

Cougars hoping for faster start in 2011

Written by Jim Ecker

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The Cedar Rapids Kennedy football team wrote its own version of "The Agony and the Ecstasy" last year.

The Cougars dropped their first three games of the season and began the year with a 1-4 mark.

That was the agony.

They rallied, won six straight games and reached the quarterfinals of the Class 4A playoffs.

That was the ecstasy.

"That's probably not the plan this year," said Josh Jahlas, who led Kennedy in tackles last season. "We want to start off strong."

Starting the season with a 1-and-4 record is usually a recipe for disappointment.

"It worked out last year, but we hope not to do that again," said tailback Trevor Heitland, who rushed for 929 yards in 2010. "Hopefully we start strong and end strong and play strong throughout the whole season."

There were three main reasons for Kennedy's slow start last year.

- 1) The Cougars made a radical change from a spread offense in 2009 to a power running

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game in 2010 and it took time to adjust.

2) The Cougars' four losses at the beginning of the year were against Xavier, Linn-Mar, Washington and Iowa City High, all good teams that made the playoffs.

3) Heitland missed the first three games of the season and didn't join R.J. Adams as a 1-2 punch at tailback until Game 4.

Once Kennedy got rolling, it didn't stop until it lost to Bettendorf, 14-7, in the third round of the playoffs. The Cougars got revenge against Xavier in the opening round of the playoffs, then beat North Scott before the fun ended.

"We saw we could actually win, and we can go deep in the postseason," said Jahlas. "It just gave us confidence for this year as well."

The Cougars rode their success into the offseason.

"We had a great winter," Coach Tim Lewis said. "We expect a lot out of the kids and expect a lot out of the coaches.

"I've been around for a while, and I think the turnout ... if it wasn't the best turnout we've had, it was right up there. And we needed it, too."

The Cougars have only four returning starters, with two on offense and two on defense. And because they were scrambling for their lives much of the season, Lewis did not get a chance to work on his depth chart.

Lewis hopes to avoid another slow start, but Kennedy faces the same schedule it had in 2010

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with Xavier, Linn-Mar and Washington in the first three games and Iowa City High in Week 5. The only changes are the locations.

"The schedule is brutal," he said.

Jimmy Lizarraga and Riley Fergus have been battling to replace Jed Haycraft at quarterback.

"They're two different types of quarterbacks," said Lewis. "Jimmy is a leader by example, not very vocal. Throws a good ball, understands our offense from having played it last year.

"And Riley is more of a vocal guy. He kind of lets everyone know that he's in charge, and that's great for a junior to be able to step in and do that. He's got a lot of really positive things to bring to the table, too, so that's going to be a battle all year long, I think."

Lewis said he might play both QBs.

"I think you can do that and get away with it with the style of offense we're running now," he said.

Adams rushed for 962 yards and 13 touchdowns last year. Heitland finished with 929 yards and 10 TDs despite the late start. They formed a potent combo.

"We had a good 1-2 punch," said Heitland. "He was a physical, bigger back and was going at the hole pretty hard. I was more shifty, and it worked out well."

Adams is playing at Iowa Central Community College in Fort Dodge, but Lewis thinks Alex Hillyer can help replace him as a hybrid fullback and tailback.

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Lack of experience could be a problem for Kennedy this season. On the other hand, Lewis said there's been spirited competition for jobs that are up for grabs.

Jahlas stars on defense, making plays all over the field. Lewis said Logan LeTellier is an unsung hero as a 6-foot-2, 220-pound defensive end. "Logan's as good as we've had here," he remarked.

Jahlas likes the way the team is shaping up.

"We're looking pretty good," he said. "We have a lot of guys that are new out here, but we'll be good."

Heitland agreed.

"We have a lot of new people coming up, but I think the victories we had last year and the success we had late in the season will carry over," he said. "The coaches are confident and we're confident. That always helps."

Heitland is not worried about the overall lack of experience.

"I don't think it really matters, because the junior class is good," he said. "We have a couple of sophomores who moved up and they're doing really well. It's different, but I think we'll be fine."

Three key members of last year's team are playing football in college this season with Christian French at Oregon, Ross Ellsworth at Iowa Western and Adams at Iowa Central.

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Kennedy hosts Xavier in the season opener on Friday, Aug. 26 at Kingston Stadium.

2011 KENNEDY FOOTBALL SCHEDULE

Friday, Aug. 26 - Xavier, 7:15 p.m. (Kingston Stadium)

Friday, Sept. 2 - at Linn-Mar, 7:15 p.m.

Friday, Sept. 9 - Washington, 7:15 p.m. (Kingston Stadium)

Friday, Sept. 16 - at Dubuque Senior, 7:15 p.m. (Dalzell Field)

Thursday, Sept. 22 - Iowa City High, 7:15 p.m. (Kingston Stadium)

Friday, Sept. 30 - Jefferson, 7:15 p.m. (Kingston Stadium)

Thursday, Oct. 6 - Iowa City West, 7:15 p.m. (Kingston Stadium)

Friday, Oct. 14 - at Waterloo West, 7:15 p.m. (Waterloo Memorial Stadium)

Friday, Oct. 21 - Dubuque Wahlert, 7:15 p.m. (Kingston Stadium)