

Morrissey is new bundle of energy at Prairie

Written by Jim Ecker

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Mike Morrissey bounced around from drill to drill Monday morning, high-fiving his players and yelling words of encouragement as preseason practice began at Cedar Rapids Prairie.

"Is that young guy the head coach?," a startled visitor to practice wanted to know.

Morrissey, 28, gets that a lot. He's the youngest head coach in the Metro area, but he's packed a lot of experience into a short period of time and is thrilled to be Prairie's new man.

"I love it," he said. "These people are smart, they have a great work ethic.

"I think they feed off of us as coaches. I really do," he said, explaining his high-energy approach. "We try to get them upbeat. If you're not running around trying to get kids better every day, it's not worth coming out here."

Morrissey succeeded Craig Jelinek, who retired after the 2010 campaign with a 106-96 record in 20 years. The Hawks appear to have quickly embraced their new coach.

"He's awesome," said junior Jace Hanna, one of the quarterbacks. "He's very excitable. He runs around with us, he teaches us a lot of new things."

Prairie finished 2-7 last season, so the new coach has work to do. The players seem receptive.

"I love him," said senior lineman Sam Manternach. "He's a lot of fun, (we) have a lot more energy at practice, getting after it. It's nice to have the change.

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"It's a little different, going from Jelinek to him, but it didn't take long to get used to it. We were open to the change. He was very open to us and warmed up to us."

Morrissey is young enough to be their older brother, which apparently helps him relate to players.

"He's younger and he's been there not too long ago (as a player), so he knows how we feel and he's there to help us out with whatever we need," senior Jason Vizzini said.

Morrissey was a quarterback at Pleasant Valley High School and Upper Iowa University. He played for his father, prep Hall of Fame Coach Ed Morrissey, at Pleasant Valley and leans on him for advice.

"He's still the best coach that I know," he said.

Morrissey graduated from Upper Iowa in 2006 and worked as an assistant at Upper Iowa, St. Cloud State and Rockford College before becoming the head coach at Thornridge High School last year in Dolton, Ill., where he led his team to the Illinois playoffs.

Rocky Bennett, Prairie's athletic director, interviewed older and more experienced coaches before settling on Morrissey, saying he liked Morrissey's enthusiasm, knowledge and the way he relates to high school students.

The Hawks worked extensively on their passing game during their 2 1/2-hour workout Monday morning, and Morrissey was jokingly asked if he has any running plays in his playbook.

"We do," he replied, smiling. "Our goal is to be more balanced this year than I guess they have been previously. We have some guys who can run and catch, and we have some guys who

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can throw a little bit."

Demetrius Harper, a speedy wide receiver, showed good moves and made some nice catches.

"We're going to be creative and find different ways to get him the ball in different situations and different packages and things like that," Morrissey said. "He's getting better every day."

That's what Morrissey wants from all his players: Steady improvement on a daily basis.

"Our philosophy is total effort," he said. "We want tough kids, we want kids who are going to come to work every day and try to get better and buy into what we're trying to do as a program and just improve overall.

"Our goal as football coaches is to make them better football players, but we want them to be better young men in the long run. That's really what our ultimate goal is."

Morrissey has lofty goals for the Hawks this year.

"I think you set the standards high," he declared. "We want to make the playoffs. That's your ultimate goal every year.

"Our goals each year are to compete for a conference championship and compete for a state championship. We have high expectations, and we're going to shoot for them. We'll be young this year, but we're excited about the guys we have."

2011 PRAIRIE FOOTBALL SCHEDULE

Friday, Aug. 26 - C.R. Washington, 7:15 p.m.

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Friday, Sept. 2 - at Xavier, 7:15 p.m.

Friday, Sept. 9 - Cedar Falls, 7:15 p.m.

Friday, Sept. 16 - at Iowa City West, 7:15 p.m.

Friday, Sept. 23 - Linn-Mar, 7:15 p.m.

Friday, Sept. 30 - at Waterloo East, 7:15 p.m.

Friday, Oct. 7 - C.R. Jefferson, 7:15 p.m.

Friday, Oct. 14 - Dubuque Hempstead, 7:15 p.m.

Friday, Oct. 21 - at Iowa City High, 7:15 p.m.

Wednesday, Oct. 26 - IHSAA playoffs