

Football tries to build off of winning season

BY BLAKE TOPPMEYER
Assistant Sports Editor

The University's football program celebrates its 100th birthday this season. And for head coach Shannon Currier and his Bulldogs, there could be no better gift than a second consecutive winning season and a shot at postseason play.

After a three-year hiatus, the Bulldogs pulled themselves out of a rut for their first winning season (6-5) since 2002. The 'Dogs also had a winning conference record for the first time since 2001 and finished in a tie for fourth in the MIAA.

"Our ultimate goal is to win a national championship," Currier said. "The faster we can start winning games, then the faster we can get that goal attained. Last year was a good start, and we just want to build upon last year's success."

Slowly, the 'Dogs are beginning to earn some respect around the conference. The preseason coaches' poll ranks the Bulldogs sixth in the MIAA, up two spots from the 2006 preseason poll. But the Bulldogs are hungry for more than just mediocrity.

"We definitely want to improve on last year's 6-5 [record]," junior quarterback Matt Ticich said. "We don't consider that a good year for us. We just want to keep building on the momentum from last year."

If the Bulldogs hope to elevate themselves into the conference's top tier, they will need another standout season from Ticich. He returns under center a year after leading the MIAA

with 2,763 all-purpose yards.

Ticich is a threat to opponents not only through the air, but also on the ground. In 2006, the transfer from Mount San Jacinto College (Cal.) led the Bulldogs in rushing and passing yards, with 678 and 2,085 yards, respectively. Ticich was the first Bulldog ever to lead the team in passing and rushing.

Under Ticich's guidance, the Bulldogs averaged more than 360 yards per game.

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Shannon Currier
Head Coach

"Most teams that don't use their quarterback in the running game, it's basically 10 on 11 because your quarterback hands the ball off, and all of a sudden you have 10 offensive players versus 11," Currier said. "In our system, with the quarterback being a run threat, it can be 11 versus 11."

Senior running back Jake Cunningham will join Ticich in the backfield. He amassed 676 rushing yards in just eight games last season and also caught 11 passes in Currier's spread offense.

Cunningham is one leg in the tripod of running backs, which also includes sophomores Marvin Bembry and Phil Kenney, who combined to rush for more than 1,100 yards in 2006. Currier said the versatility of his running backs also will allow them to line up in the receiver position at times.

While the backfield returns several experienced members, the offensive line in front of them will be made up of primarily new faces. Three-fifths of the starting offensive line graduated after last season. Junior Jon Frantz and sophomore Jon Gialds are the only two returning starters. Of the five projected starters, three will be sophomores.

"As a running back, I'm pretty comfortable with the guys up front," Cuning-

ham said. "They're young ... but we got a new [offensive line] coach in here this year, Coach Costello, and he's working them real hard. It was tough for them at first, but now they're getting adjusted."

The receiving corps also features youth. Four of Ticich's top six targets from last year graduated. Sophomore receiver Vaness Emokpae and junior tight end Ryan King are projected to be the Bulldogs' top receiving options. King — an Honorable Mention all-MIAA in 2006 — caught 17 passes last season, and Emokpae was the team-leader with five touchdown receptions.

"We had a very talented freshman class last year in terms of receivers, and they're all maturing," Ticich said. "I think they're going to surprise you on Saturdays."

The layout for the Bulldog defense follows suit with the offense. Several key players returned, but there are some voids to fill.

Improving defensively will be essential if the purple and white are to challenge elite MIAA teams such as Northwest Missouri State. In 2006, the 'Dogs surrendered almost 26 points a game in their first season using the 3-4 defensive front.

"Last year, it was kind of learning the defense and just improving on the defense," junior defensive end Les Hammers said. "But now we just know it, and hopefully this year we'll definitely step it up and take 26 down a lot lower."

Hammers, a three-time MIAA defensive player of the week in 2006, was a steady force up front in helping stop the run and rush the quarterback.

Other key pieces back from last year's unit include senior rover Jesse Cooper, who led the team with 73 tackles, and senior cornerback James Thabuteau, a three-time letter winner.



Jackson Groves/Index
Redshirt freshman quarterback Phillip Davis looks to the open receiver, redshirt freshman James Eric Blake, in last year's spring game.

Juniors Jason Thier and Kyle Glenn return after starting all 11 games last season and lead the four-man linebacker crew. Currier believes his linebackers may be one of the biggest strengths for the defense.

The Bulldogs open the season Aug. 25 at the University of Missouri-Rolla. The 'Dogs then have a week off before their Sept. 8 home opener, which will take

place under the new lights at Stokes Stadium against Upper Iowa University.

The Bulldogs dropped their two non-conference matchups to start last season, and Currier expects to see a better beginning to the 2007 campaign.

"We need to have some early success to create some momentum and confidence so we can see that we picked up where we left off last year," Currier said.



File Photo

Sophomore kicker Mickey Masucci plants for a kickoff last November. Masucci was an Honorable Mention all-MIAA last season, converting eight of 15 field goals attempts.

Special teams look to become more effective

BY BLAKE TOPPMEYER
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Head coach Shannon Currier concludes almost every football practice in the same unique fashion.

Most of the team lines up on the sideline under the goal post, while sophomore kicker Mickey Masucci and the field goal unit practice several field goals.

Just like in games, Masucci goes almost unnoticed until this point in practice. But when it's time to kick a field goal, all eyes are on him and the other members of this special teams unit.

"Coach just helped put some pressure on me there by wrapping up practice with it," Masucci said. "It helps simulate a game a little bit and put a little pressure on me."

After an Honorable Mention all-Conference season in 2006, Masucci anchors the roles of kicker and punter again this year.

Masucci's award-winning season was one of the lone bright spots in an otherwise dark night for Bulldog special teams in 2006. The 'Dogs ranked eighth in punt coverage, kickoff coverage and field goal percentage and ninth in punt returns in the MIAA. The only true special team weapon was the kickoff return unit, which ranked second in the conference.

Currier said the special teams' performance also affects a team's offense and defense, and he would

like to see the Bulldogs improve this aspect of their game in 2007.

"The biggest change of field position in any play is the special teams play," Currier said. "Your field position and where your offense starts a drive gives you a certain amount of chance of scoring points."

A couple of key special teams players graduated after last season, including long snapper Andy Pitts and holder Jonathan Duffy. Currier and his staff spent a lot of time this spring and summer developing their replacements.

This year, junior Michael Phillips will take over as long snapper. In a high-pressure position that usually only gets noticed because of a mistake, Phillips said it's important for a long snapper to have a short-term memory.

"You can't remember the last bad snap," Phillips said. "You have to just move on. It's like throwing a pick as a quarterback. You have to just forget about it."

Redshirt freshman Phillip Davis will serve as holder on field goals and extra points. The success of any kicker depends largely on his long snapper and holder, and Masucci said he is comfortable working with Davis and Phillips.

"[Davis] has been doing a real good job for me all summer, and I'm really looking forward to having him help me out in the games," said Masucci, who made eight of 15 field goal tries last season. "The new long snapper,

he's been excellent ever since he came in. I thought I might lose something with Andy Pitts heading out after last year, but Mike's really been a blessing."

In the return department, Currier said sophomore Albert Coker currently is the top candidate to field punts.

Last season, Bulldog punt returners gained an average of just 4.6 yards per punt return. By comparison, opponents were averaging over 13 yards a return against the Bulldogs.

Coker has only returned two punts in his career but did have a team-best 16-yard punt return last season. He will return kickoffs as well, alongside senior Jake Cunningham. Currier said it's important to get the ball in the hands of players such as Cunningham — who doubles as the team's starting running back — in every opportunity possible.

"If you have a chance at a big play, you want to get your big play players returning kicks," Currier said.

The Bulldogs will need every big play they can get from the likes of Cunningham, Coker and Masucci if they hope to contend for postseason play.

"This year our theme is paying attention to details and focusing on the little aspects," Currier said. "We call them the significant details of success."

No doubt one of those details will be the performance of Bulldog special teams.

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