

Jeff's rugged road begins with No. 8 Lions

Written by Jim Ecker

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Seven football teams in the Mississippi Valley Conference received votes in the Associated Press poll this week.

The Jefferson J-Hawks are scheduled to play six of them this year, all but Iowa City High.

Some teams can't catch a break.

Jefferson begins its rigorous campaign Thursday night by hosting No. 8 Linn-Mar in the 2011 opener at Kingston Stadium in southwest Cedar Rapids.

Kickoff is scheduled for 7:15 p.m.

The J-Hawks lost all nine of their games last season and have dropped 13 straight. They haven't won a game since beating Dubuque Senior, 20-13, on Sept. 25, 2009.

It's been 23 months since Jefferson last won a high school football game.

"To be honest with you, you guys from the media are the ones who brought it to my attention that it's been 13 in a row," Coach Jim Womochil said Wednesday.

"Obviously there's anxiety around here to be successful," he said. "And to say that you're not aware of it and it doesn't grow on your kids and your staff, I'd be lying."

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Womochil remains confident and up-beat. He has a huge offensive line, an experienced quarterback and 19 players who have started games during their careers. "I think experience is in our favor," he said.

The J-Hawks passed the eye test Wednesday during their walk-through at Kingston Stadium. At one point they lined up with 6-foot-9, 335-pound Christian Ohrt on one end of the offensive line and 6-7, 315-pound Colton Spicer on the other.

Spicer has missed practice time this month due to an injury and a family matter, but the J-Hawks won't lose much size if 6-1, 300-pound John Rocarek takes his place.

Jefferson also features 6-2, 305-pound Ryan Eivins at center and 6-3, 270-pound Mic Vesey at guard. The other starting lineman is the "little guy," 6-foot, 210-pound Zach Berryman.

"I think the strength of our team is up-front offensively, and I think that's where any good team starts," Womochil remarked. "The question is, can those guys stay up with the speed and quickness of some of these defensive linemen?"

"It's one thing to be big, it's another thing to be able to move. Hopefully we can match up better up-front than we did in years past."

Alex Baxter has recovered from a knee injury and is ready to play quarterback for the J-Hawks again. He started all nine games last season and took a beating, but kept bouncing up.

Baxter attended college football camps this summer and has improved his throwing, which should complement his ability to run with the ball.

"A strength is having our signal-caller back for another year," Womochil said. "That's also one of Linn-Mar's strengths. A great big one."

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Linn-Mar Coach Bob Forsyth reported Wednesday that Mark Atwater, his star quarterback, is fine and ready to lead the Lions against the J-Hawks, refuting unconfirmed reports that Atwater was injured.

Linn-Mar has rolled up a 17-5 record the last two years with two straight trips to the playoffs. Meanwhile, Jefferson is 1-17 the last two seasons and fighting for respect.

"We're improved. We can see a clear-cut difference in attitude and a little bit of ability from a season ago," Womochil said. "But we've got a good foe in Game 1. We'll have our hands full."

Jefferson's other games this season against ranked teams are with No. 1 Cedar Falls, No. 9 Iowa City West and No. 10 Xavier. Also on the schedule are Kennedy and Washington, teams that received votes in the initial AP poll. Their three other games are against Waterloo East, Prairie and Hempstead.

"I think the biggest goal that we have is to come out and play hard, compete and just try to get better," Womochil said. "We feel like we have more kids who can contribute."

Womochil thinks the J-Hawks can compete for a spot in the Class 4A playoffs, which normally takes a minimum of three wins.

"I believe in our senior class as leaders," he said. "I think we have enough ability to be competitive and win enough games to make it to the playoffs. That's our goal, and I think it's a realistic goal."

It starts Thursday night against Linn-Mar.

"It's a great test for us," Womochil said. "We expect to go into the game and be around in the

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fourth quarter with a chance to win it. That's what our hopes are and aspirations. That's what we've been practicing for."