

Meeker made splash for Prairie as freshman

Written by Jim Ecker

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Prairie Coach Mike Morrissey knew Bryce Meeker was certainly big enough to play varsity football as a freshman last year, but he didn't know if he was tough enough.

Then he found out.

"It was during the summer, and I can pinpoint the moment when we knew we were going to be OK with it," Morrissey said Tuesday.

The coaches from Coe College conducted a team camp for the Prairie Hawks and Solon Spartans during the summer of 2011 and Meeker was invited to attend. It was just a camp, but football is a rough sport.

"Bryce got popped in the nose and he was bleeding all over the place," Morrissey said with a grin. "I kind of walked over to him and I asked, 'Are you all right?' and I tossed him a towel.

"He wipes off the blood, tosses it right back to me and runs right back in. I was like, 'OK, he's got the toughness and we're going to be all right.' "

Meeker was a big man for the Hawks last year as a freshman. Now he's even bigger and stronger, measuring 6-foot-6 and 270 pounds. He made second team all-Mississippi Valley Conference, a rare achievement for a ninth grader, and he's already receiving letters from the Iowa Hawkeyes and other Big Ten teams.

Prairie finished with a 2-7 mark last season in Morrissey's first year as head coach. The Hawks hope to turn that around this year and Meeker could be a key ingredient on the offensive and defensive lines.

Meeker speaks humbly about what happened last year.

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"I came out of eighth grade thinking I was the world and everything, like an idiot," he said after practice Tuesday. "I started doing workouts with the varsity and it was a whole other level. And once I got to the varsity I knew I had to work with everything I had just to make the team.

"I ended up making the team, so I was proud of myself for working hard in the summer."

Meeker wants to build on what happened last season.

"I still have three more years," he said. "I still have to work as hard as I can, I still have to reach my personal goals."

"Bryce is special," Morrissey interjected. "Bryce's ability is pretty incredible when he gets moving."

Morrissey proved last year that he'll promote a freshman to the varsity if he thinks the kid is ready. In fact, he's doing it again this year with a freshman tailback named Trevor Northrup, who just happens to be the fastest man on the team.

Prairie has some fast players like Demetrius Harper and Jarred Edmonds, who ran on championship relay teams last spring for the Prairie track team. Northrup is faster, at least for 40 yards.

"Trevor impressed us real early in the summer," Morrissey said. "He ran the fastest 40 time in our program. Pretty impressive, considering all the guys that we have.

"He beat Harper, he beat Edmonds, he beat Mitch Dellamuth, he beat Jason Vizzini. He beat all of them. That was pretty special."

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Morrissey said he might have a "tailback by committee" this season, but Northrup apparently will be a member of the group. "We'll just kind of ride the hot hand on that," he said.

In addition to his speed, Northrup also has impressed the coaches with his work in the weight room. "He's a pretty special kid. We're lucky to have him," Morrissey said.

A lot of underclassmen played for Prairie last season and got their baptism of fire. Now they're back as seniors and juniors, perhaps ready to help the Hawks compete for a spot in the playoffs.

Quarterback Jace Hanna returns after passing for 1,169 yards and six touchdowns despite missing time with a concussion. Edmonds caught 26 passes for 529 yards and seven TDs and was a first-team choice on the Mississippi Valley Conference squad. Harper, who missed a big chunk of the 2011 campaign with a broken collarbone, gives Prairie another potent weapon at wide receiver.

Hanna can't wait to start throwing darts in their direction, along with the other top receivers on the club.

"I think it will be awesome," he said. "They're all great wide receivers, all athletic, and I think we're going to have a good season."

Tristan Beyer was a first-team MVC pick on defense last year as a sophomore and Mitch Dellamuth was a second-team choice, also as a sophomore. Hanna, Harper, Vizzini and Cam Rathje all received honorable mention in the Valley last year as underclassmen.

It could be hard to turn a 2-and-7 record in Year 1 into a winning record in Year 2, but the Hawks think they can do it.

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"I think that's pretty possible," Hanna said. "We've been working hard in the offseason with weights and agility and stuff. Going into the second year we've got a better understanding (of the offense).

"Last year was just learning it, and this year we're actually understanding why we're doing it. And it's helping."

The young Hawks got a big boost of confidence this summer when they won the 7-on-7 passing camp at the University of Notre Dame, topping 70 teams from 13 states. They beat a team from El Paso, 29-28, in the finals.

Hanna said the Hawks were not the most athletic team at the camp, but they played together and kept winning games. "It showed if we take care of the little things it will help us, and that will translate into the season," he said.

Hanna said the Hawks have a simple goal this year.

"Do the best we can," he said. "A winning season."

2012 SCHEDULE

Aug. 24 -- Jefferson

Aug. 31 -- at Kennedy (Kingston Stadium)

Sept. 7 -- Xavier

Sept. 14 -- at Iowa City West

Sept. 21 -- at Dubuque Wahlert (Loras College)

Sept. 28 -- Cedar Falls

Oct. 5 -- at Linn-Mar

Oct. 11 -- at Washington (Kingston Stadium)

Oct. 19 -- Waterloo West