

Chiefs look to take final step toward title



Every August, Canton head coach Tim Baechler has to fill oodles of roles left open due to graduation.

This year, however, Baechler has very few holes to fill with 13 starters returning from the Chiefs' best season since 2006.

"I think what's exciting is that we have a lot of guys back with experience," Baechler said. "They're smart, tough, competitive guys. Those guys win most of the time.

"I love that intelligence coming back, I love that we have a lot of experience from last year, they played a lot of football games. We are ahead of schedule mentally compared to last year."

That collage of experience comes from Canton's run to the Division 1 state semi-finals in which they lost to Cass Tech by a touchdown. The Chiefs finished with a 10-3 record and won both district and regional championships for only the third time in school history.

“I think they had so much fun on that run last year that ‘who wouldn’t want to repeat that?’ I’m sure that’s been motivation. It was close enough that they got a taste of it,” Baechler said.

Road Graters

Although quarterback Jake O’Donnell counts as a returning starter, he will not be entering preseason practice as number one.

He took over as the starter for Joel Foster in the seventh game of last season, but Foster has a chance to redeem himself, according to Baechler. “There’s a little bit of a quarterback competition with him (O’Donnell) and Joel Foster, it’s open,” Baechler noted. “They’re getting equal reps and will again in the scrimmage. Joel started the first six games and we decided to make the switch. He’s a great kid, works his butt off; he can run and throw. He’s a senior and deserves another chance.”

Whoever wins the quarterback battle will have an experienced offensive line to protect them.

That offensive line, which includes two tight ends, returns four starters from a fruitful offensive campaign from a year ago in which they averaged 37 points per game.

O’Donnell gave credit to the offensive line for leading the charge of Canton’s yearly offensive success. Without the offensive line, Canton’s staple running game wouldn’t be as effective as they have been in recent years.

“It all starts with our line,” O’Donnell said. “They block hard all day long, but never get any credit.”

Seniors David Gunnis, Jake Warner, Michael Maes, and tight end Brennon Pelland are the returners that are set to anchor the line this year.



Offensive lineman Michael Maes blocks an opponent during a pre-season scrimmage.

Baechler noted that senior Tyler Santoro and junior Max Mulvaney will add depth to the offensive line. Juniors Lou Baechler, Chase Meredith, and Noah Brown will compliment Pelland at tight end.

“We’re happy with a three or four-yard gain, we’re never bored with a three or four-yard gain; we love it and we celebrate it. We celebrate first downs and not fumbling the ball,” Baechler said.

Gunnis saw his offensive line group jell last season. With four guys returning, he expects the group to continue to grow this season.

“It’s just our work ethic and effort. We make all the holes by getting low pad level and hitting hard,” Gunnis said.

Running backs will reap the rewards from the rugged offensive line. Senior Markus Sanders leads the bunch and is returning from a 2,000 yard-plus junior season.

Augmenting him in the backfield will be senior Julian Thornton, junior Colin Troup, and sophomore Steven Walker. Senior Reid McDonnell will be in the mix as well once he returns from injury.



Julian Thornton, shown carrying the football during a recent scrimmage, is one of Canton's top offensive threats. (Photo: MICHAEL VASILNEK)

“They’re strong kids, they can block. They’ll go get that four yards when you need it,” Baechler said of his running back stable.

On same page

In Canton's traditional, yet uncommon, 3-4 defense, the four linebackers are in charge of making sure everyone is on the same page and communicating with the coaches on the sideline. Inside linebacker Lou Baechler was the lead communicator a year ago as a sophomore and is prepared to improve upon that role as a junior.

"I have to bring my class of juniors up to varsity speed and build team chemistry with the seniors," Lou Baechler said.

Seniors Jared Golles and Drew Osika and juniors Meredith and Brown will join Baechler at linebacker. McDonnell will be in the mix as well once he returns.

With the majority of high school teams running a variation of the spread offense, the secondary is an important part of any defense. For the Chiefs especially, spread teams are a very common opponent; all four playoff opponents from a year ago ran a version of the spread.

Returning cornerbacks Thornton, Troup, and Eddie Lang look to improve upon their performance last year in which they were always in the right position to make plays. Walker and Jacob Donnelly are other names to watch in the secondary.

"What's hard is everybody's spread is a little bit different and you have to defend everybody differently. Everybody causes their own set of problems for us. We certainly don't have a master, that's for sure. What we have to do is tackle in the open field and eliminate the long pass play," Baechler said.

"We're a little bit smarter than last year and have some returners which will help out," Thornton said.

On the defensive line, Canton lost Tommy Evely to graduation who Baechler said was a "huge" loss.

Warner and Gabe Teichman return after playing 13 games as juniors.

Newcomers Cam Goode, Patrick Lenczewski, and Nick Mark will add depth to the defensive line that "won't drop much" from last year, according to Baechler.

Senior Ben Tubaro will handle the kicking duties, Donnelly will do the punting, and Daniel Lanava will be the long snapper.

First test

Canton will open the season Aug. 26 against Dearborn Fordson at the annual Prep Kickoff Classic held at Wayne State University's Adams Field. The Chiefs defeated Fordson in the opener at the PKC last season.

"That was fun last year, a great stage at Wayne State and Fordson's a great opponent. They have a lot of team speed and are going to be better," Baechler said.

There will be no time for the Chiefs to rest on their laurels early in the year. They open with six straight games against playoff teams from a year ago; Walled Lake Western, Hartland, Livonia Franklin, Plymouth, and Livonia Churchill in addition to Fordson.

“It definitely has our attention headed into week one and two. We don’t have a problem keeping the kids’ attention because they know they better pay attention and get this stuff right,” Baechler said.