

BLOCK PARTY: Canton O-line looks to put hurt on Hornets

Tim Smith 2:41 a.m. EST November 11, 2015



During Tuesday afternoon's practice, a Canton Chiefs football coach blurted out "Come on, Machine! It's just another first down!"

Bursting low and with power off the line with every whistle, the Chiefs' vaunted offensive line moved the pile and the runner zipped through for a chunk of yardage on the Plymouth-Canton Educational Park turf field.

If the Chiefs' offense is a machine — and Canton does have 439 points in 10 games entering Friday's Division 1 regional football game against host Saline — the guys on the O-line are the oil that keeps it churning fast and furious.

Nobody smiles wider about that than Canton's offensive line coach, Bob Williams, in his 28th year with the team. His mantra for 12 months a year is making sure players have "low pad level," the lower and quicker the better.

"I'm like a drill sergeant," Williams said with a gap-toothed smile. "It's stomach on thigh guard for that first step. I want them to do a lot of repetitions, 100 times a week. I keep barking and they do it over and over." The offensive line is comprised of players between 5-8 and 6-1, but they have a boundless desire to help their team get over the playoff hump and maybe even reach Ford Field for the D1 finals.

"We feel very confident about how we're scheming up them and everything like that," said the biggest member of the group, 6-1, 260-pound senior tackle Devin Obrec. "We feel that we are going to put up a better fight this time.

"... We've been playing really well as a unit. In practice we're competing against each other to see who would make the better blocks."

Hit parade

The sound of Williams yelling and shoulder pads crunching also is music to the ears of Canton head coach Tim Baechler.

"Hopefully they feel like they're machine-line and unstoppable and just keep grinding," said Baechler, whose team (9-2) is primed for a postseason rematch against the Hornets (10-0).

Last November, Saline edged Canton 42-35 in a regional final that the Chiefs led for a good portion.

"It's playoff time," Baechler said. "It's one of those things, they're a great team, everybody is now.

"They're going to make plays, we're going to make plays. We're all going to make mistakes. We got to make one more play than they do, it's all that matters."



A broken finger isn't stopping Canton senior center Ben Phillips (No. 52), shown last week against Northville. (Photo: MICHAEL VASILNEK)

Saline has dangerous quarterback Josh Jackson and the Chiefs have a running game featuring slippery 5-7 junior Markus Sanders (2,000-yards rushing) and hard-driving seniors Jared Stephens and Jakob Wickens. "If you're an offensive lineman you love playing in this offense, because you get to come off the ball every play and go get after people," Baechler said. "We want those long drives, we want to score points at the end of them and keep their offense off the field. "We don't want him (Jackson) throwing the ball 40 times again on us this year."

All for one

As far as the Chiefs are concerned, they can come out victorious this time around — especially with a cohesive offensive line that considers itself a small family, eating breakfast every Saturday before hitting the weight room.

And in a season that included traveling more than 450 miles to play a game and mourning the loss of a former Canton player (Josh Nolen), the Chiefs aren't ready for it to end just yet.

They are hungry for another crack at the Hornets.

"Yeah, we're happy to be going back there," Baechler said. "And expectations are high. We think we can play with them, and if we can make one more play than they do we can come away from there with a W."

To a man, the Canton O-linemen are driven to deliver just that.

"As a unit, throughout the year we've gotten more explosive and more physical," said 6-1, 215-pound junior guard Michael Maes. "Just toughening up throughout the year and getting stronger.

"As an O-line we got a lot of chemistry, we're each other's brothers. Our mindset is, against everyone we go up against, to be physically superior and more dominant than them."

Junior tackle David Gunnis said the unit continues to grow in confidence and solidarity with every week.

"We're like brothers out there," said Gunnis, who is 6-0, 255. "Every play we got each others backs, we keep fighting."

Knock em down

Including tight ends Jesse Warner and Brennon Pelland — who each said he'd rather knock a defender on his backside than catch a TD pass — it is a group that isn't physically imposing like Plymouth's Michael Jordan.

It is more shredder than steamroller, slicing through defensive lines and allowing Canton's running game to flourish.

Also lining up will be senior center Ben Phillips (if he is deemed healthy enough to play) and senior guard Joshua Dunn.



An example of Canton's work in the trenches. Junior offensive lineman David Gunnis (No. 78) puts a pancake block on a Northville player during last week's district final. Ready with backup on the play is running back Jakob Wickens (No. 44). (Photo: MICHAEL VASILNEK)

Baechler makes sure that any discussion of the O-line includes the tight ends, not to mention running backs (yes, even diminutive Sanders) who also are quite proficient at throwing a block.

"The tight ends are like linemen around here," Baechler said. "Jesse Warner and Brennon Pelland as a junior is having an outstanding year, he is a really good tight end. Those guys are linemen too, they're glorified tackles, basically."

Out of that group, the biggest guy is Obrec while Dunn and Phillips aren't even 6-0. That doesn't bother them, not when they hit low and often.

Dunn, who said he learned a lot watching linemen during the 2014 season, noted that without low pad level and explosive leg drive "you don't get good movement, you're pretty much going to have a stalemate and the play is just not going to produce.

"Our coaches always preach low pad level and keep the feet moving," Dunn said. "That's what we do during games and it's going to be really effective on Friday night."

Just in case

Meanwhile, if Phillips isn't able to go against Saline — he fractured a finger in the first-round game against Livonia Stevenson, wore a soft cast for last week's win over Northville and had surgery Saturday — the Chiefs will call upon sophomore JV callup Max Mulvaney.

"I haven't seen any game action yet, but I've just been ready just in case," said the 6-0, 215-pound Mulvaney. "Next man up."

He already considers himself a member of the team within a team, as Phillips describes it.

"It's a team sport and the O-line, we're just a team," Phillips emphasized.

"We got to do it all. Everyone do their own job, get it done every play.

"We don't really need to throw it, keep running the ball and just keep scoring."

Baechler wouldn't mind it if junior quarterback Jake O'Donnell only needs to throw it once on Friday, as he did against the Mustangs.

Incidentally, O'Donnell's only pass in the district final was a 56-yard completion to Pelland.

No contest

Asked whether he'd rather come up with a highlight catch or a pancake block, Pelland laughed.

"Honestly, knocking someone down, it's a great joy," Pelland said. "You know, everyone can make a catch every now and again. We run all the time, so it's going to be open once in a while."

Concurring was Warner, ready to (loosely paraphrasing a baseball term) hit, catch and run in that order.

"I had one touchdown in the (Livonia) Churchill game and I think I have two or three receptions throughout the whole season," Warner said. "But it (the bigger thrill) is definitely putting someone on their butt, 10 times out of 10.

"Definitely would rather do that than score a touchdown. But touchdowns are always nice, too, I'll take those any day."

If Warner and his O-line brethren can experience both again Friday night, chances are pretty decent there will be another playoff game to get ready for.