

Marion handles Mt Vernon in opener

Written by Clete Campbell

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MOUNT VERNON – Diving headfirst into the “Schedule of Death,” the Marion Indians swam in their 2014 season opener.

In Game 1 of a slate that offers no off-weeks, Marion rode its new-look offensive attack to a mud-ugly but hard-earned 28-6 victory over a game Mount Vernon team.

Kory Walsh ran for two touchdowns, new starting quarterback Hayden Meister connected with Derek Smith on a 38-yard touchdown strike and the late-awakening Indians took control of the game in the third quarter to score an opening-night win that was as pretty as an offensive line trying to perform a ballet routine.

“That was the definition of winning ugly,” Indians Coach Tony Perkins said.

In a fitting image of just how daunting Marion's 2014 season figures to be, the sky opened wide with three minutes left in the third quarter, forcing the Indians to put the game away in the pouring rain.

“There's nothing anyone can throw at us this year that we're not expecting,” Meister joked.

Marion isn't just playing one of Class 3A's most difficult schedules this fall. The Indians are also tasked with replacing the high-voltage passing connection of Trevor Hardman (who threw all of Marion's 151 passes in 2013) and Quinn Cannoy.

Time will tell how potent the formula is in the long run, but Marion's new offensive mix was strong enough Friday night with Meister turning in a poised performance.

“The pre-game jitters were there at the beginning,” Meister said, “but I settled down and relaxed. This is the game I love that I've been playing since I was four years old. I'm playing with my

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friends. These guys are my brothers. I just had to settle down and relax.”

New Mustangs coach Lance Pedersen's crew defended its home turf with a physical defensive-driven performance designed to embargo Marian's running game and force Meister – who didn't throw a varsity pass in 2013 – to beat the Mustangs.

Mount Vernon packed the box with eight to nine men on most snaps, taking away Marion's A and B running gaps and forcing Walsh and company to bounce outside on the option in hopes of finding open highway.

Nick Muller's fumble recovery for a touchdown had Mount Vernon in a 6-6 draw after one quarter, but the Mustangs owned a big advantage in physicality points.

“They were playing physical and we didn't match that in the first half,” Perkins said, “We've got to get mean. We don't have to be nice all the time.”

The Indians played tough, raw and relentless starting late in the second quarter with towering 6-foot-5 twin offensive tackles Devin and DeShaun Quinn clearing and paving road for Walsh and Company.

Marion put 14 points on the board in the second to take a 20-6 lead into halftime. Gage Kray's 28-yard touchdown run also enabled Marion to open the most challenging of seasons on a victorious note.

“We came out really flat but we learned we can improve as the game goes on,” Devin Quinn said. “We were tired of getting our butts kicked. The game was about bearing down and getting physical.”

Marion will need that resiliency week in and week out this fall. Welcome to Iowa prep football, the grad school edition.

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Marion, armed with just a 37-man roster and almost no second-line depth, is facing a schedule with a degree of immense difficulty that Perkins says is like nothing he's encountered in 31 years of coaching.

"We talk about being 37 strong," Perkins said. "We have to be (every week)."

This autumn, the Indians find themselves fighting for a way to the playoffs in the reconfigured Class 3A District 4 newly crashed by Mississippi Valley Conference schools Cedar Rapids Xavier, the Class 3A state title favorite who was Class 4A state runner-up in 2012 and '13 (and a titan the Indians have never faced), and Dubuque Wahlert.

As if there's not enough sharks already swimming in District 4, the field also features traditional 3A state power Solon (which snapped Iowa City Regina's 56-game winning streak Friday night). Marion is just one of six of the new District 4's seven members to make the playoffs in 2013. That's a playoff batting average of .859.

Fittingly, nothing came easy for Marion Friday night. In a potentially critical loss, tight end Dalton Gardner left the game with a knee injury in the fourth quarter.

Things don't get any easier for the Indians next week. The Washington Demons, who just happen to be Class 3A's state runnerup from 2013, come to town. A road date at surging 2A school Cascade looms Sept. 12.

"(The schedule) is going to make us see if we have (the guts) to dig down and get the job done," Devin Quinn said. "Football is all about who is mentally committed and wants it more."

But Friday's gritty effort is the type of performance that can keep Marion alive and kicking in a land of Iowa prep football giants this fall.

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