

J-Hawks own longest 4A skid in state

Written by Jim Ecker

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Sometimes the football gods have a wicked sense of humor.

Take the case of the poor Jefferson J-Hawks, for instance. They had another insult tacked onto their backs this week without even playing a game.

Jefferson has lost 18 straight games and been outscored by a wide margin, 762-150, during the skid, but until this week they shared the longest losing streak in Class 4A with Des Moines Hoover. Then something unusual happened.

Indianola had to forfeit a game to Hoover for using an eligible player, and that ended Hoover's 18-game losing streak and left the J-Hawks alone at the top of the list. It's not the kind of ignominious list that anyone wants to lead.

"That's why I don't read the papers," Jefferson Coach Jim Womochil said after practice Wednesday.

The J-Hawks have not won a ballgame since topping Dubuque Senior, 20-13, on Sept. 25, 2009. It's been more than two years now and the equivalent of two full seasons.

"It's embarrassing for our kids, but it's something we can't focus on," Womochil said. "Otherwise the negativity will take over and you forget about what you're trying to get accomplished."

"That's stuff for the media and the naysayers to focus on," he said. "We're not focusing on that right now. We're focusing on trying to get better this year."

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The J-Hawks have an 0-5 record heading into Friday's game against Kennedy at Kingston Stadium, but there could be a glimmer of hope. The J-Hawks have lost to five teams with a combined record of 20-5, but their next four opponents have a combined mark of 5-15.

Jefferson finishes the regular season with Kenendy (2-3), Prairie (0-5), Xavier (3-2) and Dubuque Hempstead (0-5).

"I think there are still some games on our schedule where we can win. As long as we don't lose any more bodies," said Womochil, troubled by injuries again this season. "It seems to hit us hard this time of year, every year."

Christian Ohrt, a 6-foot-9, 335-pound offensive tackle, broke his foot and has been lost for the season. Colton Spicer, a 6-7, 315-pound tackle, battled a shoulder problem and now has been lost for the season after suffering a concussion.

The J-Hawks had to switch Alex Baxter from quarterback to tailback last week because Austin Short and Kyle Mann, their top runners, were sidelined with injuries, although Short is back this week. Womochil plans to stick with sophomore Layne Sullivan at quarterback and use Baxter in a variety of spots as a receiver, tailback and possibly QB as well.

Jefferson got walloped by ninth-ranked Iowa City West last week, 63-14. That's the most points the J-Hawks have allowed during the 18-game losing streak and the first time anyone has topped 50 points against them since the final game in 2009.

"Our kids were crushed after Friday," Womochil said. "That's the first time I've seen their will broken a little bit, and it's nice to have a good practice tonight."

Jefferson's other losses this season were to top-ranked Cedar Falls (42-6), No. 5 Linn-Mar (35-10), Washington (35-6) and Waterloo East (33-10). All of those teams, including Iowa City West, have fast players on their roster, much faster than the J-Hawks.

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"Simulating the speed in the league in practice is very difficult for us, because we don't run well," Womochil said. "That's a weakness of ours."

"You have to learn to play fast and watch a lot of tape and take good angles. When we have a chance to tackle a guy and make a play, we've got to do that. In the last two weeks we haven't done that (against Cedar Falls and Iowa City West)."

Womochil thought Jefferson had a chance to win enough games this season to make the playoffs, but time is running out. The J-Hawks probably will have to win three of their last four games to make it, which won't be easy.

Womochil has to guard against a negative attitude as the losses keep piling up, trying to prevent the J-Hawks from adopting a here-we-go-again mindset when things go wrong.

"It's difficult," he said. "When somebody breaks a long touchdown against you and we take the wrong angle and miss a tackle and you look at the scoreboard and we're down, I'm sure that's one of the things that crosses their mind."

Womochil said his team is stilling working hard, trying to improve and break the streak.

"They're trying very hard. We're playing hard," he said. "At times they're pressing too hard."

The J-Hawks have been able to move the ball between the 20-yard lines this season, but they stall in the red zone. On top of that, they've fallen behind and had to change the game plan.

"If we expect to compete with anybody the rest of the way, we have got to get better defensively," Womochil said.