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By Dennis Garcia

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ASHEBORO - During spring workouts and into the grueling summer schedule, a special feeling came over the varsity football coaching staff and players at Southwestern Randolph High School. The Cougars' program has certainly been on the rise of late, bringing a stretch of five straight winning seasons and six straight non-losing seasons into the new campaign.

But nobody knew just how special a year this season could be.

Well, the answer is pretty evident now. It can be a very special season.

Led by a potent passing attack that features quarterback Levi Dalke and Kenan Sugg and a strong running attack that is fueled by Nathan Garner and Asher Haggerty, the Cougars are off to a 5-1 start as they enter their bye week.

"We have been talking about that since spring," said Garner, a hard-nosed runner who also plays in the secondary. "We have a lot of very good players in positions we feel they fit well in. Everyone is really set in their positions."

Garner certainly is. He has been a constant since he first wore the blue and gold of SWR. With the graduation of Brody Shepherd, who was a workhorse in the Cougars' 7-4 season a year ago, Garner's role has certainly increased and he has stepped into that role rather successfully.

"He's a competitor, coachable and he gives you everything he has," veteran SWR coach Seth Baxter said. "As a sophomore last year, he played defense and was named all-conference and we started to get him involved in the offense. In our system, we like our offensive players to be able to do multiple things. He runs well, blocks well and has tremendous hands."

Garner scored once on the ground and caught one scoring pass, while adding a two-point run in the Cougars' 42-0 win over McMichael Friday night. The Cougars get a well-deserved and much-needed week off before meeting Eastern Randolph in a key Four Rivers Conference clash on October 9.

For the season, Garner has rushed for 461 yards and six touchdowns, while hauling in 345 yards of passes with three more scores. He's fitting right into this high-powered attack.



Southwestern Randolph junior Nathan Garner. Photo by Whitney Ferguson Photography.

In fact, the entire SWR offense has been operating on all cylinders most of the season. The Cougars have already scored 241 points, an average of 40 points per game.

"In almost every aspect, it's gone right," Garner said of an offense that produced 45 points against East Davidson, 55 against Trinity, 57 against Wheatmore and 42 against McMichael. "Our passing game has been phenomenal. Kenan Sugg and Levi have been really connected and that's really great for an offense. Our offensive line has been fantastic, especially with run blocks. There are sometimes I don't even get touched." One of Garner's strongest traits is his yards after contact. Defenses often feel they have a good chance to bring him down for a short-yardage gain or even a loss, but the hard-nosed runner usually fights his way through that first contact for more valuable yards.

"I learned it since I've been playing at eight, my little league coaches, my middle school coaches have always drilled that into me," Garner said about initiating contact while carrying the ball. "I am going to put my shoulder into them and try and knock them down whether I do or don't."

There are so many positive traits Garner has in becoming the dangerous runner he is.

"He's got tremendous vision," Baxter said. "He reminds me a lot of Shepherd in that every run he has a forward lane and he attacks forward. He takes on contact. I look at him as a kid who can do multiple things and when you have a kid like that, as a coach you want to find ways to give him the ball."



Photo by Just A Dad Photography.



Nathan Garner. Photo by Just A Dad Photography.

It hasn't been the easiest schedule for the Cougars, who have played on Saturday afternoon, Thursday night, and two Monday night affairs this year. Only twice in the first six weeks of the season have the Cougars played on a Friday night.

"We always talk about adaptability," Garner said. "Knowing what you need to do and when you need to do it and under any circumstances. Whether it's on a Monday, Saturday or Friday. It's about knowing your assignments and not letting your environment affect you."

SWR was scheduled to play Wheatmore Sept. 18, but that game was postponed until Monday and once the Cougars arrived, they had to sit around for nearly two hours waiting to take the field because of lightning.

"It was pretty tough, but it's nice being with your brothers and having fellowship," Garner said of the long delay while sitting in a locker room. "We were obviously locked in, but it's nice to have time with your brothers and you have to cherish that. Stay hydrated, eat some carbs and get ready to play."

Garner said he knew this was going to be a year he would be counted on heavily. So he prepared accordingly.

"Coming into the season this year, throughout spring, Coach (James) Needham had us in the weight room and I put on some mass, some strength," said Garner, who said he also worked heavily on running back drills, speed drills and his 40-yard time. "I really appreciate the help of the weight program."

Garner, who is likely to be used in just about every aspect of the game, readies himself each week as well.

"I'd say it's a mental battle with my body," he said of playing two games in one week on two occasions. "It's physically tiring, but it's something we overcome in practice with our conditioning. Keep our bodies healthy."

Garner and the Cougars have overcome quite a lot this year. And it's going to be very interesting to see just how much this team can achieve.



*Photo by Whitney Ferguson
Photography.*