

Cougars venture into the Lions' den Friday

Written by Jim Ecker

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Bob Fontana has been the Kennedy boys basketball coach since the 1997-98 campaign, so he's had a good (and sometimes painful) look at the remarkable success the Linn-Mar Lions have enjoyed during the past eight years.

It began in 2004 when the Lions won the Class 4A state title, beginning a string of seven straight trips to the state tournament. They've won two state titles during that time (2004 and 2007), been the state runnerup twice (2005 and 2009), placed third on two occasions (2008 and 2010) and were fourth once (2006).

Linn-Mar (12-0) is undefeated and ranked No.1 in the state this year, so there's an excellent chance the Lions will make their eighth straight journey to Des Moines and contend for high honors again.

In Fontana's opinion, this could be the strongest Linn-Mar team in the entire bunch. That's saying a lot, and it could be psychological "coach speak" as No.4 Kennedy prepares for Friday's showdown at Linn-Mar, but he could be right.

Linn-Mar's starting lineup is loaded with three Division I players and two others who could play in college as well. They've got a superstar who's committed to North Carolina, they've got the third Bohannon brother, they've got good size up front, they can beat you outside, they can beat you inside, they're smart and they play good defense.

What's not to love? Unless you play for the other team, of course.

Linn-Mar has compiled a remarkable 172-18 record the last 7 1/2 years. Let's say that again ... 172 victories and only 18 losses since the 2003-04 season began. That's a winning percentage of 90.5%, meaning they win better than 9 times out of 10.

Who don't you guard on this team? All of them can shoot, all of them can score, all of them can take the ball to the basket.

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Ian McBrayer, a rugged 6-foot-6 center, is shooting 66.7 percent from the field. Josh Montague, a 6-7 forward who scored 21 against the third-ranked team in Wisconsin last Saturday, is hitting 62.7 percent. Shane Benton, who signed a Division I deal with North Dakota in November, hits 58.3 percent, and we haven't even talked about the two most famous players on the team yet.

Marcus Paige, who will become the next Iowan to play for Roy Williams, shoots 57.5 percent and can create a shot anytime he wants with his great quickness. Matt Bohannon, who has signed with Northern Iowa, is shooting 49.3 percent from the field, the only starter who isn't making at least half his shots, and he's not missing by much.

These guys aren't taking all layups, mind you. Their 3-point shooting is special with Montague at 60 percent, Paige at 50, McBrayer at 50 (although only 2 for 4) and Bohannon at 46.7.

And don't foul them. Paige went 10-for-10 against Madison (Wis.) Memorial last Saturday and is canning 85.5 percent at the free throw line. Benton hits 77.4 percent of his free throws, Montague 71.1 and Bohannon 68.4. McBrayer is the weak line at 57.1, if you're looking for someone to foul in the final minute.

Paige leads the Lions at 18.1 points per game, followed by Bohannon (15.8), Montague (11.4), Benton (10.4) and McBrayer (8.5), which means the starting unit is averaging a healthy 64.2 points per game.

Linn-Mar does not get much scoring from its bench -- it doesn't need to -- but Michael Thul is a capable backup point guard, able to spell Paige for brief periods or let Paige slip to an off-guard slot. Mason Krusie and Derrick Gogg also give Coach Chris Robertson valuable minutes in reserve, completing the normal eight-man rotation.

Madison Memorial, an athletic club, crashed the offensive boards against Linn-Mar and got a significant number of second-chance points in a 10-point loss, so that could be an area another club could exploit, possibly even Kennedy.

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The Cougars (10-1) don't have any superstar basketball players on their team. Their best-known athlete is Christian French, who will play football at Oregon, but Kennedy has good depth, good size, good strength and plays good defense. They held Jarrod Uthoff, Jefferson's 6-foot-8 star, to just 12 points in a 44-37 victory last week, so they know how to stop a talented opponent.

Kennedy can match Linn-Mar's size with French (6-foot-6), Jake Manning (6-5), Kyle Lamaak (6-4), Josiah Coleman (6-4) and Elliot Christians (6-7). The Cougars also have a talented point guard in Jake Misener, with Darius Fuller in reserve, and it's no fluke the Cougars are ranked No. 4 in the state.

Kennedy does not have Linn-Mar's firepower, but the Cougars can crash the boards and play defense. And they'll play hard, for all 32 minutes and beyond, if necessary.

Linn-Mar undressed Washington and its two stars last week, 80-55, because Washington does not have a strong enough cast to support Josh Oglesby and Wes Washpun. Kennedy does not have superstars, but it has plenty of very solid players.

It could be a classic battle at Linn-Mar. Fans would be advised to come early and get a seat before they're all gone.