

A final look before the ball gets kicked

Written by Scott Unash

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With the high school football season kicking off in earnest this week, it's time to take a quick snapshot of the eight Metro football squads. I will not be predicting records for each of the teams, but just taking a look at what I think each team needs to do to be successful. After talking to all the coaches over the last three weeks on the KGYM Coaches Corner, here are some of the observations I have noted:

Cedar Valley Christian - The task is simple. Get better each week and learn. Wins and losses do not mean anything this season. It is difficult to start a program from the ground up, especially with a group of kids who basically have never played the sport before. The Huskies will be playing four varsity games this first season with the possibility of picking up another JV game or two. It will be great for the new program to get in as many games as they can to learn the game, especially for the younger players. The Huskies have athletes, they just need to continue to make them football players.

Jefferson - The J-Hawks also have a simple task that has been talked about openly by several of the players, and that is to bring respect back to this once proud program. The J-Hawks have 19 players who started at least one game last year. While they took some lumps they did learn what varsity football was all about. The J-Hawks have a returning QB in Alex Baxter to go along with some big bodies across the front. Will Jefferson win a division title? Probably not. But they can take big strides by playing tough, competitive football and winning a few games, goals that are within reach.

Kennedy - What will the Cougars do for an encore in 2011? They got hot at the right time a year ago and were the last team standing out of the Metro area. It will be a different looking team for Kennedy this fall as the Cougars return only a few starters off that squad, but there is talent to build around and terrific numbers on the varsity program with around 75 players. The Cougars return possibly the Metro's top RB in Trevor Heitland along with one of the best

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defensive players in Josh Jahlas. What the Cougars don't return in starters they will make up for in solid depth at many positions. The key for the Cougars will be up front where they have to replace nearly both the offensive and defensive lines. How they perform will go a long way in determining how the Cougars fare this fall.

Linn-Mar - There is excitement all around the Linn-Mar community this year as the Lions usher in a brand new era with the opening of the 7,000 seat Linn-Mar Stadium. We all will miss the memories at Armstrong Field along the banks of Indian Creek, but the time has come to move on. Also moving on from the program is one of the best RBs the Metro has seen for decades in three-year starter Jer Garman. He leaves big shoes to fill, but the Lions' coffers are far from empty. Perhaps the Metro's top player returns in two-way starter Mark Atwater at QB and LB. Atwater will operate behind a seasoned offensive line that returns four starters. Defensively, the Lions may have one of the best linebacking corps in the state with Atwater, Mitch Wantock and Tommie Feller. It looks to be another banner year for Coach Forsythe and the Lions who start the year rated in the top 10 in Class 4A.

Marion - The beat continues to go on for the Marion Indians. Despite the fact that the Indians stumbled at the end of the season, Marion again qualified for the playoffs. The next step for the Indians is to make some noise in the post-season. Marion already has one "win" this season. QB Cale Cannoy, who suffered a serious elbow injury in baseball, has been cleared to play. The other top returning RB in the Metro resides in Marion as two-year starter Colton Storla is back for his senior campaign. Storla ran for more than 1,200 yards a year ago. The Indians will feature a big group up front and will have more depth this year as well. The defense will be led by LB Jake McDonald, who is a big hitter. The Indians will be very solid again this year, but their district is much tougher with many of the top players returning.

Prairie - For the first time in well over two decades, Craig Jelinek is not leading the Prairie Hawks into battle this fall. Mike Morrissey takes over and, despite being very young, he brings an impressive coaching resume to the College Community. Also new is the refurbished John Wall Memorial Stadium with improved stands and a new Field Turf playing surface that will be dedicated this Friday at home against Washington. What Coach Morrissey inherits is the murderous schedule that Prairie faced a year ago in finishing 2-7. It's not much consolation, but the Hawks were no doubt the best 2-7 team in the state last season. Morrissey says he's going to throw more this year. That makes sense since he is a former QB, and he will have a tremendous target in Demetrius Harper back at WR. When the Hawks run it they will give it to state champion wrestler Zach Witte, who took over the running chores halfway through last season. With a change comes renewed enthusiasm, and that's what the Hawks have for this fall. The big question will be can they use that against a schedule that includes eight playoff teams from a year ago?

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Washington - To say it has been an interesting camp so far at Washington would be an understatement. Within a couple of days the Warriors found out junior QB A.J. Puk would not be playing football this fall and senior TB Will Griffin would be out 4-6 weeks with a foot injury. Not the start you are looking for if you are Coach Tony Lombardi. Griffin, one of the state's top sprinters, was all set to be the next in line at "Tailback High." One thing in Washington's favor is that whoever runs the ball will do so behind possibly the best line in town with a couple of three-year starters up front. Storm Henry and Tyler Burrell anchor the front line along with McCauley Todd. These players bring a lot of beef and athleticism to the trenches. Defensively, the Warriors have one of the best in David Tann who has a nose for the ball and is a tackling machine. Can the Warriors find a QB to step in and a RB to carry the load until Griffin's return? Those are the big questions facing Washington.

Xavier - Another football season is approaching and it's pretty much the same scenario for Coach Duane Schulte and the Xavier Saints. While the Saints won't wow you with Division I college potential all over the field, they will bring out 22 solid and dependable starters on the field who do all the fundamentals correctly. While the Saints have few returning starters coming back, this group of seniors and juniors both won MVC sophomore titles the last two years and know how to win. Carter Valentine looks to take over at RB and will line up behind Coach Schulte's son Reggie at QB and a typical Xavier offensive line that again will have great speed and execution. The Saints always shine on defense and bring back Kevin Hosch at DE along with Jordan Webber, who is a terrific player in the defensive backfield. Most of the so-called experts talk a great deal about Cedar Falls and Iowa City High being the favorites for this year in the MVC, but you never should overlook or, more importantly, underestimate Xavier in that conversation.

There you go, a sneak peak at all of the teams. The time for talking is over and it's time to tee it up starting Thursday night with Linn-Mar at Jefferson. We will broadcast that game on 1600 KGYM, and then on Friday night we will bring you Xavier at Kennedy on 1600 AM and will also have Washington at Prairie on www.kzia.com. Check out our full schedule at our website www.kgyradio.com.

(Scott Unash is the sports and program director at KGYM-AM 1600. He is a six-time winner of the Iowa Broadcast News Association play-by-play Announcer of the Year Award. Scott and Mark Dukes co-host the Gym Class weekdays from 3-4 p.m. on KGYM)