

No. 3 Cougars aim to slay No. 1 Dowling

Written by Jim Ecker

Sunday, 22 November 2015 13:52 - Last Updated Sunday, 22 November 2015 14:24



The Dowling Catholic football team has devoured its last two opponents from Cedar Rapids in the Class 4A finals.

Two years ago, Dowling feasted on the Xavier Saints in the championship game by the lopsided score of 44-13. Last year, the Maroons gobbled up the Washington Warriors for another crown in a 49-14 blowout.

The Kennedy Cougars are not only determined to make it a much closer game this year: They are determined to prevail and snap Dowling's stranglehold on the playoffs.

The third-ranked Cougars (13-0) meet top-ranked Dowling (12-0) in the Class 4A championship game Monday at 7:06 p.m. at the UNI-Dome in Cedar Falls. The game was postponed from Friday due to a snowstorm that struck Iowa Friday.

The Cougars respect Dowling, but they do not fear the mighty Maroons. "They're just another group of kids wearing different colored jerseys," Kennedy Coach Brian White maintained in the days leading up to the game.

The Cougars are underdogs, but that's OK with them.

"Love it. Love it," said White, who has taken Kennedy to the state finals in his second year as head coach. "The media on the west side of the state really isn't giving us much of a chance. I'm reading the Des Moines Register and it's like, 'Why even show up?'"

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"And that's fine. That's fine by us. We're good with it," he said. "Going into the season, we were the underdogs. Nobody would have ever thought we'd be 13-and-0 and playing for a state championship. These kids did, and here they are. They're not the least bit intimidated."

Kennedy began the 2014 season with six straight losses, but the Cougars rallied in the final weeks and upset Muscatine in the playoffs. That set the stage for this year.

"We just really wanted to improve ourselves," said Jackson Coker, one of Kennedy's star linemen. "We started right when the season ended. At 5 o'clock in the morning, lifting with coach (Kyle) Knock. It was tough, but that's what you have to do to get better."

Kennedy began the 2015 campaign with tight victories over Iowa City West and Washington, setting the stage for a 9-0 regular season and four straight victories in the playoffs. Now comes Dowling, the biggest obstacle of all.

"I think the thing that we are concerned with is us," said White. "Control the things that we can control."

"We can control how hard we come off the line of scrimmage, we can control getting to our assignments, we can control us. And that's the key."

"We don't have to play them a seven-game series. We play them once," he said. "We have 48 minutes to play perfect football. If we can play 48 minutes of perfect football and do our jobs, things could work out for us."

The Cougars have enjoyed some near-perfect outings this season with only a handful of turnovers. The Cougars are also sure tacklers and feature one of the best 1-2 offensive punches in the state with tailback Tyler Dralle and all-purpose star Shaun Beyer.

Dralle leads Class 4A in rushing with 2,114 yards and is capable of pounding all night. Beyer

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has caught 41 passes for 816 yards and 10 touchdowns as a tight end and wide receiver, and he's carried the ball 51 times for 618 yards and five TDs as a tailback and quarterback.

Dowling is tough on defense, however. The stingy Maroons allowed only two field goals in a 21-6 victory over West Des Moines Valley in the semifinals and have allowed only 2.5 yards per carry all year.

Dowling features four defensive linemen who weigh 260, 245, 270 and 245, but Kennedy has players who are nearly as big on its offensive line. There could be a lot of hard collisions in the trenches, where games are normally won and lost.

"I think this game is going to be decided by who makes the least mistakes," said Coker. "If we take care of the ball and take care of the line of scrimmage, I think we'll have just as good a shot as they do at winning the game."

Ryan Boyle, the Dowling quarterback who tormented Xavier and Washington with his running and passing, is now a freshman with the Iowa Hawkeyes. But the Maroons have capable weapons with co-quarterbacks J.T. Brown and Kurt Walding, along with running backs Jason Zachary and Cole Deskin.

"They can move the ball. And they don't make mistakes," said White. "They're a good football team, but when you're playing for a state championship, that's what you're going to see. That's the way it's going to be."

Nick Duehr has enjoyed a solid year at quarterback for Kennedy and is capable of making big plays with his arm and legs, but his accuracy has dipped a little in the last two playoff games against Washington and Bettendorf.

Dowling has won five state titles since 2000 and is trying to become the first school in state history to win three Class 4A crowns in a row. Kennedy, making its first appearance in the state finals, will try to stop them.

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"They're excited, they want the opportunity, they're not satisfied with just being there," White said about his team. "They want that opportunity to be a state champ."

White plans to emphasize the "family" aspect of Kennedy football in his pre-game remarks. He plans to emphasize playing as a team, not as a collection of individuals. It's worked all year and he's confident it can work again.

"That's what I'm going to hammer on with these kids," he revealed. "We are a team, we've been a team, we're so tight-knit."

The Cougars got their first taste of playoff football in the UNI-Dome Nov. 13 in the 31-14 victory over Bettendorf, so they'll know what to expect when they step on the floor against Dowling.

"It will be loud, for sure," said linebacker Garrett Kubovec. "It will be exciting."