

Improved J-Hawks see green fields ahead

Written by Jim Ecker
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It's easy to see the improvements in the Jefferson High School football program this year.

All it takes is one visit to the team's practice facility at the school on the southwest side of Cedar Rapids.

The two practice fields are brimming with lush green grass. The rusty goal posts have been painted. There are two new drinking stations at the fields, instead of on top of a steep hill. And the fields are painted on a weekly basis so the yard lines and sidelines are easily visible.

"Last year when I came here these fields were unplayable and they were unsafe to play on," Coach Brian Webb said this week. "It's an exciting time. It's exciting to see the positive changes.

"It's about taking pride in everything you do and making sure everything is top-notch."

Perhaps the best news has to do with the team itself. There are 45 players on the squad this season, compared to just 30 in 2012, thanks to renewed interest in the program and a big junior class. On top of that, the J-Hawks experienced a record turnout of 90 grade-school kids for their youth camp, and the numbers are climbing for Jefferson teams in the Metro Youth Football Association.

"We're headed in the right direction," Webb said firmly.

The J-Hawks snapped an unsightly 24-game losing streak with a 12-7 victory over Dubuque Hempstead in the third game of the season last year and finished with a 1-8 mark in Webb's first year on the job. Things are looking up for Year 2, but he doesn't want to put any limits on

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what the club might accomplish this season.

"It's always good to set goals ... You want to win so many games and get so many rushing yards and passing yards," he said. "I'm more concerned on kids understanding the process that it takes to achieve those goals.

"The goals, the wins, those things are going to take care of themselves. It's just understanding you have to be on time for everything and that if you screw up you're held accountable for your actions and that coaches are going to demand that you do things correctly. As far as wins and losses, you can never guarantee those things."

The players appreciate the improvements that have been made in the program. It starts with the green practice fields and extends from there.

"The facilities are much improved," said senior linebacker Will Orr. "You don't see any dirt on the field, so that's a great sign. It's strange, seeing grass.

"It seems like people care about us, care about the program. And it's time for us to care about them."

The J-Hawks will be stronger this year, thanks to rigorous work in the weight room. They'll be faster, deeper, more experienced and smarter about the game.

"I came into a 4A program and I assumed these kids knew football," said Webb. "We had to take a step back halfway through the season as a staff last year and went, 'These kids don't know anything.'"

Their knowledge of the game is much deeper now. "The more they learn the game, the less they have to think and the faster they play," said Webb.

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It starts with quarterback Layne Sullivan, who has spent countless hours studying game films and huddling with coaches. A smart kid and a 4.0 student, he's now smarter about reading defenses and running a football team.

"I think everyone is on the same page now, for the most part," said Sullivan. "It will show when the first game comes around that we can play to our strengths. The other thing is, we have a lot more numbers. That's helpful.

"We just have to practice hard," he said. "Everybody just has to do their job. That's been our focus this whole offseason."

Jefferson will host Cedar Rapids Prairie in the season opener on Thursday, Aug. 29 at Kingston Stadium.

Webb said Sullivan has made tremendous improvement from last season.

"Night and day," the coach said. "The kid is a competitor. I've had a year to sit down and teach him the quarterback position more in depth than I did last year when we had so many things going on.

"He understands the offense better. When he makes a mistake in practice, before I can even say anything he turns around and says, 'I know, Coach.' That's the ultimate learning, when he knows what mistakes he's making and can self-correct it."

Webb arrived at Jefferson last year after a successful stint at Carroll Kuemper High School, knowing he faced a major rebuilding job with the J-Hawks. He said he never got discouraged, even after he got here and witnessed some of the obstacles for himself, such as the barren practice fields and lack of football knowledge on the team.

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"I think the kids know about me: I just refuse to quit," he said. "Those things don't faze me. I'm just very excited for this season. We have some athletes out. Last year, we were missing a lot of speed and depth. This year we're going to have some depth."

Webb raved about Michael Smith, a big offensive tackle and nose guard who is being recruited by Big Ten and Big 12 conference schools. Smith was listed at 326 pounds last year, but he's trimmed down and gotten in shape.

"He's improved dramatically from last year," said Webb. "He is stronger than a bull."

Webb said Michael Moncivais, who rushed for 286 yards last season, is looking good at tailback. He also mentioned receiver Brandon Wiederin and safety Dakota Tomkins as other players who have stood out in practice, along with Sullivan, Orr and several others.

Webb likes where the program is headed. He appreciates the players' commitment to the program and determination to improve.

"We've laid the groundwork," he said. "You're in or out, black or white. I've said it since Day 1 in our parent meetings, I've said it to our players: You're either in or out, you're not in-between."

"Kids for the most part want discipline in their life. They want to be told when to do things and what time. If you get the discipline to do that, you can win some football games."

Webb said there's more at stake than merely winning games.

"Society bases a lot of things on wins and losses. We get that from the media and ESPN," he said. "But there are a lot of things that are happening in the hallways that people don't realize."

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