

No. 1 Warriors have new role for state finals

Written by Jim Ecker

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The Washington Warriors are ranked No. 1 in the state and have a perfect 13-0 record, but they'll have a new role Friday night when they face Dowling Catholic in the championship game of the Class 4A football playoffs.

Underdogs.

"Right. Definitely," Washington Coach Paul James agreed after practice Monday. "Dowling is the defending champ.

"They've got size and they've got skill people that are excellent. They're a very good team."

The fourth-ranked Maroons (12-1) lost to West Des Moines Valley, 24-21, earlier in the season, but they have a powerful club and a tradition-rich program. Dowling has won four state titles, including two titles in the past four years.

In fact, teams from the CIML have captured the last four Class 4A state football crowns with Dowling (2010), West Des Moines Valley (2011), Ankeny (2012) and Dowling again (2013).

Connor Vincent, Washington's star linebacker, thinks most people probably see Dowling as the favorite.

"Yeah, I would say so," he remarked. "I think a lot of people are rooting for Dowling. It's definitely motivation."

Washington has never won a state title in football. The Warriors reached the championship

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game in 2003 with James as head coach, but they lost to West Des Moines Valley 17-7.

The Warriors have reached the semifinals nine times, but this is only their second trip to the finals since the playoffs began in 1972.

And even though the Warriors are probably the underdog Friday night, it's only a slight underdog. This could be their time to make it happen.

"You just prepare yourself and do your best," said James. "It's not about anybody's 'time.' It just depends on how well you play and that kind of thing. But it would really be a fitting way for these guys to finish the year."

The Warriors are a tight-knit group that appears to get along very well with each other, both on the field and off. Winning helps, but it seems to go deeper than that on the southeast side of Cedar Rapids.

"I think it has a lot to do with a lot of them being friends growing up. They're friends outside of football," said James. "That really helps to have that cohesiveness and camaraderie. It makes for good team bonding.

"They just naturally like each other and will work hard for each other," he said. "That's what teamwork is all about. It's about respecting the guy next to you and working hard for him as well as for yourself."

If you tour the hallways and look inside the trophy cases at Washington High School, you'll find state championship trophies for swimming, basketball, tennis, golf, baseball, wrestling, gymnastics and track. James helped win two of those titles himself as the head coach of the girls basketball program in 1988 and 1995, but there are no state championship trophies for football.

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"We want it so bad," said linebacker Sam Vincent, who is Connor Vincent's twin brother. "It would be awesome if we could get our trophy up there in the trophy case."

Cedar Rapids Jefferson won the state title in 1972 when the playoffs began, but that's the only state championship for any of the three high schools in the Cedar Rapids district in 42 years.

"I don't know if there's an explanation for it," said James. "It's not like we haven't had good quality teams in the Metro."

In any case, James does not care who is considered the "favorite" and who is considered the "underdog" for Friday's game.

"It doesn't really matter," he said. "You have to play the game and see how things turn out. It's something that's out of our control. I don't worry about it."