

Football begins spring practice

Defense has several holes to fill on front seven

Sternberg only mainstay of defense to return to front seven for 2009

BY ARRON HUSTEAD
Staff Reporter

The departure of several defensive starters will offer a new class of Bulldogs their chance to shine.

After graduating eight senior starters from last year's team, including the entire defensive line, defensive coordinator Ryan Nourse's squad will have a lot of holes to fill. That process began yesterday with the start of spring practice.

These losses are especially tough because, of the eight starters graduating, four were in the top five on the team in tackles last season.

Despite the turnover, Nourse said the defense will proceed in spring practice as normal.

"I don't know if we would be going through anything different than we would go through in any year," Nourse said. "I would say [we're doing] nothing differently, but obviously with an emphasis on how are we going to fill those spots."

This will be Nourse's second year with the team, and the 2009 season will be the first time any of the players will have the opportunity to play back-to-back seasons under the same defensive coordinator. Nourse said the team will be much more consistent in its execution this season without having to work in a new system.

"That's going to be amazing actually," junior outside linebacker Eric Sternberg said. "It's going to be great to not switch up the whole defense. Instead, we're going to be able to build on things that we still weren't very good at last year."

Sternberg will be the only returning starter in the linebacker corps this season. The team will be without all three of the players who rotated in at inside linebacker. Nourse said the team will be working a lot of guys into those two positions to see who the best fit will be.

Sternberg said he doesn't think the losses will have a negative effect on the team.

"A lot of young guys are going to start coming in," he said. "They work really hard, and it's going to be a lot of competition. So they can show what they have out on the field."

Sternberg said a lot of the players who will step into the roles vacated by graduating seniors have a couple years experience with the team and will know what to do in the system already.

Nourse said the defense will be looking to make improvements in defeating blocks.

"We might be in the right place, but just being in the right place isn't good enough," Nourse said. "So we're going to have to put a really hard emphasis on how well do we get off of blocks."

The team also will be replacing the entire starting defensive line after graduating all of last season's front three. But Nourse said the team is fortunate to have a lot of depth and currently has 10 players competing for the two defensive end spots.

"They're an incredibly hard-working and diligent group," he said. "I know we don't have any Les Hammers [who led Truman in sacks in 2009] in there, but I don't know if you necessarily need that to be productive on defense."

Nourse said he doesn't think the loss of all three starters on the defensive line will change the team's ap-



Brian O'Shaughnessy/Index
Freshman linebacker Tremaine Millender (far right) powers through a drill in spring practice yesterday as defensive coordinator Ryan Nourse (far left) looks on. The football team will have the task of replacing eight defensive starters for the 2009 season.

The REPLACEMENTS

The football team lost almost all of its starting defensive ends and linebackers from the 2008 season. Finding replacements for those positions will be a key task in spring practice. Here are some of the players who project to be in the mix for starting defensive line and linebacker spots.

PLAYER	POSITION	2008 STATS
Anthony Freeman	LB	21 tackles
Dan Bryar	LB	5 tackles
Ryan Ploesser	NT	16 tackles, 1 sack
Harold Lloyd*	NT	7 tackles
Ryan Summers	DE	14 tackles, 1.5 sacks
Billy Oline	DE	4 tackles
Graydon Gaines	DE	3 tackles
Rashaad Barnett	DE	2 tackles

* Lloyd played at Wayne State University (Mich.) in 2008

Design by Antonette Bedessie/Index

proach, but they can adapt to fit the talents of this fresh unit.

"I'll find out what these guys are good at and then that's what we'll do," Nourse said. "That's the great thing about this defense, is that it's very moldable."

Sophomore defensive end Billy Oline will be competing for a starting position on the line. Oline played in eight games last season and recorded four tackles. Freshman Ryan Summers, sophomore Rashaad Barnett and junior Graydon Gaines will each return after contributing at defensive end last season.

Oline said it will be tough to fill the holes left by the departures, but he feels the team is up to the challenge.

"I've been focused a lot more on my speed and on my lateral quickness," Oline said. "I'm also focusing on trying to put on some more weight, but that kind of comes with it."

Sophomore nose tackle Ryan Ploesser will attempt to fill the void

left by senior Andy Swedenhjelm. Ploesser recorded 16 tackles and one sack in 10 games last season. No other returning nose tackles recorded playing time last season.

Ploesser said he tries not to focus on the position battles and doesn't let it affect his attitude or his approach.

"The battles you just kind of put in the back [of your mind]," he said. "You've just got to go out and play. If you show you want to be there and be positive about everything, it translates out to playing well."

Ploesser said the departing seniors taught the younger players a lot, so now they have an opportunity to fill those roles and show how well they've learned it.

"We learned from them, and we say what they did, saw how they carried themselves," Ploesser said. "With them being gone, it opens up a lot of doors for guys who now have an opportunity to prove themselves and help us get better."

Several QB options to battle for starting job

Let the starting quarterback auditions begin.

During spring practice of the past two football off-seasons, there was little mystery as to who would be Truman's starting quarterback next fall. Barring an injury in the spring, Matt Ticich was almost certain to start as QB in the 2007 and 2008 seasons. Ticich started all 33 games from 2006-2008, and he was a three-time all-conference performer.

But Ticich played his final game in a Bulldog uniform last November, and that leaves the QB position open for competition this spring. With no quarterback other than Ticich getting significant playing time the past three seasons, there is no clear favorite to win the position.

Interim head coach Aaron Vlcko said earlier this week that auditions for starting quarterback will continue through the spring and summer. He said he might not settle on one quarterback until after the team's two non-conference games at the start of the 2009 season.

Luckily, whoever wins the starting QB job will step into a better surrounding cast this season. For the first time in a few years, most of the offensive line will return next season, as will most of the receiving corps and all the running backs.

"A lot of [offensive linemen and receivers] are coming back so with those guys protecting for us and those guys making plays downfield, it really makes our job a lot easier," freshman quarterback candidate Taylor Breen said.

Still, this won't remove all burden from the quarterback. Vlcko said the Bulldogs will need solid play from the QB position and probably will need to score more points than Ticich-led offenses did during his Truman career if Truman is to stand a chance at winning the conference next season.

Despite the current uncertainty about who will be calling the signals next season, at least Vlcko has several options — albeit very inexperienced ones — to choose from when it comes to selecting a QB for 2009. Essentially Vlcko could go in one of three ways.

1. The "veteran"
Although it's hard to coin sophomore quarterback Phil Davis as a veteran, Davis is the only QB among Vlcko's candidates who has completed a college pass. In 2007 and 2008 as a backup QB, Davis completed 9-of-21 passes for 111 yards and two touchdowns.

Those aren't stellar numbers, but it's really too small of a body of work to form a true opinion of Davis. In Davis, Vlcko said he would be getting a quarterback style similar to Ticich's. Davis possesses the ability to pass and scramble out of the pocket, and Vlcko said he also could call designed quarterback runs for Davis like he did for Ticich.

Most importantly, Vlcko said that after Davis spent 2006 redshirting and then two seasons as a backup, he has a firm understanding of the offensive system.

"He knows the system as good, potentially even better, than maybe what Matt [did]," Vlcko said.

Davis started spring practice,

which opened yesterday, practicing with the first unit, and if it's experience that Vlcko wants, Davis will be the most worthy choice.

2. The young guns
While Davis plays with a style more similar to Ticich, Vlcko said candidates Caleb Roberts and Breen, who both redshirted as true freshmen last fall, are more prototypical pocket passers. Vlcko said both can scramble when needed but that he probably wouldn't call as many designed QB runs if Roberts or Breen was the starter.

Davis is 6-foot-1-inch tall and Ticich is 6-foot, whereas Breen and Roberts both are 6-foot-3. This added height aids their pocket-passer style.

"They're both strong-armed, big, tall kids," Vlcko said of Breen and Roberts. "They're not going to back down to the upperclassmen."

3. The student of the game
Andy Mundwiller, who was a redshirt freshman last fall, is Vlcko's final candidate for the starting QB position. Mundwiller served as the team's third-string emergency backup in 2008 but did not appear in a game.

Vlcko said Mundwiller had a thumb injury to his throwing hand last spring and was unable to participate in spring drills. Now that Mundwiller is healthy, Vlcko said he'll have a better opportunity to evaluate Mundwiller's skills.

Mundwiller's top strengths are his "work ethic and knowledge of the game," Vlcko said.

"He understands defenses and understands what we're trying to do offensively, and he makes a lot of good decisions," Vlcko said.

Although the lack of an experienced quarterback will create some uncertainty until the start of the season, Truman might benefit from the position battle this off-season. With so many candidates vying for one spot, the competition should push each quarterback. As long as Truman has a solid quarterback in place by the time conference games begin in September, there's no harm in letting the audition process run its course throughout the spring and summer.

"Anytime you replace your starter, there's a lot of question marks," Vlcko said. "We really don't have a young man that's got a lot of quality reps, which makes it an even bigger question mark for us. ... [But] I don't expect a big let-down, honestly, in the quarterback play."

COMMENTARY



Blake Toppmeyer

On the Blog

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