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Sports

Finally Healthy, Emerald Line Showing Its Mettle

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Emerald's Kivis Boyd, from left, Kent Kelley and Ontario Curry are a big reason for the Vikings' success against run-based teams, like Ware Shoals and Crescent. (Staff file photo by R. Shawn Lewis)

Like much of the Emerald High School football team's defense, the defensive line has been hampered by injuries, but that group has slowly been able to rebuild itself. That resurgence began with the Vikings' 22-6 win over Ware Shoals in Week 4 and came to a head last Friday in a 36-0 shutout win over Crescent that was dominated by Emerald's defensive front.

Emerald's defense limited the Tigers to 71 rushing yards in the first half and forced them into a number of offensive penalties. The

defensive line hasn't been the one the Vikings coaching staff anticipated at the start of the season, but it has developed into a formidable group.

Seniors Rashad Robinson and Taylor Johnson suffered season-ending knee injuries, while Kent Kelley, Dillon Gary, Ontario Curry and Nick Brinson have all missed games on the line. "We've had five guys where we've kind of been rotating them in. It's been a lot of more than anything sort of a revolving door where a lot of guys have been coming in and out," Emerald coach Mike Clowney said. "One of the key things now though is we've gotten Kent back, we've got Dillon Gary back in a steady rhythm and it's really brought ... some continuity to our group."

The Vikings began the year running a 4-3 defense and that hasn't changed, but the players involved have been rotated through a number of positions on the line. "We wound up having to kind of bang guys around. Ontario Curry, he's played tackle and he's played nose," Clowney said. "Right now, we've tried to firm it up to where we know Ontario is going to play tackle, Lucas (Mathis) knows he's playing nose, Kent knows he's going to play tackle. "Kivis (Boyd) and Dillon know that they're going to be playing ends, which is kind of giving us a chance to learn a little bit better and execute a little bit better."

Emerald's anchor up front has been Mathis, a junior who has not missed a game while moving from tackle and to the nose position when Brinson was injured, a transition crucial to the Vikings' win Friday. "One of the biggest keys was Lucas, being able to put him straight up the center and knowing that we were going to get a little bit of a push there," Clowney said. "That kind of disrupted their offense a little bit."

The Tigers were also gaining yardage in the first half on sweep plays because of Emerald's inexperience in the secondary, but Gary's play at defensive end helped shore that up as the game progressed. "The other thing was getting Dillon back and on the edge some," Clowney said. "We saw a couple times where we were getting beat on that sweep. "One of the big things with that was our corners; we just weren't attacking there."

Kelley said the Vikings' defensive line has been steadily improving each week, but didn't really become visible until they beat Crescent. "There's a lot of game where we played good together, but they just didn't work out in our favor," said Kelley, who missed two games with an ankle injury. "Like when we played Boiling Springs and Pendleton, we played good, (but) it just wasn't clicking. "Friday's game was when everything clicked perfect. Coach Clowney told us to play our role and nobody tried to do anything different."

The Vikings' defensive line has also benefited from being one of the team's most tight-knit groups. "They're a good group. It's probably one of the most energetic groups to where you go down and you hear them in drills," Clowney said. "They're giving each other high fives and encouraging each other. There's a lot of fun kids in that group."

Added Kelley, "We all look at ourselves as teammates, brothers. We've got a big bond on defensive line because we know each other well."