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ASHEBORO - Veteran Southwestern Randolph High School boys basketball coach Matt Kiser said he and his coaching staff knew his team would be strong on defense this season and if they could figure out a way to put up a reasonable amount of points, his team would be very competitive in the 2019-20 season.

Kiser knows his team well and the Cougars have shown in the first part of this season that with a stout defense, a few points will go a long way.

After losing the first three games to Trinity (58-49), South Stanly (59-48) and Union Pines (50-47), the Cougars ripped off five straight wins, including a 53-45 win over Trinity. The Cougars also dusted off South Davidson (62-29), Eastern Randolph (55-45), Southern Alamance in the Mid-Piedmont Conference opener (74-63) and Providence Grove (48-36). That streak ended Friday night, but not without a fight as the Cougars battled back from a 17-point deficit in falling 56-54 to Eastern Guilford, who many believe is the favorite for the MPC title.

The Cougars will take that 1-1 league mark and 5-4 overall record into Tuesday night's MPC game at Southern Guilford before taking more than a week off to get ready for the 29th edition of The Courier-Tribune Christmas Invitational.

"A lot of the change has come from within the players," said Kiser of the Cougars, who have won 16 total games in the previous three seasons. "I have what I consider a player-led team this year. The drive and motivation that has come from the coaching staff in previous seasons is now coming from the players who are self-motivating and holding themselves accountable for doing things better."



Cougars head coach Matt Kiser. Photo by PJ Ward-Brown/PJ Ward-Brown Photography.

The five wins has already equaled the total number of wins achieved in three of the last four seasons and the Cougars next victory will tie the most wins in one season since the 2016-17 campaign. Under Kiser, the Cougars won nine times in the 2015-16 season and eight times in 2014-15, his most successful seasons in terms of wins.

The first game against Trinity, we showed some good signs defensively," Kiser said. "Offensively, we struggled. I thought we would get better at that as the season went on. The thing we have done better since those first three games of the season is control the tempo and playing at our pace. If you look at

our scores, we have games in the 40s and 50s because we are a defensive-minded team and that is the pace we want to play at."

It took a few games for the players to realize a slower tempo meant a higher percentage of possible success.

"Early on, we were taking quick shots," Kiser said. "We were shooting one or two passes into our offense. We took guys out when they took a quick shot and that's what it took to get them to understand that we are looking to control the clock, control the possession and make their team work on defense. You take a quick shot and that defense is working seven or eight seconds. It got to the point after just a few games, I didn't have to say anything any more. When we got into a situation where we may be going too fast, we have players who will calm things down and remind everyone that we are going too fast and getting out of our comfort zone."

Stressing defense certainly has paid off as the Cougars are allowing just 49 points per game, the lowest of any team in the MPC.

The Cougars have also shown a balanced attack on defense. Parker LaPlant, Chris Hardin, Luke Dalke and Ethan Smith have all put up solid numbers and anyone off the bench can contribute during the course of a game.

"If we aren't the most unselfish team you have seen, I need to see that other team," Kiser said. "They really don't care who scores, who gets the assist. All they care about is playing the best we can play. I think we have had four different guys leading us in scoring. That is a testament to our guys unselfishness and ability. They are creating plays for one another, They are sharing. Each of them has their own strength and everyone is doing a good job of playing to those strengths."

The Cougars are certainly primed to have the best season they have enjoyed in quite a few years.

"I think we have always had high expectations and hold the players accountable to reach those expectations," Kiser said. "We always go into a game expecting to win. What we have done so far comes down to my players. They deserve the credit for it. They stepped up and found what it takes to be successful and don't mind doing it.

"We won a few games and the guys have gotten some confidence," Kiser added. "They have proven they can play with anyone that steps onto the court. Any time you have a streak like that, the confidence grows. They are playing with confidence, not arrogance or cockiness, just confidence."