

PATERSON, NJ – To outsiders, there was little reason to expect much from the Kennedy High football team. The Knights were coming off back-to-back 2-8 seasons. They hadn't made the state playoffs since 1991. And in recent years there were fewer and fewer players coming out for the squad.

But at the start of the season, Knights' head coach Ron Jackson had a feeling this team could break through. There was talent at the skill positions and a solid core of seniors.

In the third week of September, Jackson got the confirmation that his gut feeling was right. The Knights were losing to Fair Lawn 17-6 midway through the fourth quarter and they mounted a comeback. A touchdown made the score 17-12 and then Kennedy had the ball back and was facing a fourth-and-goal situation with the game on the line

"We were going to run a simple option," Jackson said of the pivotal play. "They (the Fair Lawn Cutters) knew we were going to do it. Everybody knew it. And we did it." The play ended in a touchdown that helped propel the Knights not only to that win, but to a season that has put them back in the state playoffs for the first time in more than 20 years.

"I felt we were going to be good," said Jackson. "I just didn't let anybody know about it."

Kennedy, with its 4-4 record, has clinched the eighth seed in the North Jersey Section 1 Group 5 playoffs. The Knights will play either Montclair or Bloomfield. Both teams are 7-0 and Montclair is No. 8 in The Star-Ledger's state rankings. Passaic Tech seems to have secured the third seed.

Jackson said seniors Miguel Miller and Jordan Henry have been the big reasons behind the Knights' success. Miller scored three touchdowns against Passaic and had two against Clifton, including the winning score in overtime. Henry, meanwhile, has been a stalwart on defense and Jackson said he's among the state leaders in sacks.

Running back Shaon Stephenson, who had three touchdowns in the Fair Lawn game, Greg Oliver and quarterback Rason Ison also have excelled for Kennedy.

Two years ago, the Knights were suiting up only about 24 players, including many sophomores, and there was talk Paterson should merge its two high school football teams to ensure there would be a full squad.

But this, Kennedy started out with almost 50 players and still has about 40 on its roster. The extra bodies have helped. But the Knights still have found themselves far outnumbered in their four losses, Jackson said. In fact, he said, Ridgewood, Hackensack and Passaic Tech all had almost twice as many players on the sidelines.

Besides the state playoffs, Kennedy has one other game remaining on its schedule, the annual Thanksgiving Day contest against city rival Eastside High. The Ghosts this year are 2-5 and play Fair Lawn at Baeurle Field at 6 pm on Friday night.

Kennedy clinched its playoff bid on October 27, when its two competitors for the last playoff spot, East Orange and West Orange, lost. But since then, Hurricane Sandy and her lingering after-effects have shut down schools and kept the Knights from practicing, except for a workout on Tuesday.

On Thursday morning, snow covered Kennedy's practice area at Totowa Oval. Jackson said it would be nice to be able to have money to rent the indoor bubble facility in Clifton for practice preparation for next weekend's state playoff game. Otherwise, Jackson is just hoping for the snow to melt.

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