

SPECIAL FEATURE

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ASHEBORO - There's never a doubt that the Southwestern Randolph High School boys basketball team is going to give its best effort on the floor each and every night. That has been a staple for this program while under the guidance of Matt Kiser. Opponents will not outwork SWR teams.

It is the same philosophy for this year's version of the Cougars, but that work ethic is leading to a few more wins through the first 13 games of the season.

The latest was a 60-47 victory over Uwharrie Charter Academy to open Four Rivers Conference play Friday night as the win pushes the Cougars to 1-0 and 7-6 overall, its best 13-game start since the 2019-20 campaign when SWR was also 7-6 on their way to a 17-10 finish.



Cougar coach Matt Kiser. Photo by Eric Abernethy, Randolph Hub.

"I am just so proud of this group of kids," Kiser said after his team stretched their current win streak to four. "This group right here, I remember watching play PTO basketball in fourth and fifth grade in our youth league and coming out through our feeder schools and local programs. It's great to see how they have developed and grown over the years."

Watching them play in fourth or fifth grade wasn't too long ago as the Cougars feature a wealth of talented underclassmen, including sophomores Levi Dalke, Trivett Kennedy, Colton McKee, Carson Wood, Carter Edmonds and freshman Drake Beeson.

"I had a lot of belief that this group would be solid and they are showing that," Kiser said of the team that also features juniors Kenan Sugg and Jaxon Campbell.

"They have put in the work. We talked about being young. I hear it all the time how young we are. I tell them no one cares. I tell them Uwharrie Charter doesn't care how young we are. Eastern Randolph doesn't care how young we are. Wheatmore is not going to care how young we are. It doesn't matter who we show up and play. They don't care that we're young. We can't use that as a crutch and they bought into that. We don't care if we have freshmen on the court, juniors on the court or seniors on the court, they are going to show up and battle."

It took a while for this group to get going as SWR started 0-3, 1-4 and 3-6 before winning four straight games entering this Friday night's battle at Eastern Randolph. Four of those losses were by five points or less, including two one-point losses to Providence Grove.

"In the beginning of the season, we had a rough time," said Kennedy, who poured in 17 points against the Eagles, including 12 in the second half when the Eagles attempted a comeback. "We know we're young, we know we're smaller than everyone else, but we got that dog in us. We don't back down to anyone no matter how big they are or how talented they are. We just hustle when we play and we never quit. I am excited for the rest of the season."

That desire has led to a solid first half of the season. After 13 games last year, SWR was 5-8. In previous campaigns, the first 13 games saw SWR record records of 3-10, 5-8 and 6-7. SWR was 1-10 overall during the shortened COVID season.

"You always want your team to play hard, get after it and battle," Kiser said. "When you take some losses, it's a hard thing to do. To have success to go along with it, I feel we will continue to build on that. We have been playing with great momentum lately, and hopefully we can keep that snowballing in the right direction."

Sugg is certainly a player who has led on the court. The junior can handle the ball, has a strong instinct to drive to the basket and he can shoot from long-range as well. Against the Eagles last week, Sugg and his teammates continually gave the ball up to a player who had a better shot.

"This group as a whole collectively, these 14 players here are extremely competitive," Kiser said. "I see it every day. They go after each other in practice. It doesn't matter what type of drill we're doing or what type of competition it is or if it's a five-on-five scrimmage. They want to win and that trickles into game nights."

McKee and Dalke are key players with McKee providing bulk down low, looking more confident every time he takes the floor, while Dalke is dangerous everywhere on the floor.

"Every game I feel my confidence go up and up and guys guarding me can't stop me when I go to the rim strong," said McKee, who scored 10 points against the Eagles, including five in the first quarter to help the Cougars get going.

"You've got a group of kids who have bought in and are willing to do anything it takes to get the W," Kiser said. "That's a special thing to see."

The Cougars may very well be a special team.



Trivett Kennedy. Photo by Eric Abernethy, Randolph Hub.