

## Cougars looking for faster start this year

Written by Jim Ecker

Tuesday, 07 August 2012 22:33 -

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"No More Slow Starts" is not a real sexy slogan for a high school football team, but it might be appropriate at Kennedy.

The Cougars lost their first two games of the season in 2011 and dropped their first three contests in 2010, so needless to say they'd like to avoid something like that this year.

Kennedy rallied to make the Class 4A playoffs both times, but it was an uphill climb.

"No More Slow Starts" does not look good on a T-shirt, but the sentiment has certainly crossed their minds.

"We haven't really discussed it, but I think we all know it, just because it's been that way," said tailback Alex Hillyer, who rushed for 771 yards and 11 touchdowns last year. "We just need to start off strong."

Who you play -- and where you play them -- has a lot to do with slow starts. Kennedy began the 2010 and 2011 campaigns against Xavier, Linn-Mar and Washington both years, and all three of those schools had strong playoff teams.

This year, the Cougars open with Washington, Prairie and Iowa City West.

"As we looked back at our opening games the last 10 years, for whatever reason we haven't played very well," said Coach Tim Lewis, beginning his 13th year at the helm. "You also look back and see who we've opened with. We always have tough teams to open with."

Lewis and his assistant coaches have debated the topic the last few weeks. They decided not to make any drastic changes in preseason drills, but they will tweak a few things before facing Washington at Kingston Stadium on Aug. 24.

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"We're going to try to be a little bit smarter and think about maybe tapering off a little more toward that first game, as far as getting their legs back and getting them fresh," he said.

Kennedy made a deep run in the playoffs in 2010 and finished with a 7-5 record that year, but the Cougars lost their playoff opener last season to Iowa City High and finished 5-5.

Kennedy has to replace quarterback Chico Lizarraga, tailback/receiver Trevor Heitland and all-state defender/receiver Josh Jahlas before making another run for the playoffs.

"Those guys are all going to be really hard to replace, but we're really happy with what we've seen so far," Lewis said Monday night.

Riley Fergus is competing with Derek Jacobus and Joel Smetzer at quarterback, and if Jacobus loses that battle he'll move to wide receiver. Jacobus runs like the wind and was Kennedy's starting shortstop this past season as a sophomore.

"We said, 'Hey, we don't know how this quarterback thing is going to pan out, but we need you to be on the field,' " Lewis remarked.

Lewis thinks the offensive line will be the strongest part of the club, led by all-state tackle Austin Holzer and center Drew Heitland, a pair of 260-pounders. A half-dozen of the offensive linemen trained religiously during the offseason as a unit, reporting to the weight room at 6:45 a.m. every day.

"We knew our offensive line was going to be tough," Lewis remarked. "They've had the best winter and spring, as far as in the weight room, of any guys. They never missed. So they were able to build that unity.

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"They're fun to coach, because they work extremely hard and they're exciting to watch," he said. "They play football the way it's supposed to be played."

Holzer said they would lift and run on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, then mix in other drills on Tuesdays and Thursdays. "We're constantly conditioning," he said.

Lewis has approximately 60 men on the varsity and said he's never had this many players who weigh 250 or more.

Hillyer could be one of the beneficiaries of a strong offensive line. He's grown from 165 pounds to 180 since the end of the 2011 campaign, thanks to a rigorous schedule with a personal trainer and his regimen at Kennedy.

"I've been putting a lot of work in," he said.

Lewis likes to have two tailbacks for his stack-I formations, to keep defenses guessing and to keep his guys fresh. He said Miles Moa, the top tailback on the sophomore team last year, has moved to the front with Hillyer and could be a key performer.

"They might end up being a pretty good 1-2 punch," Lewis said.

"We need a thousand-yard rusher," the coach continued. "We haven't had a thousand-yard rusher for awhile. A long time.

"I'd like Alex to be that guy. He sure deserves it and has worked hard to get where he's at."

Overall, Lewis likes his club and thinks the Cougars have a chance to make the playoffs again.

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"I would like to think so," he said. "And I'd like to think with the guys we have coming back and with our skill kids, I'd like to think we'd be up there."

### SCHEDULE

Aug. 24 - at Washington (Kingston Stadium)

Aug. 31 - Prairie

Sept. 6 - Iowa City West

Sept. 14 - at Dubuque Senior

Sept. 21 - at Xavier

Sept. 28 - Jefferson

Oct. 5 - at Waterloo East

Oct. 12 - Dubuque Hempstead

Oct. 19 - at Iowa City High