems at running back in the state with Tavian Patrick and Johnny Dobbs, who combined for 25 touchdowns and more than 2,000 yards on the ground last year on Washington's march to the Class 4A finals.

The Warriors are rebuilding their offensive line and need to replace all-star linebacker Connor Vincent, but Coach Paul James should have another successful club on his hands. The Warriors appear to have another favorable schedule, which should help.

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It's hard to know what to make of Jefferson, Prairie, Linn-Mar and Marion.

The J-Hawks finished 4-6 last year and made the playoffs, but they lost quarterback Jesse Furrow and all-star lineman Dalton Kuehl to graduation. Jared Eivins, the quarterback for the sophomore team two years ago, returns after missing the 2014 season with a shoulder injury and could hold the keys to a good year.

Jefferson faces Washington in the season opener Friday night at Kingston Stadium. That could be a rugged assignment for the J-Hawks, but they gave the Warriors one of their toughest battles last year and might surprise again.

Prairie has a new coach with Mark Bliss, who has been successful wherever he's been in the high school ranks, including four state titles in Kansas. It's hard for a new coach to step in and produce a winner, but Bliss has an experienced staff and a potential star in receiver Jalen Rima, the fastest quarter miler in the state.

Linn-Mar got practically wiped out by graduation after going 9-2, but Coach Bob Forsyth said his new team is anxious to make a name for themselves and exceed public expectations. Linn-Mar hosts Prairie Friday night, so we'll have an idea of where both clubs are headed after they meet in the opener.

Marion Coach Tony Perkins thinks the Indians have the look of a winner after struggling to 1-8 last year. He's got a solid tailback in Kory Walsh and better athletes on the field than a year ago, but the Indians have another tough schedule in 3A and must limit their turnovers. They host Mount Vernon Friday night at Thomas Park, meeting the only team they beat in 2014.

Cedar Valley Christian won the first game in school history last year in the 8-Player game and will be looking for another victory against Harmony in the opener Thursday night at LaSalle Middle School. The Huskies have taken baby steps the last few seasons and should take another stride in the right direction this year.

I'm picking Washington, Xavier and Kennedy to have winning records this season, but all of the

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other Metro teams will have to prove they belong in the same category.