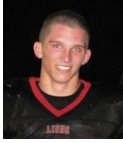


Atwater, Lions bracing for Iowa City High

Written by Jim Ecker

Tuesday, 11 October 2011 21:13 - Last Updated Thursday, 13 October 2011 18:57



The Linn-Mar Lions have reached this point before.

They've been undefeated late in the season before, they've been ranked fairly high in the polls, they've dreamed about making a deep run in the playoffs.

It didn't happen in 2009, when they started 6-0 and lost to Cedar Falls. It didn't happen in 2010, when they began 7-0 before losing to Iowa City High.

Both of those clubs lost in the second round of the playoffs, far short of their goal.

Now here they are again. The Lions are 7-0, ranked No. 3 in the state and bracing for Friday night's big home game with the fifth-ranked Iowa City Little Hawks (6-1).

The Lions have been burned once. They've been burned twice. A third time would be unacceptable.

"It's not OK to be at this point anymore, it's not OK to lose in the second round of the playoffs," senior Mark Atwater said Tuesday after practice. "It's not OK to be 8-and-3, 9-and-2. We are capable of the Dome, and everybody knows that."

Linn-Mar wants to play for the state title in the UNI-Dome on Friday, Nov. 18. That's still seven games away, and the biggest game so far will be played this Friday at new Linn-Mar Stadium.

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Coach Bob Forsyth thinks his team is determined to go as far as it can this season.

"It's been an oncoming thing for a couple of years now with this group," he said. "It's dedication. They're a close-knit group.

"A lot of times, competition in athletics is more than X's and O's, and more than what the coaches can put down on paper. It has to do with what you have in your heart and how you feel about your teammates and those type of things.

"We're getting close," he said.

Atwater, a quarterback and linebacker, is a three-year starter. He played on good teams in 2009 and 2010, but he thinks this year's team can finish the job.

"We've talked about that all summer. Now it's really here," he said. "That's our biggest thing: Finish, finish, finish.

"I've learned so much over the last two years about these kids. It won't happen again. It can't happen again for us. We just have to finish."

The Lions demolished Cedar Rapids Washington last week, 56-7. The week before, Washington upset Iowa City High, 27-24, and snapped the Little Hawks' 33-game winning streak in the Mississippi Valley Conference, but the Lions are not fooled by comparative results.

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Yes, they beat Washington convincingly. And yes, Washington beat Iowa City High. And yes, people at Linn-Mar (not players) have been talking about grabbing a No. 1 seed for the playoffs with a victory over the Little Hawks.

"You can say that on paper, but you try and stop Ronald Thompson a bunch," Atwater remarked. "It would be tough on anybody."

Thompson is City High's star tailback, a tough customer who can shed a defense if he's not tackled low and hard.

Forsyth thinks the preparation for last week's big game against Washington will help the Lions this week against City High.

"I thought it was great for us to go through a week like that," he said. "It was really a big football game, a lot of mental preparation, really a lot on the line. I thought our kids did a great job mentally of handling that situation."

The Lions appeared crisp, relaxed and confident in practice Tuesday. They put in a new play for City High and seemed to get it right after a few tries.

It was only Tuesday, however. The Friday night lights were still three days away.

"Focus is high this week. But you have to try and keep some normalcy, especially in a big week," Atwater said. "In school, you just have to be a kid almost."

"We like to keep it fun out here. There's a lot of joking around. We're not the most serious group of kids, that's for sure."

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"We're not sitting there gripping our notebooks in class, waiting for Friday. I like that about our team."

Atwater has a good feeling about Friday and the rest of the season, but knows it will be tough.

"The difference here is 34 kids that are seniors," he said. "These kids have put in the time since freshman year to senior year. We stuck together.

"You can tell in their eyes, it's just different. These kids, they want something more than 9-and-2. It's not OK for these guys. It's not OK to end like that.

"Every one of those kids will be devastated by any loss at this point," he remarked. "That's not to say we weren't hurting (the last two years), but we could accept it. This year, I don't think these kids can accept it. They just want to win.

"I feel like we have 34 great leaders. We all hold each other accountable. That's why I'm proud of our team."

The biggest game of the year is Friday night.

"We just have to strap it up this week," Atwater said. "I guarantee, if you come out flat-footed against City High they will power-drive you."