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By Dennis Garcia

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ASHEBORO - Nathan Garner finding a hole for a big gain has been a recurring theme for the Southwestern Randolph High School varsity football team. So has quarterback Levi Dalke taking a snap, dropping back a few steps, waiting for his receiver to get open and firing a perfect pass for another Cougars first down.



Two phases of high school football - being able to run the football and being able to throw the football - are paramount if a team is going to be successful. When the Cougars travel to Northwood Friday night for a key Four Rivers Conference battle with the Chargers SWR will need to be successful in both and that means they will be looking for another strong performance from the offensive line.

As most football coaches will say, it all starts up front, and the Cougars' offensive line has been moving defenders out of the way while giving Dalke the time he needs to pass the football.

Led by junior tackle Colton McKee, freshman tackle Brayson Neelon, senior guard Trey Jackson, junior guard Hunter Harris and senior center Whyatt Williams, the Cougars have moved the ball up and down the field. With Kayden Plummer and Keaton Hill also playing key roles, the Cougars' offense is averaging more than 36 points a game, including a season-high 57 against Wheatmore.

"Football at any level, you have to have the line of scrimmage taken care of," veteran SWR coach Seth Baxter said. "First of all, we got kids who are very selfless up there. They continue to work hard. Coach (Nate) Cockman has done a tremendous job with them. They work nonstop. It's just a mindset for them. They don't mind doing that extra work."

That extra work has paid off as the Cougars' high-scoring offense produced 45 points against East Davidson, 55 against Trinity, 42 against McMichael and 43 against Jordan-Matthews. Even in their only two losses of the season - to Eastern Randolph and Randleman - the Cougars moved the ball and had opportunities, but were stopped by turnovers.

"Improvement each day," Baxter said about what he's seen from this unit all year long. "The one big thing we've always said to our offensive line is just give us a chance to get a crease. Garner is having an unbelievable year running the football, the pass protection has been really good, probably as good as since I've been back. They give us time to throw the football and for our routes to develop."



*From left, Brayson Neelon, Hunter Harris, Whyatt Williams, Trey Jackson and Colton McKee.*

Williams and Jackson are the two seniors on the line, both of whom had to wait their turn to become starters. Although certainly undersized, both have taken full advantage of the opportunity to start.

"They are both undersized, but they have such heart," Baxter said. "And both of those kids have waited their turn. They hadn't started until this year. They waited their turn, waited for their opportunity. We were senior-heavy last year on the line and these kids have stepped in and been selfless."

Williams said the group enjoys a special bond.

"This season has been amazing, we're so tight," Williams said. "We're all together as one big family and it makes the communication easier."

Jackson agreed.

"From the beginning of the season, we tried to put the pieces together," Jackson said. "We experimented with a lot of things. Personal groupings and it really clicked. It's like family. We treat each other with so much respect. We have much confidence in each other, so we don't have to worry about what we're doing. We know each will do their job to the best of their ability."

While McKee has shown steady improvement since his freshman season, working his way into collegiate Division 1 discussions, Neelon showed a lot of promise during preseason workouts and grabbed the other tackle position.

"Neelon was a surprise," Baxter said. "We saw some things in the summer and thought this kid has a good chance. We kind of threw him into the fire the first couple of weeks and in

scrimmages. He responded very well and he has gotten better every game. This whole group has jelled together."

The Cougars love to run a fast-paced offense which tests the line's ability to read defenses and adjust accordingly.

"Being balanced and doing what we want to do when we want to do it is important," Baxter said. "A lot of teams will have to throw third and long second and long when everyone in the state knows your passing. We have the ability, with our skill kids and offensive line, to call a play based on feeling where we have positive alignments at."

There have been a lot of positives for this SWR football team. Positives from the receivers who love to block, positives for the running backs who are running hard and getting plenty of yards after contact, positives from an athletic quarterback who is showing his ability each week and positives from an offensive line which is the glue to this impressive offense.