

Cougars bracing for top-ranked Saints

Written by Jim Ecker

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The stretch of 42nd Street NE that runs between Kennedy High School and Xavier High School used to be nice and flat when their football teams knocked heads.

During the first eight games of the rivalry from 1998 through 2007, the Cougars won four times and the Saints won four times. That led to bragging rights on both sides and made it fun.

Lately, however, Xavier has gained the upper hand. The Saints have whipped the Cougars five straight times in regular-season contests in 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011 and 2012 by at least 18 points each time, and the last two meetings resulted in lopsided shutouts by the tune of 28-0 and 35-0.

Xavier also beat Kennedy in the 2008 playoffs, but the Cougars returned the favor with an 11-7 victory against the Saints in the 2010 playoffs.

That leaves Xavier in charge of the 15-game series, 10-5, heading into Friday night's showdown at Kingston Stadium. The top-ranked Saints are 4-0 and sitting on top of the world, while the improved Cougars are 3-1 and looking for an upset.

"It's going to be a hard game. There's no denying it. They're a good team," said Kennedy co-captain Austin Holzer. "They don't make mistakes. We have to play solid for four quarters to be able to beat them."

Kennedy committed five turnovers in a 41-14 loss to Iowa City West two weeks ago, then committed 15 penalties in a 19-9 victory over Dubuque Senior last week. This time the goal is no turnovers and no penalties, or as close to that as possible.

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"We have to find a happy medium there," said Kennedy Coach Tim Lewis.

Lewis hopes his Stack-I power offense will be able to move the ball against the stingy Saints, who have allowed only seven points and 92 yards per game in four outings.

"When you look back at the years when we've had success with them, it's all about ball control, it's all about trying to keep it out of their hands," he said. "We're going to try and get 3 1/2 yards on every play. That's our goal going into it. We'll see if we can make that happen."

Kennedy likes to use two tight ends with its Stack-I, putting seven blockers at the line of scrimmage, but Lewis does not think they'll be able to do that all night against the Saints.

"There's no question that we're going to have to loosen it up," he said. "Xavier has really good athletes at every position. If we don't loosen them up a little bit, they're going to have 11 guys in the box and that's going to make it a little difficult to get the 3 1/2 yards we're trying to get.

"We've got some things in the works to try and loosen it up a little bit," he said.

Kennedy quarterback Derek Jacobus hit 11 of 12 passes against Dubuque Senior last week in his best game of the season. Lewis is looking for another productive game from Jacobus to help keep the Saints off-balance.

Both clubs take great pride in their defenses, which means points could be hard to come by.

"It's going to be a low-scoring game, no matter what," predicted Holzer, a two-way lineman. "It's not going to be a blowout either way. It's going to be a hard-nosed football game. That's my kind of game."

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Kennedy began the 2012 campaign with five straight losses, including the 35-0 setback to the Saints. They rallied and won four straight regular-season games to make the playoffs and finish 5-6 overall, but they feel much better about things this year with the 3-1 start.

"It's a good feeling, going from 0-and-5," said Holzer. "To go 3-and-1 this year is just great. All the seniors are on the same page. We just want to win so badly and we're willing to do whatever we have to do."

Holzer thinks there's a fairly simple reason for the better record this year.

"First off, I'd have to say the senior leadership," he remarked. "Last year we had one or two seniors who were trying to lead the team, but that's not enough when you have 50 or 60 guys. This year we have every senior buying into our team."

"Another thing is the experience that we've gotten," said Holzer. "We had so much experience returning this year that it's really helping us out."

Kennedy could shock the state and jump into the rankings with an upset victory Friday, but they know the Saints are a serious bunch that will come ready to play. Lewis expects a physical, low-scoring game between two schools that will be playing for pride and mutual respect.

"Everyone wants to put ill-will between the two schools," said Lewis. "As far as I know, there isn't any. The coaching staffs get along really well. Hopefully it will be just a good high school football game Friday night."

There are big incentives for both teams.

"It's always going to be, just because of the whole 42nd Street thing and the fact that their program is one of the top-notch programs in the state," said Lewis. "You always find out where you're at when you play these guys."

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