

Healthy Warriors hoping for playoff run

Written by Jim Ecker

Monday, 17 October 2011 21:15 - Last Updated Monday, 17 October 2011 21:34



Think back with the Cedar Rapids Washington football team to this past August.

A.J. Puk, the starting quarterback, quits the team to concentrate on his promising baseball career.

Will Griffin, the heir apparent as the next star tailback at Tailback High, hurts his ankle and needs surgery. He'll miss five games before limping back.

Ryan Cain, a top defensive back and receiver, breaks his collarbone and will miss four games.

On top of that, you'll face a three-game stretch during the second half of the season against powerful Iowa City High, Linn-Mar and Iowa City West.

Late at night, the devil knocks on Coach Tony Lombardi's door and offers him a 6-3 record, with victories over Iowa City High and Iowa City West on the road.

"I'd take that," Lombardi said Monday after practice. "I'm proud of the kids."

The Warriors aren't 6-3 yet, but they will be if they defeat winless Waterloo West Thursday night at Kingston Stadium.

Braedon Tovey, thrust into the spotlight when Puk quit, has passed for 1,133 yards and nine touchdowns, although his 11 interceptions are a concern.

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Mitch Bredeson and David Tann, who became primary ballcarriers with Griffin on the sideline, have combined for 1,134 yards and 12 touchdowns to help carry the load.

Flynn Heald, who didn't get to catch the ball very much last year when the Warriors featured Alex Carr at tailback, developed into one of the top receivers in the state with 50 catches for 767 yards, including 21 catches against Kennedy.

Washington upset City High, 27-24, when the Little Hawks were ranked No. 2 and riding a 33-game winning streak in regular-season Mississippi Valley Conference games.

They walloped Iowa City West, 66-37, setting a school record for most points in a single game last week, just when it looked like West might have one of the top teams in the state.

And Griffin is back, although he says he's still only 90 percent. He showed his 90 percent is pretty good, carrying the ball 15 times for 181 yards and four TDs against Iowa City West.

Suddenly, Lombardi has a lot of toys to play with as the Warriors start thinking about the playoffs.

"I've seen City High, I've seen Linn-Mar, I've seen Cedar Falls," he said. "The teams in our half (of the state), they're all very good, but I don't think there's any of them we couldn't beat if we played really well. I think we can make a run."

The one blemish is Linn-Mar, and it's a big one. The Lions clobbered the Warriors, 56-7, two weeks ago, but the third-ranked Lions have established themselves as one of the best teams in the state.

Lombardi would like a rematch, knowing it would be tough.

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Griffin looked good against Iowa City West after limping through games against City High and Linn-Mar. And he looked good in practice Monday, racing around the field.

It looked like his jets were back.

"A little bit, a little bit," he said, smiling. "I'm still not 100 percent, but I'm trying to get there as soon as possible."

Griffin is one of the fastest guys in the state when he's fully healthy, as shown last spring when he finished second in the Class 4A 100-meter dash at the state track meet.

"He's looking better, isn't he?" Lombardi said. "I'm happy for him. I want to keep playing for him."

"He's only had one solid game. He's a senior, and he's a wonderful kid. So I'm hoping we can put a little run together so he can play deep in the playoffs."

"If we do that," Lombardi said, "he'll remember that more than he remembers being injured."

The Warriors have clinched a playoff berth and will get a decent seed if they beat Waterloo West Thursday night and finish the regular season with a 6-3 record. The playoff pairings will be announced late Friday night.

"I think if we work together we can get all the way. That's our goal," Griffin said. "That's our team goal, to get all the way. We may be small, but we can pack a punch."

"You have to believe and not have a doubt in your mind."