

## Cougars vs Warriors: A week too soon?

Written by Jim Ecker  
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The showdown between the Kennedy and Washington football teams in the Class 4A playoffs Friday night should be great fun, but could be coming a week too soon.

That's the only "negative" comment you can make about their impending battle at Kingston Stadium. It's coming in the quarterfinals of the postseason tournament instead of the semifinals.

Both teams are worthy of advancing to the Final 4 next Friday night in the UNI-Dome instead of having one of their seasons end this week. The Cougars (11-0) are ranked No. 3 in the state by the Des Moines Register and the Warriors (10-1) are ranked No. 5.

Washington's only loss was to Kennedy, 28-24, in the second game of the season two months ago. Otherwise, neither team has lost.

The other quarterfinal game in the Class 4A playoffs in Eastern Iowa features Iowa City High (8-3) at Bettendorf (11-0). Clearly, the Iowa High School Athletic Association used geography when it arranged the pairings for our side of the state.

It's Cedar Rapids vs Cedar Rapids and Iowa City vs Bettendorf, which reduces travel time. But while it makes sense, it didn't have to be that way.

The IHSAA could have paired Washington against Bettendorf in one game and Kennedy

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against Iowa

City High in the other, making it possible for Kennedy and Washington to meet next week in the semifinals in Cedar Falls.

Kennedy, Bettendorf and Washington were all No. 1 seeds for the playoffs and Iowa City High was a No. 2 seed. The IHSAA does not re-seed teams for the quarterfinals, claiming it has no criteria for ranking all the contenders in order.

Kennedy and Bettendorf are both 11-0, so they were not going to meet in the quarterfinals. The question was picking their opponents, and the IHSAA used a map to find the answer.

Knowledgeable football people who have seen the teams play -- coaches, administrators, media representatives -- think Kennedy has a stronger team than Bettendorf. If that's the case, you could re-seed the four teams like this: 1. Kennedy, 2. Bettendorf, 3. Washington, 4. Iowa City High.

Traditionally, 1 would play 4 and 2 would play 3. That means it could have been Kennedy vs Iowa City High and Bettendorf vs Washington.

It's impossible to justify those hypothetical seedings based on limited information, of course, which is why the IHSAA did what it did. Plus, the IHSAA may have been thinking about a big crowd at Kingston Stadium for Kennedy against Washington and the state association's share of the loot.

The IHSAA had an easy time with the pairings in the western part of the state. Dowling began the playoffs as a No. 1 seed, West Des Moines Valley and Johnston were No. 2 seeds, and Lewis Central was a No. 3 seed.

The IHSAA paired Dowling against Lewis Central (1 vs 3) and paired West Des Moines Valley

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against Johnston (2 vs 2). That was neat and easy, and it wasn't because the IHSAA wanted to avoid having Dowling and Valley -- both located in West Des Moines -- from facing each other in the quarterfinals.

We can argue all we want about Kennedy and Washington meeting a week too soon, but here's the bottom line: It's time to cherish and embrace what could be an extraordinary game between two excellent teams.

Both teams arrived at this point from different directions. Kennedy finished 3-8 last year after an 0-6 start, while Washington went 13-1 last year and traveled all the way to the championship game of the 4A playoffs.

The Cougars have enjoyed one of the greatest turnarounds in state history, going from 3-8 to 11-0, while the Warriors have maintained a lofty position in the state despite some heavy graduation losses.

Kennedy has cruised through its two playoff games this season, whipping Clinton 59-0 and North Scott 49-7. Washington has had a much tougher time, surviving Cedar Falls 28-21 and pulling away from Jefferson 42-21 in the second half.

None of that will matter Friday night when they collide at Kingston.

Who has a slight edge? Probably Kennedy, but it could be whisker thin.

Both clubs have playmakers on offense, defense and special teams. Both clubs have a terrific attitude and excellent coaching staffs. And both clubs really want to beat each other, which is natural in an intra-city game like this.

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Both teams have strong running games. Kennedy features Tyler Dralle, who has carried the ball 315 times for 1,830 yards and scored 22 touchdowns this season. Washington features Tavian Patrick, who has run for 1,073 yards with 13 TDs, and Johnny Dobbs, who has 648 yards and 14 TDs.

Both teams have big-time receivers. Washington features Isaiah Nimmers, who has 39 catches for 780 yards and 12 touchdowns. Kennedy features Shaun Beyer, who has 36 receptions for 670 yards and nine touchdowns.

Nimmers could be the "wild card" for Washington, because he also excels on special teams and kickoff returns. Beyer could be the "wild card" for Kennedy, because he'll move into the backfield at quarterback or tailback and do some damage there, having rushed for 518 yards and four more TDs.

Both teams have good quarterbacks who are capable of making big plays, but Kennedy quarterback Nick Duehr has the edge on Washington passer TJ Vogel in terms of season-long statistics. Duehr has completed 64.2 percent of his passes, with 17 touchdowns and only one interception all year. Vogel has hit only 47.8 percent of his throws, with 16 touchdowns and nine interceptions.

Those stats come with a warning, however: Vogel was hampered by a knee injury for much of the season, making it harder to throw, but he's a lot healthier now and had three TD passes last week against Jefferson.

On defense, Kennedy has allowed only 9.3 points per game and has lots of sure tacklers. Linebacker Johnson Mator leads the Cougars with 90.5 tackles.

Washington has allowed 15.7 points per game, but the Warriors have shown a knack for making big plays at critical times. O'Rien Vance has 92.5 tackles, including 25 for losses, and Ian Thomas has a nose for the ball.

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The semifinals will be played Friday, Nov. 13 in the UNI-Dome and the finals are slated for Friday, Nov. 20.

One of our teams from the Metro will be playing in Cedar Falls next week. We'll find out which one in the "Collision at Kingston" Friday night.