

Lions are 'most improved' team in 4A

Written by Jim Ecker

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Linn-Mar football coach Bob Forsyth said in August that he was "cautiously optimistic" about the 2014 season and hopeful for a good year.

He may have underplayed his hand a bit.

Quite simply, Linn-Mar is the most improved team in Class 4A this year with a good chance of making a deep run in the playoffs.

The Lions finished with a 2-7 record in 2013 and improved to an 8-1 mark for the regular season this year. That's a gain of six victories and that plus-6 mark is the best among all 46 Class 4A teams in Iowa.

Lewis Central is next on the "most improved" list at plus-4, going from four victories in 2013 to eight wins in 2014.

Two Metro teams tied for third place in the "most improved" category at plus-3. The Washington Warriors jumped from 6-3 to 9-0 and the Jefferson J-Hawks climbed from 1-8 to 4-5.

Ankeny and Fort Dodge also were in the plus-3 department.

At the other end of the spectrum, the Kennedy Cougars finished the regular season at minus-4, dropping from a 6-3 mark for the 2013 regular season to 2-7 this year. Nonetheless, the Cougars have reached the Class 4A playoffs with a chance to make amends.

Iowa City High suffered the biggest drop, falling from 7-2 last year to 2-7 this year for minus-5. Kennedy was next in line, followed by Iowa City West and Pleasant Valley at minus-3.

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There were several key ingredients in Linn-Mar's turnaround this season. Perhaps the biggest factor was experience, with all the young players from 2013 turning into successful players this year as seasoned seniors.

Linn-Mar quarterback Ryan Schmidt should get serious consideration for all-state honors after what he's done this year. The 6-foot-5 senior has accounted for 31 touchdowns for the Lions, with 18 rushing TDs and 13 passing TDs.

Schmidt's 31 touchdowns rank third in Class 4A. Brock Larsen of Des Moines Hoover and Austin Simmons of Lewis Central have both accounted for 38 touchdowns this year.

Larsen has 34 touchdown passes and four TD runs. Simmons has 23 TD passes and 15 TD runs.

The Lions have some nice weapons on offense. Perrion Scott, one of the fastest men in the state, has rushed for 775 yards and five touchdowns. Schmidt has passed for 1,178 yards and run for 482. Logan Benter has rushed for 195 yards.

Trevor Noble has emerged as a big-play receiver in recent weeks and has 18 catches for 459 yards and nine touchdowns. Garrett Evans and Scott have 14 receptions and Daniel Gorsich has caught 13 passes.

The Lions have some stalwarts on defense as well. Logan Nelson has 60 tackles, three sacks and three fumble recoveries. Austin McCulloh has 59 tackles and three sacks. Trevor Long has 11 tackles-for-loss and four sacks. Devon Rushing has five sacks. Noble has intercepted four passes.

On top of all that, Sean Zimmerman has been automatic on PATs, hitting 40 for 40.

Linn-Mar hosts Davenport Central (4-5) in the first round of the Class 4A playoffs Wednesday.

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The other first-round games for Class 4A Metro teams are Clinton (2-7) at top-ranked Washington (9-0), Prairie (4-5) at Pleasant Valley (6-3), Jefferson (4-5) at second-ranked Bettendorf (9-0) and Kennedy (2-7) at Muscatine (7-2).

The Xavier Saints (6-3) host Charles City (4-5) in a Class 3A opener Wednesday.

The second round will be held Monday night.