

Basketball (not football) was French's 1st love

Written by Jim Ecker

Tuesday, 30 November 2010 00:00 - Last Updated Friday, 31 December 2010 22:26

Christian French was a basketball player as a young kid. He was bigger, stronger and better than everyone else.

It looked like he had a future in the sport. Football came later.

“Yeah, I used to play a lot of basketball when I was younger,” he said. “If anything, I thought I’d be in the same position for basketball instead of football.”

That’s not how it turned out, however.

Iowa, Oregon and Notre Dame want French to play football for them after he graduates from Kennedy this spring. Basketball is a distant second now, but he still loves the sport and isn’t ready to stop playing.

French is 6-foot-6, weighs 230 pounds and runs the 40-yard dash in 4.5 seconds, which is why the Hawkeyes, Ducks and Irish covet his skills. He considered spending this winter in the weight room, getting ready for Division I football, but decided to play basketball for the Cougars as a senior.

“I thought about it, but I figured it’s best for me (to play basketball),” he said. “College coaches say to try and play as many sports as possible, because they like the athleticism — keep that speed, that quickness, that coordination. This will give me another chance to catch balls and get my footwork down.”

French averaged 8.5 points and 5.5 rebounds for Kennedy last season. Coach Bob Fontana thinks he could have developed into a college basketball player, but college basketball coaches lost interest.

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"They stopped inquiring about him, because as soon as they heard he was a football player, they just assumed that was the route he was going," Fontana said. "It's unfortunate."

Fontana is delighted French decided to stick with basketball this year.

"I told him just to have fun with basketball," Fontana said. "Whether you make a decision soon or later (about college), just have fun with basketball and use that as your release."

French didn't exactly have a lot of fun during the first week of practice, however.

"Coach Fontana was running us hard, but he did it because we needed it," French said. "It will help us later in the season."

Fontana marvels at the number of Division I athletes who are playing basketball in the Metro area this season with Jarrod Uthoff (Jefferson), Josh Oglesby (Washington), Matt Bohannon (Linn-Mar), Marcus Paige (Linn-Mar), Shane Benton (Linn-Mar) and Wes Washpun (Washington). He's got one, too, with French.

"It's going to be interesting," Fontana said. "The league is going to be as good as it's ever been. We've got six Division I kids right here in Cedar Rapids and Marion — Division I basketball players. You've got a couple of other Division I football players. There are some nice athletes."

Fontana said the Des Moines Register considered four Metro teams — Linn-Mar, Jefferson, Washington and Kennedy — for its top-10 in Class 4A. "It's going to be a fan's delight and a coach's headache this year," he said.

Fontana, in his 14th year at Kennedy, thinks he has the ingredients for a solid team with French, Kyle Lamaak, Jake Manning, Joe Coleman, Herschel Dixon, Jake Misener, Trevor Heitland, Darius Fuller, Cody Bell and others. Misener is recovering from a separated shoulder.

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Austin Christensen and Griffin Michael, who played last year, are not playing so they can concentrate on baseball. Max Martino, Spencer Fontana, Brendan Drahn and Ryan Dusil graduated.

Kennedy finished 15-9 last year, but lost a half-dozen games by one or two points. The Cougars hit only 60.2 percent of their free throws last season, which proved to be a costly weakness.

"We have got to become better free-throw shooters," Fontana said. "It was the worst free-throw shooting team I've coached in 13 years at Kennedy. We could have very easily won 20 ballgames. Stay healthy and make those free throws and we'll have a chance."

French likes what he sees.

"We have a lot of versatility," he said. "We have size, strength, good point guards and people who can take care of the ball. So I think if we play good defense, we have the ability to put up a lot of points."

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ROSTER

Seniors (7)

Jake Manning (6-5), Jake Misener (6-1), Herschel Dixon (6-0), Kyle Lamaak (6-4), Shane Goodall (6-5), Christian French (6-6), Ross Ellsworth (6-2).

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Juniors (9)

Antonio Bolden (5-8), Alex Hayden (5-10), Darius Fuller (5-8), Austin Rhoads (6-3), Trevor Heitland (5-11), Josh Jahlas (6-2), Cody Bell (6-4), Elliot Christians (6-7), Joe Coleman (6-4).

SCHEDULE

Friday, Dec. 3 — at Burlington, 7:30 p.m.

Saturday, Dec. 4 — Oskaloosa, 7:30 p.m.

Friday, Dec. 10 — Xavier, 7:30 p.m.

Tuesday, Dec. 14 — Dubuque Senior, 7:30 p.m.

Saturday, Dec. 18 — vs. Iowa City High, at U.S. Cellular Center, 6:15 p.m.

Tuesday, Dec. 21 — Washington, 7:30 p.m.

Tuesday, Jan. 4 — at Dubuque Wahlert, 7:30 p.m.

Friday, Jan. 7 — vs. Sioux City North, Tyson Event Center, Sioux City, 8 p.m.

Saturday, Jan. 8 — vs. Sioux City West, Sioux City, 3:30 p.m.

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Tuesday, Jan. 11 — Waterloo East, 7:30 p.m.

Friday, Jan. 14 — Jefferson, 7:30 p.m.

Friday, Jan. 21 — at Linn-Mar, 7:30 p.m.

Saturday, Jan. 22 — Ames, 6:30 p.m.

Tuesday, Jan. 25 — Prairie, 7:30 p.m.

Friday, Jan. 28 — Iowa City High, 7:30 p.m.

Tuesday, Feb. 1 — at Waterloo West, 7:30 p.m.

Friday, Feb. 4 — at Washington, 7:30 p.m.

Tuesday, Feb. 8 — at Iowa City West, 7:30 p.m.

Friday, Feb. 11 — at Jefferson, 7:30 p.m.

Tuesday, Feb. 15 — Dubuque Hempstead, 8 p.m.

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Thursday, Feb. 17 — at Cedar Falls, 7:30 p.m.

Feb. 21, 25, March 1 — Substate

March 7-12 — State Tournament, Des Moines