

Strait shooting Cougar

Written by Jim Ecker

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Dennis Roloff has coached some outstanding guards during his years at Cedar Rapids Kennedy with players like Anne O'Neil, Amy Wold, Sarah Russell and Dawn Hynek.

Now he's adding Courtney Strait to the list.

"I've had some fantastic guards," Roloff said Tuesday after practice. "She ranks right up there with some of the best."

Strait, a 5-foot-9 senior, is the top scorer among all Class 4A players in Iowa at 21.4 points and ranks second in steals with 5.1 per game, a testament to her offense and defense. She's also grabbing 7.4 rebounds, dishing out 2.3 assists and hitting 85.5 percent of her free throws for the Cougars.

Strait had two huge games before the holidays when she poured in 37 points against Dubuque Senior and 30 against Iowa City High, but she did a lot more than just score in those outings. She collected 37 points, 9 rebounds, 6 assists and 4 steals against Dubuque Senior, then posted 30 points, 8 rebounds and 8 steals against City High.

Strait averaged 15.7 points last year and was averaging 16.6 points through the first five games this season before cracking 30 points in two straight contests. "My confidence with the ball is the biggest thing," she said.

She's driving to the basket with strength and assurance, either making a field goal or getting fouled. And she's been deadly at the free throw line, sinking 16 of 18 against Dubuque Senior and 17 of 20 against Iowa City High. She hit 23 straight foul shots last season to set a school record.

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Roloff said Strait has a great ability to stop and hit a jumper, drive to the basket or step back and hit a shot. "She's been outstanding for us, and I expect that out of her," he said.

Strait also has been a good leader for the younger players on the team, according to Roloff. She was a nervous young player herself at one time and knows what to tell them.

"It's OK if you make mistakes, because you're just going to get better from it," she said. "When I was a sophomore, I was always worried about making mistakes. I learned that if you keep playing and don't worry about it, the game will come to you."

Kennedy has a 3-4 record this season, but had the lead at halftime in all four losses. Roloff attributes those second-half slides to growing pains with a fairly young squad and credits Strait with helping boost the team's confidence despite the setbacks.

"Courtney has been great in her ability to say, 'It's OK if you miss a shot, it's OK if you turn the ball over, just keep trying harder and harder,'" he said. "She's been a good leader there. She's not one who's going to yell at somebody or get all over them."

Strait played for Team Iowa last summer with some of the top players from around the state, participating in tournaments in Kansas City, Chicago, Indiana and elsewhere.

Strait has signed a national letter-of-intent to play at Truman State next season, so she doesn't have to worry about impressing any college coaches this year. She can play her game, help her teammates and try to help Kennedy win as many games as possible.

"I don't really worry about myself," she said. "I just know what I have to get done."