

Chad Jeffries ready to lead the charge for Azusa Pacific football

By Steve Ramirez , San Gabriel Valley Tribune

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Azusa Pacific University QB Chad Jeffries (#12) during the Cougars first football practice of the season Aug. 13, 2015. (Photo by Leo Jarzomb/San Gabriel Valley Tribune)

AZUSA >> Chad Jeffries played in the shadow of All-American running back Terrell Watson last season. But now it's the sophomore's time to take the reins of an Azusa Pacific University football team that's been the best NCAA Division II unit on the West Coast the past few seasons.

Jeffries and his teammates took the initial step toward continued success as they began fall practice on Thursday.

"You love having that quarterback position with experience," said APU coach Victor Santa Cruz, whose team has won 24 of 27 games since October 2012. "With his arm, his leadership, Chad brings us an element with the passing game that he can make every pass."

The Glendora High School alum showed it last season. He accounted for 2,278 yards and 17 touchdowns, including throwing for 1,606 and 11 scores. He's expected to be more productive this fall.

Watson graduated after setting several school records.

"Terrell was a great player," Jeffries said. "We loved him; he's going to be missed. Our offense is going to be a little more balanced. We are hopefully going to air the ball out a little more, but with the running backs we (have in camp), we are going to keep that good running game."

APU, which has won the past two Great Northwest Athletic Conference crowns, is the favorite for a three-peat and begins the season ranked No. 24 nationally by Lindy's Sports.

The Cougars open the season at West Texas A&M on Sept. 3, with the home opener scheduled for Sept. 12 vs. intra-state rival Humboldt State at Citrus College.

Other key returners for APU will be senior defensive lineman Talaiaasi Taueli; defensive backs Chris Broussard and Taliuaki Suliafu; offensive linemen Jaylen Crutchfield and Paul Flores and receiver Blake Robertson, who had 28 receptions for 357 yards last season.

"We're excited to be back with the guys," Santa Cruz said. "This is kind of why you get in the business. I'm excited about the veterans who are coming back and the new players.

"It's going to be a great year. We have our work cut out for us to go for a three-peat championship."

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