

Webb faces stiff challenge with J-Hawks

Written by Mark Dukes

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He is 32 years old and embarking on the rebuilding job of a lifetime. Does Brian Webb, or anyone else for that matter, have a chance to put Cedar Rapids Jefferson back on the Iowa high school football map?

The short answer is yes, anything can happen. But it's a lot more complicated than that.

Webb was introduced last Thursday as Jefferson's eighth football coach since the school opened in 1958. Scott Unash and I had an opportunity to interview him on The Gym Class on 1600-AM last Thursday afternoon, a few hours before Webb met with Jefferson players, parents and boosters.

Webb talked a good game, giving thoughtful and complete answers to questions. He spoke with some passion and conviction. He didn't claim to know the J-Hawks' first opponent this fall but committed to putting his plan in place this summer.

Jefferson's once-proud football program has fallen on hard times. It has endured 11 straight losing seasons and has lost 22 straight games. That's unbelievable and unacceptable for many J-Hawk alumni.

At one time, the program under coaches Ted Lawrence and Jack Fisk produced 20 straight winning seasons (1961-81), mythical state championships in 1964 and '65 and a state title in the first year of the Iowa playoffs (1972).

How in the world has it gotten to this point, Jefferson boosters ask.

There are many elements that go into a winning, or even competitive, prep football program: coaching, good athletes, sound facilities, solid administrative backing, student body support and

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sometimes some luck.

Jim Womochil had no winning seasons in his tenure that ended recently, although the J-Hawks made the 2008 playoffs with a 4-5 record and were bounced by Cedar Falls in the first round. The last winning team was 2000 when Jefferson completed an undefeated regular season but was ousted in the first round by Cedar Falls.

Ah yes, Cedar Falls, the much-decorated program orchestrated by Pat Mitchell. Coincidentally, Webb played under Mitchell at Cedar Falls. Whether that's a helper, who knows.

The Jefferson district faces some tough hurdles intrinsically. Enrollment is down over the past 10 years, especially after the floods of 2008 took out neighborhoods in the Wilson and Roosevelt middle school districts, feeder schools for Jefferson.

Back when Jefferson won the 1972 state title, the bulk of the starters were from those Wilson and Roosevelt districts. Over the years, Jefferson has had to share Roosevelt and Taft middle school products with Kennedy. Wilson students go to Jefferson exclusively.

In high school, you have to play the hand you're dealt. No recruiting, at least in most districts. Often times, you don't have the cards to go all-in, so sometimes you have to bide your time, try to ride out the tough hole cards and maybe occasionally try to bluff your way to a winning pot.

Webb made it clear he won't proceed with smoke and mirrors. His program will be built on strong conditioning, discipline and execution. And that can lead to wins, no matter how great your athletes.

Back in the 1970s and '80s, Tom Good had a highly successful program at Regis with a playbook that was paper thin. Execution was Good's premise.

Complicating Webb's challenge is the fact there are few easy customers in the Mississippi

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Valley Conference. Nine of its 14 members had winning records and made the Class 4A playoffs last season. Five won first-round games. Only Jefferson and Waterloo West were winless.

It'll be a tough go but at least Webb breathes fresh air into the program. He won't be able to craft that first win alone. It'll take committed assistants and players to do so. It'll take solid game planning and execution against tough opponents.

Are the tough times behind Jefferson? Tune in this fall.