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(Neb.) - Eagles to end 'productive' spring with game on Saturday

By: John Thayer Posted at: 04/18/2012 08:07 AM

CHADRON – The Chadron State College football team will wrap up a month of practices Saturday by playing its annual spring game at Elliott Field. The Eagles will take the field at 10:30 a.m. with kickoff set for about 11.

The spring game will be followed by a barbecue sponsored by First National Bank of North Platte.

New head coach Jay Long and each of his top assistants said the spring has been a good one.

"Every practice has been productive," Long said. "I think we've gotten better each day. I believe it's been a good experience, particularly for our young guys who are still learning."

The players will be drafted later this week by the graduate assistants, forming what should be two teams with about equal talent. Richard Smock and Jeff Lyster, both former Eagles from McCook, will lead one team while Joe McLain, the Chadron native who quarterbacked the Eagles to three conference championships, and Richard Fairhead, a Gordon product who has been a volunteer with the Eagles this spring, will direct the other team.

The full-time coaches will be available for suggestions and make evaluations during the game.

RMAC officials will join the Eagles on the field.

The squad will not be at full strength because assorted injuries have kept several team members, including a few key veterans, away from contact this spring.

Offensive coordinator Chris Stein said he thinks the offense has made good progress this spring.

"I think everybody has learned a lot," Stein said. "We've made some small changes that I think will benefit us and I'm pleased with our skill level at nearly all the positions. We have a few needs, but I think we've helped ourselves in those places with our recruiting."

One of the strengths is expected to be quarterback, where Stein said the Eagles have both quality and depth.

The position features the starters from the past two seasons.

Chadron native Jonn McLain was the quarterback as a redshirt freshman in 2010 and was at the controls again last year before being sidelined following the second game against Angelo State. Brandon Gorsuch, a graduate of Rapid City Central who had transferred the previous fall from the University South Dakota, took over and improved as the season moved along.

McLain completed 170 of 271 passes for 1,894 yards and 16 touchdowns in 2010 and Gorsuch clicked on 199 of 330 passes for 2,089 yards and 18 TDs last fall.

Stein added that sophomore Patrick O'Boyle of Gering, who was the backup last fall, has also had an excellent spring and redshirt freshman Chris Conroy of Gordon "has done a great job and made some big plays this spring."

He added that he's also very pleased with the tailback situation. The leader there is Glen Clinton, who has proven he ranks among the best the RMAC the past two years. He rushed for 1,020 yards as a freshman in 2010 and for 768 yards last fall after recovering from an injury that sidelined him the first three games.

Stein said Clinton will not play Saturday.

"We've seen enough of him. We know what he can do," the coach said.

Several other tailbacks have shined this spring, Stein noted. They include Michael Madkins, who rushed for 494 yards last fall while spelling Clinton, and redshirt freshmen Donnie Butler and Cole Montgomery.

Stein said Madkins and Butler are shifty while Montgomery is a patient runner who has a strong burst once the opening develops.

Another bright spot has been the development of senior-to-be Cody Wilson, Stein said.

The Eagles aren't at full strength at either inside or outside receiver.

Chadron native Cody Roes, who caught 29 passes for 340 yards and five touchdowns last fall on the inside, has missed the spring drills while recovering from shoulder surgery.

Two-year starter Travis Reeves of Chadron is among the players who have been banged up this spring and may not play Saturday.

Stein said both Reeves and the other starter on the outside the last two seasons, Nathan Ross, have had "exceptional springs." Stein also said Kyle Vinich, a 6-foot-6 redshirt, has done well.

"He's big, can run and is physical," Stein said of Vinich, who also played basketball this winter.

Brek Carper is another redshirt who may be ready for action this fall, Stein said.

With Roes sidelined, junior Chapman Ham and sophomore Austen Stephens have seen most of the first-team duty on the inside. Stein added that Blake Pirkl, who was an outside receiver last fall, and Isaac Holscher have also made good progress on the inside this spring.

Long said the spring has been crucial in rebuilding the offensive line, which graduated three starters last fall and has not had another starter, guard Brandon Ratcliff, available this spring because of a back problem.

That means 2012 senior Garrett Gilkey, who plays left tackle, has been the only full-time starter on duty this spring.

However, two players who started three games last fall when starters were sidelined, have been impressive, Long said. They are tackle Jake McCrary of Valentine and center Sam Parker of Harrison.

The coach noted that several others with little or no experience have developed well. They include Tony Hartman, Mike Lorenzo, Lance Pickett and Connor Weingart.

“It’s been good for these younger guys, and that includes everyone except Gilkey, to get so much work this spring,” Long said.

On the other side of the ball, new defensive coordinator Jeff Larson had similar comments.

“Young players have gotten lots of repetitions and learned a lot,” he said. “We’ve added some new schemes and have some new terminology. Both have slowed us down a bit, but I’m happy with the way they’ve picked it up. We’ve found some players who should contribute this fall.

“Everybody has worked hard, been competitive and tried to learn. They’ve also asked questions, which is something I like.”

A couple of seniors have been particularly impressive, Larson noted. They are tackle Jan Karlos Medina and outside linebacker Kevin Lindholm. Both received all-conference honors last season and could gain even higher honors this fall, Larson believes.

Larson said Chadron product Zach Sandstrom has been impressive at end while going against Gilkey much of the spring. Returnee starter Keifer Burke, another returning all-RMAC player, has been withheld from contact this spring.

Larson said Alliance native Kyle Hinton will be valuable in the line again, particularly because he’s able to play both end and tackle.

One of the major needs on defense is finding someone to replace James Belville, the ex-Valentine Badger who led the Eagles in tackles the last two years and also was voted the MVP by his teammates both seasons.

Candidates for playing time there include Alliance native Conor Schnell and a pair of highly-regarded redshirt freshmen, Dylan Furrier and Kyle McCarthy.

Shea Koch, last fall’s third-leading tackler, is another capable linebacker, the coaches note.

The secondary won’t be at full strength Saturday, according to Craig Jersild, who is in charge of that portion of the defense. That’s because injuries, most of them not serious, have caused several of those who shared playing time last fall to miss some of the contact. The most severe injury was a broken arm suffered by safety Pierre Etchemendy early in the drills.

Senior Phil Rivera, who returned two interceptions for touchdowns last fall, has not participated in the workouts because he’s one of the top 200 and 400 runners in the conference and is zeroing in on the RMAC Meet in early May.

Jersild said both Lane Haller, a true freshman from Gordon, and Conor Casey, a redshirt freshman from Rapid City, have developed at cornerback after being forced into action with limited experience last season. The coach added that Trelan Taylor, who has played both cornerback and safety the past two years, and Dylon Rinaldo, another youngster who broke into the lineup last season, are solid players who have had a good spring.

The kicking game should be a plus. Both Alex Ferdinand, who scored 70 points as the team's placekicker last season, and Josh Borm, who averaged 39.7 yards as the Eagles' punter, will be sophomores this fall. Borm, who caught 71 passes for 1,111 yards as a senior at Central High in Cheyenne, has also been used as a wide receiver this spring.

(Story courtesy of CSC Sports Information)