

Hillyer carries big load for Kennedy

Written by Jim Ecker

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Cedar Rapids Kennedy tailback Alex Hillyer gets a little tired sometimes. Not often, but once in a while, perhaps after a long run.

Otherwise he's fresh as a daisy, despite carrying the ball 25 times a game, playing defense and returning kickoffs.

"Honestly, I'm a little bit surprised," he said. "I haven't been tired. I'll be in the huddle and a lot of people are breathing kind of hard."

Not him.

"I'm pretty relaxed," he said.

The heavy breathers are the guys who are trying to stop him. Hillyer has enjoyed a productive season for Kennedy and is one of the reasons the Cougars will make the Class 4A playoffs if they beat Iowa City High on Friday.

Kennedy began the year with five straight losses, but the Cougars have won three straight heading to Iowa City.

"We're 3-and-0," Hillyer said. "We call it our second season."

Hillyer has been one of the top tailbacks in the state this year. He ranks first in Class 4A in rushing attempts (200), third in rushing yards (1,202) and is tied for third in touchdowns (13).

In a typical game, he'll carry the ball 25 times for 150 yards and score a touchdown or two.

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Then he'll go play defense.

"He's sleeping well on Friday nights," mused Kennedy Coach Tim Lewis. "He's a great kid and works hard and deserves everything he's got."

A meticulous athlete, Hillyer worked with a personal trainer during the offseason in addition to his strenuous workouts at Kennedy. It's paid off on the field and in the school record book.

He ranks third among single-season rushers with 1,202 yards and can climb to No. 1 before the season is over, especially if the Cougars make the playoffs. J.C. Steinberg set the record at 1,377 yards in 1997 and Derek Kielkopf is second at 1,335 yards in 1999.

Hillyer ranks fourth in career rushing at Kennedy with 1,990 yards after collecting 788 last year as a junior. He can pass Tracy Crocker (2,121) for third, but Kielkopf (2,536) and Steinberg (3,280) are probably out of reach.

Hillyer said he feels "pretty good" about his accomplishments, but quickly credited his offensive linemen for opening the holes.

Mostly, he feels good that the Cougars have a chance to make the playoffs after their miserable 0-5 beginning.

"We have a lot of momentum coming into this game," he said. "Hopefully it's going to pay off. We've always been working hard, but it's starting to show a little more now."

More than anything, he said intangibles have made the difference.

"Enthusiasm, emotion, flying around, getting excited," he said. "If somebody makes a big play,

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getting on them (to congratulate them)."

Lewis sees it the same way.

"Our kids are playing with enthusiasm and emotion," the coach said. "We tried to sell that to them for the first five weeks. We just couldn't get it done.

"Our practices are more enthusiastic, more emotional. With that, they play faster.

"When you're playing with enthusiasm and you're playing with emotion, you're getting excited about being out there and you automatically play faster. I think that's probably been the biggest difference."

Iowa City High (4-4) has struggled during the second half of the season, battling key injuries after being ranked in the top 10 earlier this year.

Kennedy will make the playoffs with a 4-5 record if it beats the Little Hawks. The Cougars might make the playoffs at 3-6, but Lewis doesn't want to find out.

"I'm a firm believer you've got to earn your way in," he said. "City High is a team we can play with. We want to go in at 4-and-5. I think if we do that it's well-deserved."

Hillyer has been steady for the Cougars all year. He's cracked 100 yards in six games and surpassed 200 yards in two of them, netting 215 yards against Prairie and 220 last week against Dubuque Hempstead with four touchdowns.

He lugged the ball 35 times against Iowa City West, 30 times against Prairie and 30 more against Waterloo East. He shredded Hempstead last Friday despite playing with a sore groin

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muscle, suffered the week before against Waterloo East.

"I never said anything to the coaches or the training staff," he said Tuesday. "I finally decided to tell them now and we've iced it a little bit.

"It's just a little sore," he said. "Just a little ice and stretching out. I'll be fine."