

Womochil, Baxter think J-Hawks can turn it around

Written by Jim Ecker

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The Jefferson J-Hawks are talking about winning some football games this season.

They're talking about making the playoffs.

More than anything, they're talking about pride in themselves and pride in the program.

"One of my goals - and for a lot of the guys - is not necessarily measured in the wins and losses," senior quarterback Alex Baxter said. "We want to win some respect back from the other schools. That's one of the biggest things."

The J-Hawks lost all nine of their games last season by an average margin of 44-8. They've lost 13 straight games, matching the second-longest losing streak in Class 4A, and they've dropped 19 of their last 20 games overall.

"We'll see how we compare to some other teams, but I know at this point and time we're better than we were last year," Coach Jim Womochil said Tuesday on the second day of practice.

Womochil enters his 11th year with a 22-69 record. He's confident the program is moving forward, for these reasons:

- The J-Hawks could have a huge offensive line, with three 300-pounders if everyone gets healthy.
- Baxter survived his baptism of fire at quarterback last year and has improved as a passer, but began training camp with a knee injury.
- The J-Hawks have 19 players who cracked the starting lineup at one point last season.
- They're a little bigger, a little stronger, a little faster, a little deeper.

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"We're excited, and I'm enthused about it," Womochil said. "I think J-Hawk football is just going to keep climbing. Last year is over and some of our younger kids are maturing, and we do have some nice young talent on its way."

Jefferson has a tough schedule in the Mississippi Valley Conference, as usual, with games against Linn-Mar, Washington, Cedar Falls, Kennedy and Xavier on the horizon. The J-Hawks also play Waterloo East, Iowa City West, Prairie and Dubuque Hempstead.

"It would be great to win three or four games and make it into the first round of the playoffs, because none of these guys have ever experienced that," said Baxter. "I want to experience that, and I want that for these guys."

Womochil thinks the playoffs are a definite possibility. Thirty-two of the 48 teams in Class 4A make the playoffs, and it usually takes three or four wins to get there.

"It would be outstanding to qualify in the top half of the teams in 4A and make the substate playoffs," he said. "That's a goal of ours. I think that's a realistic goal."

Baxter tore the MCL in his left knee and dislocated his kneecap a few weeks ago at Jefferson's summer camp, but he's made a quick recovery and participated in practice Tuesday. He avoided making sharp cuts, but otherwise appeared to move well.

"I'm just doing everything the doctors tell me, trying to get back for that first game," he said. "It's healing pretty fast."

Jefferson hosts Linn-Mar in the season opener on Thursday, Aug. 25 at Kingston Stadium.

Baxter took a beating last year as the quarterback on a young, inexperienced club. He rushed

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for 476 yards and three touchdowns and completed half his passes for 574 yards, but finished with only one touchdown pass and 10 interceptions.

"We couldn't pass at all last year," he said. "It was more of a desperation thing once we got to 3rd-and-forever that we had to pass the ball."

Baxter attended football camps at Iowa and Iowa State this summer, looking to improve his passing. He also worked with a private quarterbacks coach.

"It was interesting," he said about the camps. "There were some solid athletes there, some really good players. There were some quarterbacks that obviously are going to get a lot of attention because they're 6-foot-4, but I still had a fun time."

Baxter stands 5-11 and 165, which is big enough for high school football but not big enough for a major college QB.

"I'm not going to the camps to get any hard looks by some of the coaches," he said. "More to just improve myself and keep busy during the summer."

Baxter said he learned a lot about throwing a football at the Hawkeye and Cyclone camps.

"One of my biggest problems was I'd dip the ball a lot," he said. "I needed to get my release point up. I'm kind of a short guy, and I had some passes knocked down (by defensive linemen).

"I learned a lot of things about my footwork, too," he said. "If I made a bad pass, I just assumed there was something wrong with my arm."

Womochil said the J-Hawks have more athletic ability this year - bigger, stronger, faster - thanks

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to a strength and conditioning program at Jefferson that's conducted by Performance Therapies of North Liberty.

"We're seeing a huge difference with the kids that committed to it, compared to the kids who didn't," he said. "We're a little bit faster. We were really slow last year.

"Speed is still a worry of mine. We don't have those burners, we don't have any track stars and guys that pick them up and put them down. That means we have to be physical and control the line of scrimmage."

One guy who could help control the line of scrimmage is Christian Ohrt, who stands 6-foot-9 and weighs 350 pounds. He played on the varsity last year as a freshman, but missed four games due to shoulder and foot problems. Ohrt is battling foot problems again this season and needs special fittings for his shoes.

"That's an awful lot of weight on a young person's feet," Womochil noted. "He's a diamond in the rough. You can't coach someone to be 6-9 and 350."

Womochil thinks the J-Hawks are moving in the right direction. He said the expectations are high.

"We're going out there to be competitive and try to win each and every game we play," he said. "Being in the Valley and coming from where we're coming from, that's tough to do. I realize that."

2011 JEFFERSON FOOTBALL SCHEDULE

Thursday, Aug. 25 - Linn-Mar, 7:15 p.m.

Friday, Sept. 2 - vs. Washington, 7:15 p.m.

Thursday, Sept. 8 - Waterloo East, 7:15 p.m.

Friday, Sept. 16 - at Cedar Falls (UNI-Dome), 7:15 p.m.

Friday, Sept. 23 - Iowa City West, 7:15 p.m.

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Friday, Sept. 30 - Kennedy, 7:15 p.m.

Friday, Oct. 7 - at Prairie, 7:15 p.m.

Friday, Oct. 14 - Xavier, 7:15 p.m.

Friday, Oct. 21 - at Dubuque Hempstead (University of Dubuque), 7:15 p.m.