

MSR begins tour of prep football camps

Written by Jim Ecker

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When I began working at The Gazette back in 1982, the Big Ten Conference used to conduct a "Skywriters Tour" for college football writers who would visit

Big Ten camps and file preseason stories from around the league.

The late Gus Schrader went on those tours for The Gazette and offered the latest insights from the around the Big Ten, hobnobbing with head coaches and other writers so Iowa fans could get a feel for the new year.

Those "Skywriter Tours" are a thing of the past, replaced by an annual cattle call in Chicago, but the Metro Sports Report will be conducting its own tour of the Metro high school football camps this week to get a glimpse of what lies ahead this season.

We plan to visit all eight Metro teams in five days, from Monday through Friday, to see how things are shaping up. We'll post the stories and pictures for eight straight days, from Aug. 17 through Aug. 24, as we prepare for the opening-round games Aug. 27 and 28.

We'll check in with the Washington Warriors, who went 13-1 last year and played for the Class 4A title. We'll visit with the Xavier Saints, who finished 9-4 and reached the semifinals of the Class 3A playoffs.

The Linn-Mar Lions went 9-2 last year, but suffered heavy graduation losses. None of the other Metro teams had a winning record last year, but Prairie, Jefferson and Kennedy all made the playoffs.

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The Marion Indians suffered through a tough year and finished 1-8. Cedar Valley Christian also finished 1-8 last year, but the Huskies showed improvement and won their first game in school history.

It's always fun to visit with the coaches and players and watch them practice. We're especially eager to meet Mark Bliss, the new head coach at Prairie who has won four state titles during his career.

It's impossible to know in advance how things are going to turn out, but it appears that Washington could have the best team in the Metro again this year despite heavy graduation losses of its own. Running backs Tavian Patrick and Johnny Dobbs, who combined for 2,029 yards and 25 touchdowns last year, are back this year with their "Thunder and Lightning" attack, but the Warriors have some holes to fill on the offensive line after losing Julian Good-Jones and Royal Silver.

Reid Snitker, a gritty quarterback and defensive back for Washington, has graduated, but TJ Vogel showed promise as the No. 2 QB last year and probably has a better arm than Snitker. Isaiah Nimmers, a Division I recruit, returns as a premier wide receiver. The defense needs a new leader after losing all-star linebacker Connor Vincent to the college ranks.

Duane Schulte runs a football machine at Xavier High School, where the Saints make deep trips into the playoffs on a regular basis and are always tough to handle. Quarterback Bryce Schulte, the coach's son, passed for 14 touchdowns and ran for 12 TDS last year as a sophomore and is back to lead the offense.

Tailback Jay Kortemeyer graduated after rushing for 1,174 yards and seven touchdowns for Xavier, but speedy Sean Murphy showed promise with 479 yards and two touchdowns. Nick Stark caught 26 passes last year and Dallas Klein kicked nine field goals, giving the Saints two important threats.

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Xavier graduated its six leading tacklers from last year's club, so there's work to do on defense.

The Linn-Mar Lions have numerous holes to fill after their successful season was cut short by Iowa City West, 38-34, in the second round of the playoffs. All-star quarterback Ryan Schmidt is now a member of the Iowa Hawkeyes after passing for 14 touchdowns and running for 21 TDs last season.

The Lions also lost such notable players as Perrion Scott, Trevor Noble, Logan Nelson and Austin McCulloh to graduation.

The Jefferson J-Hawks went 4-6 last year and took a big step in the right direction by making the playoffs, but they need to keep improving and prove it wasn't a one-year hiatus from the tough times that have plagued them in recent years. Jefferson caught a break last year when Jesse Furrow, an accomplished quarterback, moved into the school district from Indiana, but Furrow is now a freshman at Wheaton College and the J-Hawks need a new QB.

Tavian Rashed is back at Jefferson after rushing for 660 yards and 11 TDs, but the J-Hawks need to develop more weapons on offense.

The Prairie Hawks also finished 4-6 last and made the playoffs. Coach Mike Morrissey left for a job in Arizona, leaving the keys for Bliss to try and produce a winning record this year. Bliss has 26 years of experience as a teacher and coach, including a 159-57 record as a high school head coach in Missouri and Kansas with those four state titles.

Quarterback Trey Beckman, who missed a big chunk of the 2014 campaign with a concussion, has graduated and will play baseball in college. Keagan Pinter, who rushed for 1,103 yards and 11 touchdowns, also is gone. So is Sam Drysdale, who kicked nine field goals, and Bryce Meeker, a 300-pounder who is now a Cyclone.

Prairie returns a pair of talented receivers in Jojuan Simpson and 400-meter state champ Jalen

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Kennedy began the season with six straight losses last year before a late push got them in the playoffs. Sammy Lizarraga, who passed for 1,405 yards and 16 touchdowns, is pitching baseballs instead of footballs for the Iowa Hawkeyes now, so the Cougars need a new man at the helm of the offense.

Kennedy has a big weapon in Shaun Beyer, a talented receiver and linebacker/defensive end who has committed to North Dakota State. Beyer caught 35 passes for eight touchdowns last year and led the Cougars in tackles. He could see time at quarterback this year as well.

Tyler Dralle rushed for 915 yards and eight TDs as a junior and also played well on defense. Drake Brewster is back after catching 27 passes.

The Marion Indians won their first game of the season in 2014, but then lost eight straight. Coach Tony Perkins has run a successful program at Marion for many years, so it's probably safe to assume the Indians will bounce back this season. Kory Walsh is back after rushing for 755 yards and seven touchdowns last year, but the Indians need more sparks on offense after averaging just 12.9 points per game.

Marion graduated its top five tacklers, so there are holes to fill on defense.

Cedar Valley Christian, a relative newcomer to the Metro football ranks in the eight-man game, opened the 2014 season with a 30-20 victory over Harmony for its first (and only) victory in school history. The Huskies host Harmony on Thursday, Aug. 27 and will be looking for a good start again.