

'Dogs look to rebuild

New coach and QB among changes for upcoming season

BY BRENT FOSTER
Assistant Sports Editor

It truly is a new era for Truman football.

Following a 4-7 season that included the end of all-MIAA quarterback and three-year starter Matt Tichich's career and Shannon Currier's final game as head coach, the Bulldogs will kick off the season at 7 p.m. Aug. 29 against Minnesota State University-Mankato with uncertainties across the field.

One of the biggest questions is at quarterback. For the Bulldogs to reach the postseason for the first time since 1994, finding a QB could become vital. Senior Phil Davis is the only Bulldog quarterback on the roster with experience. He threw eight passes while backing up Tichich last season.

With the lack of experience at quarterback, new head coach Aaron Vlcko said he is not ready to name a starter for the season opener. Vlcko did not say who was in the mix at quarterback, but Davis could see competition from redshirt freshman Taylor Breen, who was the 2008 offensive scout team player of the year. Truman has seven quarterbacks listed on the roster, and five are either freshmen or red-shirt freshmen.

"Right now we are still trying to narrow that down and don't anticipate naming a starter until game week, if we decide to name one at that time," Vlcko said. "We may even rotate quarterbacks the first couple of games before we get into conference play. We may end up doing that

the entire season."

Junior wide receiver Vanessa Emokpae said the early battle at quarterback is not affecting the receivers.

"The wide receivers get reps with all the quarterbacks, so that's not really affecting me directly at all," Emokpae said.

Emokpae tore his ACL and MCL in the 'Dogs first game last season, and the 'Dogs missed his production. In 2007, he had 35 catches and averaged more than 13 yards per catch with four touchdowns. Without Emokpae on the field, Tichich threw seven fewer touchdown passes in 2008.

With the lack of experience at quarterback, the Bulldogs might have to establish more of a ground attack than in previous years. Truman ranked ninth in the conference in rushing last season, averaging 120 yards a game. Sophomore Donald Harvey ran for 275 yards last season and is the 'Dogs leading returning rusher.

Before Emokpae was hurt last season, former head coach Shannon Currier said Emokpae would be used as both a wide receiver and halfback at times during the season. Vlcko said Emokpae would continue to work on different aspects of catching and running as will senior running back Phil Kenney and Harvey.

Vlcko said Emokpae is not 100 percent yet, but Vlcko is hopeful that he will be ready to play in the season opener, or when conference play begins.

The question marks are not confined to the offense. Truman lost some key defensive players from last season's team, including all-MIAA defensive tackle Les Hammers, who had 71 tackles and 6.5



Mayank Dhungana/Index
Senior quarterback and team captain Phil Davis could be one of the new faces on the field this season.

sacks, and linebacker Jason Thier, who led the team with 97 tackles. In total, the defense also lost four of its top-five tacklers.

Senior linebacker Eric Sternberg returns to help anchor a defense that ranked eighth in the MIAA in total defense last season, when the 'Dogs surrendered 385 yards a game. Sternberg finished with 64 tackles a year ago and was an Honorable Mention all-MIAA selection.

Even with the losses, Sternberg said he thinks the defense is coming along at the right pace.

"I think the young guys that are stepping in are doing their job and making the plays," Sternberg said. "As long as they do their job and everyone does their job, it's tough to lose those guys, but as long as we play the team defense, we think we will be OK."

Vlcko said that if the Bulldogs play hard every down they will remain competitive.

"We want to compete better [in] one-on-one matchups," Vlcko said. "We want to win more one-on-one matchups on the field. If we can do that on a consistent basis we are confident we are going to be more competitive and win more football games."

Following the season opener, Truman has a home game against Oklahoma Panhandle State University at noon Sept. 5, before opening MIAA play at 7 p.m. Sept. 12 at the University of Nebraska-Omaha. The MIAA schedule remains tough for the 'Dogs as conference foes Northwest Missouri State University (No. 2), Pittsburg State University (No. 7) and the University of Central Missouri (No. 25) are all ranked in the preseason top 25.

TRUMAN ATHLETICS News and Notes

Men's golf: Madsen takes over as coach

Tyler Madsen, athletics media relations assistant, is taking a second position this year.

Madsen was hired to replace Sports Information Director Kevin White as the men's golf co-head coach. White resigned from that position this summer to spend more time with his family this fall. White was a co-coach since the summer of 2005.

Co-head coach Jim Berrey will continue to handle recruiting and on-course coaching for the team.

"Tyler... basically handles all the tournament scheduling, travel coordinating and taking them on the road because Jim can't do that," Director of Athletics Jerry Wollmering said.

Wollmering said Madsen was the only candidate for the job.

Madsen graduated from Truman in May 2008 after specializing in sport and recreation management. He became the media relations assistant in June 2008. While at Truman, Madsen served four years in Residence Life.

Last June, Madsen was recognized by the AVCA for his work in sports information. He was named the top Sports Information Director in the South Central Region, according to Truman's athletic web site.

Madsen takes over a program laden with five juniors and no seniors. Berrey is in his fourth year as coach of the team.

Men's soccer: Grad assistant joins team

Men's soccer head coach Duke Cochran will be receiving some coaching support this season from a former teammate.

First-year graduate assistant Joe Nick played with Cochran at Truman in 1993 and 1994. Nick was a freshman and sophomore those seasons, and Cochran was a junior and senior.

During Nick's four seasons at Truman, the Bulldogs made the NCAA Tournament twice and won the MIAA three times. Nick netted 14 goals and had nine assists in 1996, his senior season.

"It's great to be back in with the guys and the team," Nick said of returning to Truman. "Kirksville has always been good to us and good to me, so it's fun to be back."

Nick also played with Cochran and women's soccer coach Mike Cannon for a season on the Des Moines Menace, which plays in the United Soccer Leagues Premier Development League.

Nick's primary role with Truman will be assisting the offense.

"I specialize in the offensive third and for the forwards and mid(fielders) to score," Nick said.

Nick will be working with a Bulldog offense that was shut out eight times last season and scored more than two goals three times in 18 games. Nick, however, is expecting more production out of the Truman attack in 2009.

"They were young last year," Nick said. "It wasn't so much that they were poor players, but they were inexperienced. And now this year with a little bit more experience and a little bit more coaching in the offensive half, they're probably going to produce."

Football: Punter situation unsettled

The football team continues to search for a punter as camp nears an end. Last year's punter Max Kleckner is no longer on the team and averaged 36 yards a punt. Senior kicker Mickey Masucci handled the punting duties in 2006 and averaged 36 yards a punt.

"That's a battle right now," Vlcko said. "We need to improve our punting game, and right that's an area we don't feel like we've made strides in fall camp yet."

Vlcko said that right now the two players competing for the punting job are Masucci true freshman Eric Phillips. Phillips averaged 40 yards a punt at Blue Valley Northwest High School in Overland Park, Kan, during his career. He also connected on 19-of-23 field goals, including two from 52 yards.

Football: Team to switch sidelines for games

The football team is switching sides this season from the south to the north sideline for home games.

Director of the Athletics Jerry Wollmering said the move was made because there is more space on the north side. The Bulldogs have more than 100 players dress for home games, but opponents are not allowed to travel with more than 56.

The switch also gives the cheerleaders more room and puts the opposing team closer to the grandstand.

"Now we'll have more room to kind of spread out," Wollmering said. "Plus we want the band to kind of give a little crap to the opposing team, like we get when we go on the road."

Volleyball: Coaches pick team fourth

The volleyball team is missing from its usual perch near the top of the MIAA. Truman was picked tied for fourth in MIAA preseason coaches poll. The Bulldogs have finished in the top-three of the conference every year since 1998, and have been ranked in the AVCA top-25 coaches poll for 128 consecutive weeks dating back to the 2000 preseason poll. From 2002-2008, the Bulldogs spent 78 consecutive weeks in the top-ten.

Turf field redone during summer

New turf and rubber put down, track still not finished

BY JACK NICHOLL
Sports Editor

Monday showed the impact that a finished turf football field can have on Truman athletics.

Football, men's soccer and women's soccer all practiced on the turf during a steady rain-fall and no practice fields were ruined for Tuesday's practices.

After two years of planning for a turf field, putting down a field, rolling it up, rolling it back down, completely tearing it up and finally putting down new turf, practices on days like Monday were made possible.

"Even though it was a frustrating process, in the end we're here today with what we want," Director of Athletics Jerry Wollmering said.

The field, which was torn up after graduation in May, was finished in early July in time for voluntary football practices, football camp and band camp. The football team is scheduled to have its first home game on the new turf this Saturday against Minnesota State University Mankato.

"The advantage we have [with] this year's team compared to last year's team is

that we do have the field turf, and when it does rain we don't cancel practice," head football coach Aaron Vlcko said. "On the grass field, you practice one day and tear that up and you come back the next day and try and practice — it lingers on for two or three days."

The finished product is the result of a domino effect that started when a turf field was first laid down in summer 2008. Wollmering said the completion of the first field last summer was rushed, partly because of the pressure of upcoming home football games, and the field was not quite correct. The field was rolled up after the season to fix the original problems and when it was rolled back down more problems arose.

"When they rolled it back down, with all that rubber in it, they realized that all of a sudden they couldn't get it lined up," Wollmering said. "The sideline was like a zig-zag."

University General Counsel Warren Wells said that throughout the process to fix the field there was a lack of communication between people who were working on the project and the people overseeing the project. Wells said the problem was fixed the second time around.

Truman will be reimbursed

for any extra costs that arose during the process of redoing the field. Wells said the original contract was for Truman to pay roughly \$968,000 for the project, and Truman has not paid the entire contract because of work that is yet to be finished.

"You pay on the go for work that's done, and all the time holding some back in case they don't finish the work," Wells said. "Well, probably halfway through it became clear that we really had some problems. So we stopped paying — in fact, they hadn't even asked to be paid for a long time. So we are holding currently about \$405,000."

The process to put a second turf field down was easier than the first time because the irrigation system underneath the field was already in place from 2008. General Sports Venue oversaw the entire ordeal and AstroTurf Gameday Grass 3D was the turf used both times. This summer workers used lasers to line the sidelines and made sure the grading underneath the field was correct before laying down new turf to prevent further problems, Wollmering said.

The only difference between the first turf field and the second is the color of the

coaches' box, Wollmering said. The box, which runs along each sideline, is now solid white. The players' box is behind the coaches' box and is green with a white border. On the old field there was only one box, which had a white border.

The curb on the east side of the field was also fixed this summer, Wollmering said. Water used to run down the street and onto the track and football field. But with an improved curb, water now can run down to a storm gutter, which then runs underneath the field.

The track, which was unusable for meets last year because of the transportation of heavy equipment onto the football field has been resprayed and restriped. Wollmering said only lane 8 still needs work. The track team will likely not host the Truman Open for a second-straight year.

"I guess I would call it a great practice/small meet track," Wollmering said.

Wollmering said that other than track repairs, there are plans for the football field to have routine maintenance every year to prevent further problems. For now he's happy.

"Summer of 2009 was so much more enjoyable than the summer of 2008," Wollmering said.

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