

Mator was 'missing link' for Kennedy defense

Written by Jim Ecker

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Kennedy Coach Brian White began getting e-mails in February from a high school sophomore in Pennsylvania who said he was moving to Cedar Rapids and planned to play football for the Cougars this year.

"Yeah. Sure. Whatever," White recalled thinking, not taking it too seriously at the time.

Then Johnson Mator sent White the video highlights of him playing linebacker for the varsity football team at Central York High School last year as a sophomore and White got excited.

True to his word, Mator moved to Cedar Rapids and quickly became a key member of the Kennedy football team that has an 11-0 record and is ranked No. 3 in Class 4A heading into Friday night's showdown with Washington in the quarterfinals of the state playoffs at Kingston Stadium.

Mator plays the "mike" linebacker position for the Cougars and has excelled all year, leading the team in tackles and tackles behind the line of scrimmage. Kyle Knock, Kennedy's defensive coordinator, has been impressed with Mator from Day 1.

"When we found out we were getting a move-in from Pennsylvania and we saw his tape from last year, Coach White sent it over and I said, 'Whoa! We'll take him,'" Knock remarked. "The kid just plays with a motor. His speed to the ball is the best we've had at that position in a long time.

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"He kind of makes our defense whole," said Knock.

Mator has collected 90.5 total tackles, 62 solo stops, 15 tackles for losses and three sacks. Keep in mind, the Kennedy defense allows only 9.3 points per game and does not spend a lot of time on the field.

Mator, a junior, actually grew up in Cedar Rapids and moved to Pennsylvania a few years ago.

"My mom wanted to move back, because she liked Iowa a lot," he explained. "We used to live here before. I went to McKinley (Middle School), and then I moved away in eighth grade."

His older cousin, Prince Kollie, played football for the Cougars.

The Kennedy football team prides itself on being a big family and Mator has comfortably joined the group. "It's been great. They welcomed me in," he said Monday night after the Cougars whipped North Scott, 49-7, in the second round of the playoffs.

"We've had a pretty good season so far," he said. "We want to continue it."

Mator wanted White and the Kennedy coaches to know he was moving back to Cedar Rapids from Pennsylvania and wanted to play for the team.

"I pretty much e-mailed him and I told him I was coming down," he related. "I e-mailed him twice to tell him what grade I was in and stuff like that. He said, 'We're excited to see you play and come to our team.'"

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Mator is listed as 6 feet tall on the Kennedy roster, but admits that's a slight exaggeration. "I'm not 6 foot," he confessed. "It's more of a stretch, I guess."

Mator is probably about 5-foot-10 and 180 pounds. That's not very big for a Class 4A linebacker, but in Mator's case it hasn't mattered.

"In this defense," Knock said, "you don't have to be big, you have to be fast. He plays from sideline to sideline."

Kennedy returned an experienced unit on defense this season, but the Cougars needed another linebacker to round out the team. They found him in a gift from Pennsylvania.

"One of the comments that Coach White made was, 'Maybe this is the last piece of the puzzle for our defense,' and he has been," said Knock. "He's been more than we expected."