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Newark looks to rebound in playoffs

Steven Martin

When one thinks of Newark Memorial, the names Devon Hardin, Kyle Spain, Trae Clark, and Chris Jones quickly come to mind. That's because this Mission Valley Athletic League school has a well deserved reputation as a perennial basketball power.

With the resurgence of the Cougars' football program, you may add the names **Michael Gates, Myles Gates, Eric Stewart, and Robert Hawkins**. These four have been the catalysts on a team that went into last Friday's showdown with James Logan High, at 9-0 and the No. 11 ranked team in NorCal.

Ironically, it took a loss in the season finale for Newark to gain the full respect it deserves. There had been whispers that the Cougars play down to the competition. "We played our schedule, we're 9-1. Nothing else needs be said," said coach Rich Swift. "We haven't played our best every game, but we've played well enough to win," he continued.

If playing to the competition also means you play your best games against your toughest opponents, the Cougars may plead guilty to that charge as well.

On Sept 28th, Washington was coming off a huge game, having tied the East Bay's No. 3 ranked team, San Ramon Valley, 35-35. Most observers expected Washington's powered offense to have little trouble putting points on the board. The result was a 6-3 Newark win in a hard fought defensive struggle.

Fast forward to last Friday night. Again, not many thought Newark would be able to keep pace with the explosive offense of James Logan, and star quarterback Rashad Evans.

The Cougars' proved to have a few stars of their own.

Twin brothers, Michael and Myles -otherwise known as "Nickle and "Dime" (Michael wears jersey number 5, Myles number 10), accounted for most of Newark's offense. Michael, a quarterback in the mold of former San Leandro High and current Oregon star, Dennis Dixon, had 59 yards on 13 carries. Myles rushed for 136 yards on 13 carries, while throwing for 33 more out of the half-back position.

Both twins also play in the defensive backfield and project as cornerbacks in college. They are receiving recruiting interest from UNLV, Utah St, and Sacramento St.

Michael has seven interceptions and a punt return for a touchdown this year, while Myles has eight picks to go with three punt return touchdowns.

"I can't put them on the field at the same time anymore for punt returns, because they fight each other for the ball," Swift joked.

The Cougars' other top players are running backs Stewart and Hawkins. Stewart, 6-foot-3, 190 pounds, combines speed with power to average 6.5 yards per carry to go with eight touchdowns on the season.

Hawkins, is an elusive speed back who has broken off several big runs at critical times this season.

The real star of this Newark team, however, is it's stingy, swarming defense.

Logan, which came into the game averaging 360 yards and 43.7 points per game, could muster only 205 yards in it's 21-14 win. Three Newark turnovers in the first half led to 14 Logan points,

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or otherwise we could be talking about a near shutout of one of the most explosive offenses in Northern California.

Despite a 9-1 record, losing in a classic heavyweight bout in the final game, the Cougars were curiously bypassed for the 3A playoffs No. 1 seed. That went to San Ramon Valley. Yes, the same SRV team that had tied Washington the week before Newark beat the Huskies, their only common opponent.

Amazingly, the selection committee then seeds Washington at No. 7 (they are more likely a 4 seed, but took two forfeit losses of games they won on the field), setting up this week's rematch with the Cougars.

"I have no control over those things(seedings)", said Swift. "We play Washington. We are both significantly different teams than we were back in September," he continued.

"They are getting their wide receiver back, Vaughn, and their running game is much better".

With a deep playoff run and continued success, Newark could become synonymous for football glory along with hoops.

So, when talking about Cougars sports, and you here the names Hardin, Spain, Clark, and Jones - just smile, and say "and Nickle and Dime."

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