

## Prairie aiming for another big year

Written by Jim Ecker

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The Cedar Rapids Prairie football team enjoyed a strong season last year when it finished 8-4, stunned No.2 Iowa City West in the playoffs and reached the quarterfinals of the state tournament.

The Hawks want to do it all over again - and more.

"We're coming out with high intensity and high tempo, just the way we want to play," linebacker Tristan Beyer said last week after practice. "We want to start right where we left off."

Prairie had a modest 3-3 record after losing to Cedar Falls, 41-30, in the sixth week of the season last year. As it turned out, that disappointing homecoming setback turned their season around.

"We were up three touchdowns and lost it," Beyer noted. "That was a rallying point. That's where everything came together."

Prairie won five straight games after that before losing to No.3 Xavier, 28-7, in the quarterfinals of the playoffs.

The Hawks graduated a lot of talent from that club with Jace Hanna, Jared Edmonds, Cam

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Rathje, Andrew Netolicky, Demetrius Harper, River Whitters and other top players departing, but this year's club boasts considerable talent as well.

"We have guys who can fill their shoes and step up like they did last year," said all-state defensive back Mitch Dellamuth, who had six interceptions in 2012. "Each and every year, we focus on getting better.

"Last year was great," said Dellamuth, "but we can't relish on that."

Hanna passed for 2,55 yards and 28 touchdowns last season despite battling a variety of injuries. Edmonds caught 63 passes for 1,267 yards and 16 TDs, making them one of the best pitch-and-catch combinations in the state.

Hanna is playing basketball at Upper Iowa now and Edmonds is playing football at the University of Northern Iowa, but Prairie Coach Mike Morrissey thinks he has capable replacements with new QB Trey Beckman and a deep group of receivers.



Beckman, a junior, has already committed to the University of Nebraska for baseball, but he's an accomplished football player as well.

"Trey looks really good," said Morrissey. "I think Trey has really progressed. He's really starting to pick things up and make good decisions."

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Dylan Kuchemann also has experience in the huddle for the Hawks. "I think at the quarterback position we're going to be OK," said Morrissey.

Kentrel Smith caught 19 passes for 322 yards and four touchdowns last season and Dellamuth snared 19 passes for 288 yards and three TDs. They're back to lead the receivers, along with Jesse Vizzini and promising sophomore Jalen Rima.

Mitch Christensen burst onto the scene midway through the 2012 campaign and rushed for 661 yards and eight touchdowns, giving the Hawks more of a balanced attack. He'll be toting the ball from Day 1 this year.

"Christensen has done a great job," said Morrissey. "He's taken ownership of that job. Since he's taken that job he's really gotten better."

Prairie returns four starters on the offensive line, including a Division I prospect in 6-foot-6, 285-pound Bryce Meeker at right tackle. Meeker has scholarship offers from Northern Iowa and Illinois State and could get others.

Prairie also has an effective place-kicker in Sam Drysdale, who nailed 50 of 54 PATs and 4 of 6 field goals last season.



The Prairie Hawks turned into a flock of ball-hawks last year on defense with 20 interceptions,

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including six that were returned for touchdowns. Vizzini collected three of those TDs on defense and will be returning to a strong defensive backfield with Dellamuth and Kentrel Smith (three interceptions).

"Those guys, they have a knack for the ball," said Morrissey.

The Hawks have good athletes in the defensive backfield, and they get a lot of practice against a guy who was a pretty good passer in high school and college himself - none other than Morrissey himself.

"Coach Morrissey likes to play quarterback in practice," said Dellamuth, smiling. "It definitely motivates us to pick him off."

Beyer, one of the top quarter-milers in the state, is a beast at linebacker for the Hawks. He made 111 tackles last year and is back for more.

"He is so self-motivated and driven, it's incredible," said Morrissey. "He's the type of kid, you wish you had a thousand of them in the community."

Luke Howes, another quarter-miler, joins Beyer at linebacker and is another strong player. JoJo Simpson has moved to defensive end and has looked good in practice, according to Morrissey.

Morrissey likes the way his club has been shaping up and anticipates a good year.

"I think the goal is to always improve," he said. "You always want to get better than the year before and be the last team to win in November."

Morrissey is hoping to use the 49-28 upset of Iowa City West in the playoffs as a springboard

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for more success this year.

"That's something we've talked about," he said. "It was an exciting time, but we can't live on that."

Christian Ohrt, one of the biggest high school players in the state at 6-foot-10 and 365 pounds, transferred from Cedar Rapids Jefferson to Prairie last December and is eligible to play for the Hawks. Ohrt was bothered by knee problems at Jefferson, but Morrissey hopes he'll be able to help Prairie on offense or defense this season.