



Brian O'Shaughnessy/Index

Freshman running back Anton Bernard catches a pass during spring practice. Bernard is one running back vying for a spot in the backfield.

# Running game seeks better showing in '08

BY BRENT FOSTER  
Staff Reporter

As spring practice wraps up this week, the Bulldogs football team is placing a greater emphasis on the running game.

The Bulldogs finished ninth in the 10-team MIAA last season with 114 rushing yards per game, and that was largely skewed by the "Dogs 306 yards rushing in a Week 1 win against the University of Missouri-Rolla.

Often the team seemed to abandon its running game in favor of a passing game that finished second in the conference in yards per game.

"We're going to run more option off our running game, too, so I think that is going to possess some challenges for defenses," head coach Shannon Currier said. "We have athletic quarterbacks, having abilities to get our quarterbacks involved and read defenders. ... I think our option game is going to benefit our running game as well."

The Bulldogs will look to a host of running backs to replace departing senior Jake Cunningham. Cunningham led the Bulldogs last season, averaging more than 37 yards per game.

The returning leading rusher for Truman is junior quarterback Matt Ticich. Ticich averaged 36 yards per game on the ground. The next two leading returning rushers are sophomore running backs Marvin Bemby and Phil Kenney. The duo combined to average 47 yards per game last season.

"We're looking at production, but we're also looking at our running backs for what guy's going to work the hardest," Currier said. "What guys are going to be the most dependable and [that we] can trust? What guys are willing to do the things that aren't always fun? A lot of times you've got to block, especially if you're going to run the football effectively."

Currier said that right now there is no clear-cut No. 1 running back. He also said a string of injuries in the backfield has made it difficult to get a good look at all the running backs. Bemby and freshman Anton Bernard are the only two running backs so far this spring who have been 100 percent healthy and fully able to participate.

Possible backs who could make significant contributions include Bernard, Bemby, Kenney, junior Nick Nathan and incoming freshman Tracy Milo.

With all of the different possible combinations at running back, Bemby said he expects to see more running plays mixed in with the pass.

"I definitely think there will be more balance," Bemby said. "We've got some guys back. ... In the end, we just want to win games. Whether we have to throw the ball 70 times or run the ball 70 times, we just want to win games."

Bemby also said a lot of the problems running the ball last season were offset by the solid passing game.

"Last year we struggled a little bit, but we threw the ball extremely well," Bemby said. "The lack of the running

game didn't hurt us as much because we threw the ball so well."

Kenney said the team is running more back sets this spring to try to confuse opposing defenses.

"We've been concentrating a lot more on having two running backs on the field at the same time," Kenney said. "I feel like our running back group is pretty versatile. We've got guys that are fast, guys that are bigger. ... It makes the offense harder to defend because we're getting two running backs on the field, and really, the defense has no idea what we are going to do, and we can always have two running backs out there."

Another key to improving the running game will be a more effective offensive line. The Bulldogs return four starters on the offensive line, losing only starting center Tim Bauman.

Freshman backup quarterback Phillip Davis said the backfield is doing its part this spring to help an offensive line that struggled at times run-blocking last season.

"We're trying to focus on helping the offensive line by making different calls, different reads, trying to have an easier scheme for them to do," Davis said. "Our offensive line coach as well as offensive coordinator studied film enough last season to incorporate a better scheme for the offensive line so it won't be so confusing for them like last year."

The Bulldogs will conclude spring practice with the annual spring game at 7 p.m. Saturday at Stokes Stadium. The scrimmage is free and open to the public.

## Rugby enjoys winning spring despite challenges

BY BEN YARNELL  
Staff Reporter

A season just above .500 isn't always considered a success for a team.

For the Truman men's rugby team, it is.

After a fall record of 2-6, the Bulls took what they considered a building season and put together a 5-4-1 spring record.

The Bulls faced tough opposition this semester, but the biggest enemy for the team was the weather. Unaccommodating weather and poor field conditions forced Truman to miss three individual matches and one tournament. All of the cancellations only hurt the Bulls.

They were unable to work out makeups for those missed opportunities.

Even though his team missed out on those chances to add experience to his young team, head coach Bill Sexton was pleased with the quality of many of the matches.

"We did get some good games in," he said. "It would have been nice to have it spread over more time. But, at the end of the day, I think we had more positives this spring than we did negative."

Sexton pointed to specific aspects, such as the team's awareness on the field, and the ability to spread out its game across the field, as areas in which he has seen improvement.

"We did have moments where we did break down very badly," he said. "But there were also moments where we played smart and did a lot of good things."

Sexton said another reason for the success was the addition of several more active players, bringing the roster to close to 30 for the season average. Junior Will Holleman said he sees this as a bigger stride than simply a matter of numbers.

"We've got guys that have been here three or four years, and then we've got guys who have only been with us for a semester or two," he said. "I think we've done a pretty good job getting everybody on a pretty equal playing field."

Sexton said one improvement he has been pleased with is younger players' willingness to step into positions when more experienced players missed playing time because of either injury or personal reasons.

"Sometimes that's what matters," Sexton said. "You get a chance to play games, your game turns around, you become the better player, and the guy who wasn't there loses out."

A big factor in players being able to take those spots in the future will be summer conditioning. Sexton has worked out a conditioning plan for his players to follow during the offseason, and he has encouraged them to find a team

to play with at home to keep their skills sharp.

Junior Alex Koenen said that in the past the team has not adhered closely to the summer regimen because of work and other commitments. However, he said he thinks the team's situation will be better coming into this fall.

"We have the potential to be a really good team next season," Koenen said. "I think that will be a really big motivation for guys because it will be a direct contribution that gets paid off next year."

The Bulls will have to fill the void of seniors Leo Stephens and Tim Hage, both of whom will be graduating. Sexton said Stephens and Hage have been anchors for

the team for years at hooker and prop, respectively. The increase in numbers this season will help soften the blow of these losses.

"We've got some young guys coming up [who] know those guys are graduating and are hungry to take their spots," Sexton said. "They've been trying all this season to lay claim to those positions. ... but I like to see that competition."

The effect of losing members might be felt more off the field for someone like Holleman, who has played alongside Hage his entire Truman career.

"You know, we'll miss his skill set, but I'm really going to miss him as a friend," Holleman said.

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