

POWERING THE OFFENSE

SM East's O-line is tightly knit off the field, giving the offense a critical boost

story by MICHAEL YI

SET, HIKE!" MOMENTS after senior Jack Reeves calls the first snap of the Lancer Day game, the offensive line surges into action. Gabe sets the edge on the left. Hank picks up a linebacker. Michael squeezes down as Cannon blocks a safety, allowing Jack to punch through the opening on the quick side.

As Jack barrels down the 50, the 40, the 30-yard line, all five linemen charge down the field, already celebrating. Though Jack scored the touchdown, the offensive line created the opportunity by working perfectly in sync.

"At the end of the day, [offensive line's] not just one person, it's five guys that have to act as one," senior and center Michael English said. "We have to have one heartbeat, one mind."

To Michael, the four other players on the offensive line mean more than just teammates.

Teammates just practice with each other and play during the season. SM East's linemen stick together year-round: lifting together in the offseason, analyzing film together over text message, demolishing steaks and a colossal number of rolls together during team dinners at Texas Roadhouse.

The 20+ hours spent with each other every week and shared fire for competition bind the five offensive linemen – seniors Mete Ozkan, Hank Hunter, Michael English, Gabe Wallace and sophomore Cannon Zubeck – as close as family. Their bond improves their ability to act as a single unstoppable force on every snap.

"The love that we feel on this team is special, and it's probably a feeling that I'll long for for the rest of my life,

because we have each other's back through everything," Michael said.

The strong emphasis on community within the line was kicked off by offensive line coach Jamie Fournier, who joined the program last year after 30 years of coaching experience and three state championship titles with Blue Springs South. Fournier encouraged the senior linemen last year to hold weekly team dinners and make a team T-shirt, dubbing the unit "The Cavalry" – because they bring the support.

"The difference between a great line

QUICK-SIDE

The left side of the lineup, where quickness is prioritized over brute strength. Generally, less runs go through the quick side.

and an average line is the camaraderie that they have with each other," Fournier said. "[These players] are constantly around each other and really care about each other. Not just as football players, but as men."

This year, the squad's four senior members are continuing the tradition with team dinners, hangouts and a new T-shirt with the inscription "The Madmen." Providing mentorship for right tackle Cannon, the seniors have welcomed the Colorado transfer as he learns a new position in a new jersey.

"I barely knew them to start with, and they just openly let me in and started teaching me," Cannon said. "It felt like I was under their wing, and they were great leaders to help me get to where I am."

When the line is hanging out together, typically at each other's houses, the conversation isn't just about football. Right tackle Mete says that the conversation can range from school subjects to romantic relationships.

"We talk about the kind of stuff you would talk to your best friend about, just because we're on that level," Mete said.

Left guard Hank believes that the line's close bonds allow for friendly competition that pushes him and his teammates to improve. Training as an offensive lineman can be exhausting, whether it's the sprints in 90-degree weather, 7 a.m. summer lifting sessions

or brutal blows in practice.

But those moments when Hank and Michael are one-upping each other in the weight room with five-pound PR improvements soundtracked by "disgusting, face-shattering" rock music make the crushing lifts a whole lot easier.

Michael says that the hours spent outside of practice have led to a near-psychic level of coordination on the field. Wordlessly, the five come off the snap knowing what the other four are doing at the same time, precisely controlling leverage and footwork to protect the quarterback.

The result? A lineup Fournier's more confident in than any he's ever coached.

Mete recognizes that the offensive line isn't going to get a lot of credit from fans, even if they take the fall for a bad sack. But he's learned to move on, because a great block brings the team closer to a win. They're not in it for their own personal glory.

"That group of guys is really selfless, because they know they're never going to score a touchdown themselves," Fournier said. "They're not going to catch a pass. They're not going to have people cheering for them individually. So they care about the team's success more than any individual."

In the last 10 seconds of the Lancer Day game, on that final, tiebreaking snap, all eyes were on Jack Reeves and his heartpoundingly low kick – sputtering through the air for hours – as it dinked over the crossbar and gave East their first win of the season.

No one was watching the O-line, crashing against the raging current of Olathe Northwest's defense. Few eyes were tracking the five-man, synchronized storm that gave the kicker his precious few seconds of opportunity.

But that's okay. The linemen did their job, and they won. And as the crowd rushed the field and clustered beneath the Friday night lights, Cannon felt a surge of elation and pride for his newfound teammates. A feeling every man on the line knows.

"We're all in it for each other," Mete said. "We play for the guy next to us."

SEARCH FOR THE LINEMEN

A word search containing the offensive linemen's names alongside positions

C A N N O N Z U B E C K H Q
M G A E E A G U A R D T A A
G E R N C M D A A N C R N G
T F T C J O D O C C L R K R
A M E E E O Z F A N E N H A
C R H D O H N S T E R N U N
K A E E O Z N Z I S E N N D
L N R N T R K I U N T R T M
E H G A B E W A L L A C E A
V P P I E O C E N T E R R V
M I C H A E L E N G L I S H
K S D A L G H T E R O H K K

- Cannon Zubeck
- Mete Ozkan
- Guard
- Gabe Wallace
- Michael English
- Tackle
- Hank Hunter
- Center