

Kennedy cagers welcome gridders to team

Written by Jim Ecker

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Jon McKowen cheered for the Cedar Rapids Kennedy football team all the way to the Class 4A championship game in the UNI-Dome Monday night and relished the team's success along the way.

Now he's glad the football season is finally over so several of those guys can trade their cleats for sneakers and join McKowen's basketball team at Kennedy.

Matt Gardner, Nick Duehr, Carter Krall and Kai Jenkins will be making the switch from football to basketball in the next few days after they've had a chance to mentally and physically recover from the rigors of a long season.

They'll get a late start in basketball with the season opener set for next Friday, Dec. 4 against Sioux City North on the road, but McKowen feels the benefits of a successful football season far out-weigh the detriments in terms of school pride and spirit.

"It is so easy to cheer for good kids, and when good kids are on really successful teams it just changes the atmosphere at the school. And that's what the football team has going right now," McKowen said Monday afternoon.

"To see these kids in the hall, they're genuine, they're happy to be here, they're leaders of the school. The icing on the cake is they're good football players, but they're great teammates, too. They make everybody better, not just on the football team but in the school."

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The football players will start trickling onto the basketball team later this week. McKowen planned to pat them on the back and send them home if they showed up for practice Tuesday or Wednesday.

"We're going to tell them how great of a football season they had and then we're going to make them go home after school," he said. "We don't want them hanging around us. They need to go home and almost get bored. I'm more worried about it mentally than physically."

Kennedy suffered heavy graduation losses from a club that finished 18-6 and reached the Class 4A state tournament last year. The Cougars lost their four leading scorers with Brendon Manning (14.6 points), Zach Daniels (12.3), Bryton Heisler (11.7) and Cole Murdock (9.8) all gone. Murdock led the team in assists, Daniels led the club in steals and Manning led the team in rebounding, so there are holes to fill.

The Cougars have four returning lettermen with Drake Brewster, Derick Diggins, Gardner and Derek Girling, all of whom could be elevated to larger roles this season as McKowen figures out the rotation and depth.

"We'll rely on them a little bit to get us going through the early part of the year," he said.

Max Techau lettered at Kennedy last year, but has transferred to Xavier.

McKowen is not ready to announce a starting lineup or the rotation.

"That's the million dollar question without the football kids," he remarked. "We want to give them a fair shake at it, too."

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McKowen promoted Diggins to the varsity last year as a freshman at mid-season. He stepped into the backcourt and averaged 5.8 points, displaying no fear as a ninth grader.

"Ball skills-wise, he's as good as we have around here. And he shoots the ball really well," McKowen said. "He's just a kid who loves to play the game. He's the happiest person in the world to come to practice and to play in games. He goes about it the right way."

Brewster, who did not play football to concentrate on basketball this season, has developed his perimeter game to complement his inside presence and should be able to assume a bigger role this year, according to McKowen.

Gardner brings a football mentality to basketball, in terms of having a nose for the ball.

"If there's a ball on the ground, he's the first one there," McKowen said. "Matt is one of those kids that every team has to have, because he's the energy, he's the leader, he's the guy that's going to work the hardest and you know what you're going to get from him every day."

Adam Wall, a 6-foot-10 senior, is catching up to his body and could give the Cougars a big man near the basket. "Adam is ready to take that next step and play for us this year and play a lot," McKowen said.

Duehr, who enjoyed a successful year at quarterback for the Cougars, gives Kennedy a good athlete with leadership ability, either on the football field or the basketball court. "That stuff does translate," McKowen said, "being able to make decisions under pressure, being able to lead a team. He's a great athlete."

Matt Berst, the starting catcher on the Kennedy baseball team, has gained 30 pounds since the

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end of the 2014-15 basketball season and could be ready to help the basketball team.

"Huge surprise," McKowen said. "He's such a competitor. It doesn't matter what drill we're running in practice, he wants to win that drill."

Mike Bisenius and Malik Haynes are pushing for playing time as well, according to the coach.

McKowen has led the Cougars to the state tournament in both of his years as head coach. He's looking to make it 3-for-3 this season.

"It's our focus for this year again, and not just getting down there," he said. "We want to do something when we're down there."

ROSTER

Seniors

Matt Gardner (6-3), Derek Girling (5-11), Mike Bisenius (6-0), Kollin Wiebel (6-5), Adam Wall (6-10).

Juniors

Malik Haynes (6-0), Drake Brewster (6-5), Matt Berst (6-1), Nick Duehr (6-1), Jake Olejniczak (6-1), Caleb Carlson (6-0), Jeremy Upshaw (5-11), Carter Krall (6-4), Devonte Foy (5-4), Isiah Harris (6-3), Chris Knight (6-1), Duncan Schultijans (6-0), Jackson Coker (6-4), Ryan King (6-3).

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Sophomores

Kai Jenkins (6-2), Derrick Diggins (6-2), Jackson Foley (5-5).