

Bliss brings 4 state titles to Prairie

Written by Jim Ecker

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Mark Bliss won 62 straight football games and four straight Class 3A state titles at Conway Springs High School in Kansas from 2001 to 2005, but he reluctantly walked away from that job for a very simple reason.

It had to do with basic family economics.

"It was hard, believe me. I could have stayed there the rest of my life," the new Cedar Rapids Prairie coach said Tuesday after practice. "But quite frankly, I have four daughters and I was only getting paid \$38,000 a year."

Bliss heard about a better-paying job at a new high school in Naples, Fla., and went for it.

"It was double my salary and free insurance," he said. "So when you're almost borderline food-stamps, you basically have to do the right thing and better your family. So when that job came open in Florida I took advantage of it."

Bliss, 51, grew up in Oklahoma and has coached in Colorado, Kansas, Illinois, Florida, Missouri and now Iowa. He came to Prairie from a high school in Ozark, Mo., where he made three straight trips to the playoffs.

"Iowa is probably the last place I was cut out to be, because I was pretty happy in Missouri," said Bliss, who speaks with a distinctive Oklahoma twang.

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His new job found him, in a sense.

Bliss and former Cedar Rapids Jefferson football coach Jim Dostal are old friends and have always wanted to work together. Dostal almost joined Bliss as an assistant in Florida, but that fell through. Then fate intervened.

When Mike Morrissey decided to leave Prairie after four years for a head coaching job in Arizona, Dostal called Bliss and suggested he look into the vacancy in Cedar Rapids. Dostal's father, Chuck, was the head coach at Prairie at one time and he thought it might be a good fit for his buddy.



"I researched it and stuff and thought it had potential," said Bliss, "so I looked into it and put my name into it. They offered me the job and the first thing I did was hire Coach Dostal.

"We wanted to coach together before we retired and now it's happening. We're having fun. We really are. We're having a great time and I couldn't be more pleased."

Jim Dostal has joined the Prairie staff as assistant head coach and defensive coordinator, leaving his post as an assistant coach at Coe College. Bliss also dipped into the Kohawks staff to hire Ashton Northern to coach the defensive backs.

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In addition, Bliss was able to retain several of the coaches from Morrissey's staff. "Everything has worked out well," he said. "I have no complaints about it."

Bliss described himself as an "old fashioned" coach who incorporates aspects of the single wing into his offense, but he also uses a spread offense and just about everything else. Jalen Rima, a speedy wide receiver and the fastest quarter-miler in the state, got a little nervous when he heard the new coach was partial to the single wing, which relies on deception and running the ball.

"I was worried," he said, "but then I heard we have other offenses too, so I'm good."

In fact, Bliss might have something special in store for Rima to take advantage of his speed and strong right arm.

"I heard we're putting in the wildcat, so hopefully I'll get to play quarterback in that," said Rima, who won the Class 4A state title in the 400-meter dash last spring and plays center field for the Prairie baseball team. "We haven't put it in yet, but he likes the way I throw so hopefully I get that spot."

Rima has college football offers from Western Michigan, North Dakota State and Northern Iowa, according to Bliss, but he has not made a decision. Bliss confirmed that Rima could shift to quarterback in wildcat formations this season.

"It's possible," the coach said. "He's one of the fastest kids in Iowa, so you need to utilize his talents any way you possibly can."

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"The biggest thing is, everyone is going to know who he is on the field. So when No. 15 is on the field, we have to try and find ways to get him the ball as creatively as possible, without making it too obvious. We're in the process of doing that."

Rima said there's been a smooth transition this season.

"I like all the coaches," he said. "Coach Bliss is doing a really good job. I like him a lot."

Morrissey, a quarterback in college, used to run the scout team offense in practice at Prairie, but those days are over. Bliss was a college quarterback as well, including a stint at Tulsa, but he's not going to take any snaps at John Wall Field.

"I'm too old for that now," he claimed. "I let the young guys do it."

Bliss has compiled a 159-57 record in 19 years as a head coach in high school, beginning when he was a 25-year-old coach in Colorado. His wife, Jill, is also teaching in the College Community School District.

Their youngest daughter, Natalie, is a senior at Prairie and plans to play basketball for the Hawks. Two of their daughters are in college and their oldest daughter is a physical therapist and nurse.

2015 SCHEDULE

8/28 - at Linn-Mar

9/4 - Jefferson

9/11 - Dubuque Senior

9/18 - at North Scott

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9/25 - Burlington

10/2 - Iowa City High

10/8 - at Washington

10/16 - Muscatine

10/23 - at Ottumwa