

No spies needed: Heitland is double-threat for Cougars

Written by Jim Ecker

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Kennedy has a big football game with No.2 Iowa City High Thursday night, and for a while Tuesday it looked like somebody was spying on the Cougars during practice.

Coach Tim Lewis has seen him there before, perched on the deck of a condominium that borders the western side of the Kennedy practice field, peering at the Cougars through binoculars.

Lewis was startled the first time he spotted him. Now he laughs about it, because it's just a Kennedy fan with a keen interest in the team. He's not spying, he's just watching.

So no, the Iowa City Little Hawks are not spying on the Cougars. They don't have to, because Lewis is perfectly willing to share part of his game plan with anyone who asks.

There's nothing top-secret about it.

"I like our game plan," he said. "We're going to do what we do, what our kids are comfortable with.

"I thought we ran the ball well on them (the Little Hawks) last year. The key is to keep their offense off the field, so we'll take our time and make sure we don't snap the ball with 20 seconds left on the play clock."

The Cougars want to shorten the game, to keep City High and its high-powered running attack in neutral. Iowa City tailback Ronald Thompson has rushed for 833 yards in four games, giving him a gaudy average of 208.3 yards per game and 9.3 per carry.

"The more we keep him off the field, the better," Lewis said.

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That's how the Cougars beat City High in the opening game of the 2007 season, 21-18. The Little Hawks don't lose Mississippi Valley Conference games very often, but they lost that night.

"That was the game where we tried to sustain drives," Lewis said. "They got a little frustrated, I think, because they're not used to having 10- and 12-play drives against them and that's what we were able to do that year.

"So that's going to be our approach, to see if we can get some things going and sustain some drives and keep their offense off the field."

The Little Hawks have won 32 straight MVC regular-season games since the tail end of the 2007 campaign. That includes three straight 9-0 seasons in 2008, 2009 and 2010 and a 4-0 start this year.

Kennedy is the underdog Thursday night at Kingston Stadium, but the Cougars have won two straight games since tinkering with their offense and moving Trevor Heitland to the "Z" spot as a hybrid flankerback/running back in different formations.

If the Cougars want to spread out, they'll move Heitland to wide receiver and have Chico Lizarraga throw him the ball. And if they move into their Stack-I formation, they'll put Heitland in the same backfield with tailback Alex Hillyer and let the defense worry about which guy will get the call.

Heitland was strictly a tailback last year when he rushed for 929 yards and 10 touchdowns, but now he's a double-threat as a receiver and ballcarrier. He's caught 11 passes for 172 yards, making him Kennedy's top receiver, and he's carried the ball 56 times for 303 yards, making him the No.2 runner behind Hillyer (370 yards).

All told, Heitland has accounted for 475 yards of total offense in four games and scored seven touchdowns.

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Kennedy had trouble moving the ball in its first two games in losses to Xavier and Linn-Mar, but the offense has flowed against Washington and Dubuque Senior with Heitland doing double duty as a receiver and running back.

"I didn't know what to expect the first week they tried it, but it's been working and I like being able to get the ball out in space and run some routes," Heitland said. "It's been working, so I like it."

Heitland had not been a receiver since the seventh grade, but he worked on his pass patterns during the summer and during the early weeks of the season, just in case. Lewis wanted to get Heitland and Hillyer on the field at the same time, but wasn't sure of the best way to do it until two weeks ago.

Lewis said Heitland has been awesome in his new roles, even though he wasn't totally eager at first. "When we sat him down and we talked about it, he was hesitant," Lewis said. "He's a tailback; he wants to be the tailback."

Lewis promised Heitland he'd get the ball 20 times per game and has been true to his word. Heitland rushed 16 times for 70 yards and caught six passes for 100 yards against Washington, then ran 15 times for 146 yards and caught four passes for 46 yards against Dubuque Senior.

Lewis said Heitland has "great hands" and runs the ball really well.

The Cougars won both games with Heitland contributing 362 yards of total offense and six TDs. Prior to that, he carried the ball 25 times for 87 yards and caught one pass during the first two games against Xavier and Linn-Mar.

Heitland wants to play football in college next year and figures his dual role as a receiver and running back might help him find a place to play. "I'm hoping it helps, to show people I can also

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catch the ball and make stuff happen in the open field," he said.

The Cougars know they'll be facing a tough cookie Thursday night. Iowa City High dumped Xavier, 52-24, last week with a powerful running attack that features Thompson and quarterback Jasper Washington, who is a running QB with speed. The Little Hawks don't pass much, but Jeremy Johnson has caught eight passes for 164 yards and three TDs.

"They're a real tough team. Everybody knows that. But we always play them tough," Heitland said. "We have to come out ready to fight, and we know it's going to be a big battle.

"Hopefully, our guys don't get too scared to play them."