

(Neb.)- Senior Quarterbacks Expected To Give Eagles Big Boost

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CHADRON - Even though considerable rebuilding will be necessary, with nearly 20 seniors and an array of talented younger players on the roster there's lots of optimism that this year's Chadron State College football team will be another competitive one.

Preparations for the season will begin Sunday, when about 125 players will report, giving the Eagles nearly a month to prepare for their opening game on Saturday, Sept. 6 at home against Missouri S&T.

The Eagles finished with 8-3 record last year, went 7-2 in the Rocky Mountain Athletic Conference and were in the NCAA Division II playoff picture entering their final game. A dozen seniors who were starters a year ago must be replaced, but the coaches were pleased with the progress made during spring drills by the players who will be striving to fill the vacancies.

"I'm excited about our team's prospects," head coach Jay Long said. "We've got a solid corps of returning starters and a lot of younger players who have learned our system and are ready to take over. We'll have good competition for playing time at most of the positions.

"Even though we graduated most of our starters at the skill positions on offense, we're fortunate to have two senior quarterbacks and some outstanding, experienced linemen returning to lead the offense. On defense, we've got experienced players back in every area and both our punter and placekicker are returning on the special teams."

The veteran quarterbacks are Jonn McLain and Patrick O'Boyle. McLain is a three-year starter and already is the Eagles' career record-holder for pass completions with 699. Those passes have gone for 7,534 yards and 72 touchdowns.

"Jonn is one of the best quarterbacks we've ever had and we also have complete confidence in Pat," offensive coordinator Chris Stein said. "It's a good scenario to have two great quarterbacks available, particularly since we graduated our leading ball carrier and all four of our starting receivers from last year."

The roster also includes Chris Conroy, whose playing time has been limited because of the presence of McLain and O'Boyle, but has a thorough understanding of the offense as he enters his junior year of eligibility.

The missing players include tailback Glen Clinton, who rushed for 4,656 yards the past four years, including 1,584 last fall, and the receiving corps made up of Chapman Ham, Travis Reeves, Cody Roes and Nathan Ross. They combined for 190 receptions for 1,923 yards last season and finished their careers with 510 catches for 5,818 yards and 58 touchdowns.

Stein said he was impressed by how well the receivers who had backed up the seniors last fall knew their assignments and played during spring drills. Those on the outside include seniors Andrew Rios and Antonio Thompson, juniors Danny O'Boyle and Kyle Vinich and sophomores Kyle Hooper and Marcus Brown.

Three veterans-Zac Bargaen, Ethan Bauer and Austin Stephens-are available on the inside. Stein added that several redshirt freshmen showed lots of promise there during the spring and will push for playing time. They include Jack Dobyns, Matt Fujan and Garrett Patterson along with Brayden Stewart, who moved from quarterback late in the drills.

Four quality players-one from each grade level-make the running back picture bright even though Clinton has

graduated. The most experienced is senior Michael Madkins, who has rushed for 1,004 yards and averaged nearly six yards a carry while backing Clinton the past two seasons.

The others are junior Robert Jackson, sophomore Cody Paul and redshirt freshman Derek Jackson. Stein said the backs complement one another well. He labeled Madkins and Paul as "slashers" and said the Jacksons are more power runners.

Last year's starting left tackle, Jake McCrary, and right guard Tony Hartman, also have graduated and must be replaced.

Two seniors, both of whom will be starting for the third year and earned all-conference honors last fall-center Sam Parker and left guard Mike Lorenzo-will lead the way in the offensive line this fall.

Long, who played center for the Eagles in the late 1990s and now coaches the offensive line, said both are "right up there with the best we've ever had."

A third senior, Lance Pickett, started several games up front last season and had a good spring while playing left tackle, according to Long.

Daniel Sotelo, now a junior, started at right tackle last season and is extra strong and a superb run blocker, Long added.

The head coach said sophomore lettermen Anthony Valdez, Jake Weber and Palmer White have made big gains and will be in the battle for playing time along with redshirt freshmen Darrien Oliver, Matt Barden and Mitch Collicott, who is expected to back Parker at center.

Other youngsters such as Connor Conilogue and Draper Sullivan showed promise during spring drills, Long said.

Several big and athletic freshmen linemen also have been added to the roster this fall

Seven starters along with several key backups from a year ago return on defense.

Coordinator Jeff Larson said he was pleased with the improvement the unit made both last fall and during the spring.

"We graduated some really good players on defense, but we've also got some good ones coming back," Larson said. "We'll have more experience in the line than we had when we started last season and we should be pretty solid at both linebacker and in the secondary.

Up front, the Eagles return seniors Dillon Breinig and Zach Sandstrom, who started at end and tackle, respectively, last fall. Olufemi Aaron and Tyler Kiess also earned letters at end and during the spring redshirts Austin Powell and Tanner Wintholz were impressive, Larson said.

Larson added that it's possible a freshman or two could also help in the defensive front this fall.

Shea Koch and Bryant Miller have graduated, leaving junior Dylan Furrier as the only returning starter at linebacker, but several others who saw action a year ago are back.

Furrier, the team's second leading tackler last fall, has moved from strong side to the middle and has received all-star attention entering his junior year.

Once a wide receiver, senior Isaac Holscher had an excellent spring as the strong side linebacker and Courtland Joshua continued to develop on the weak side.

Larson said junior Clay Cundall will be invaluable because he can play all of the linebacker slots well. Also ticketed for action are senior Hank Strauss in the middle and redshirt freshman Collin Eisenman on the outside.

Although five seniors who shared playing time in the secondary last fall graduated, the Eagles should be solid there again.

The leaders include Lane Haller, who became a starting cornerback midway through the 2011 season when he was a true freshman, and Conor Casey, who has started at the other cornerback spot the past two seasons. Entering their senior seasons, they have combined for 10 interceptions and 42 pass breakups.

Late last season, Haller moved to strong safety and true freshman Jordan Jones took over at the cornerback slot Haller had filled. Also returning at safety are junior Cole Montgomery, a regular the past two years, and Ryan Wood, who was selected as the Rocky Mountain Athletic Conference's defensive freshman of the year last fall.

"These guys are quality players with experience and should do a great job again this fall," Larson said.

Larson also said senior Jojo Phillips, junior Donnie Butler and redshirts Ricky Hodges and Trevon Mosley are among the candidates for playing time in the secondary and be key members of the special teams.

Because he not only runs well, but is also a good blocker, Butler is expected to be among the kick returners, special team coordinator Craig Jersild said.

The Eagles got a boost last fall when a pair of freshmen performed extra well as the team's kickers. Zach Smith averaged 39.5 yards a punt and Randy Wentz was good on 10 of 12 field goal attempts.

Alex Ferdinand, who received some all-star acclaim as a placekicker in 2012 but missed most of last season because of a leg muscle problem, hopes to make a comeback this fall.