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It's all up front

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By **BILL KINDT STAFF WRITER**

GENEVA -- They seldom reap the glory but often feel the grief.

While running backs, quarterbacks and wide receivers are praised for their efforts that result in victory, these guys pass through the night in relative obscurity.

Without them, though, running backs find only defenders in their way, quarterbacks see only the arms and faces of opponents, and receivers only run downfield for the exercise.

Together these athletes, coined the "Big Uglies" by retired television play-by-play man Keith Jackson, are the hub of any football team. From tackle to tackle with a tight end often tossed in, they form the offensive line.

The Geneva football team, 8-0 and counting, has one of the best around.

Largely because of tackles Dustin Douell and Taylor Reed, guards Ryan McMillin and Matt Francis, center Alex Wetters, and tight ends Aaron O'Connell and Colin McCaffrey -- with fullback Pat Schiller leading the way -- quarterback Shaun Ratay has had the time to throw for more than 1,000 yards and tailback Chris Modjeski has found enough room to pile up more than 1,000 yards running.

All of it with little fanfare.

"He gives us a lot of credit," Reed said of Modjeski. "Even when you make a mistake he says, 'Keep your head up and keep on going.' If you do your assignment, it's fine with him."

Even so, there must be times when they hear the cries of unhappy fans in the bleachers and share an unpleasant sideline talk with line coach Gale Gross.

"I don't really listen to it," McMillin said. "Mo-Jo (Modjeski) gives us a lot of credit and so does Shaun. Really, it's whatever they say that counts."

Speed vs. size

Geneva's line averages 239 pounds per man, not really that big by today's standards. Reed, the lone junior in the group, is the biggest at 6-foot-3 and 285 pounds. They are often called on to block against defensive linemen that are much bigger.

That's when more than strength and size are needed. It's also when the hours of pushing the blocking sled around the practice field pays off.

"You just have to be quick off the ball and stay lower than them," McMillin said. "If you can do that, you can win the battle."

"Our whole line right now is pretty fast, and we use our speed against their size," Douell added. "We just use leverage."

Modjeski's quickness is a huge plus for any lineman. The 170-pound senior has a knack of exploding through a hole, then using his quick feet to pick up additional yardage. Modjeski also has shown the ability to lower a shoulder and carry defenders downfield.

Linemen attempt to carry out their assignments on any play, but most have a favorite. Geneva's is the 44 power.

"That's our bread-and-butter," Douell said. "It's just Mo-Jo running up my back side and me and the tight end blocking down."

There also always seems to be a play linemen don't like to have called. The Vikings would rather head coach Rob Wicinski throw the draw out of the play book.

"We haven't had a lot of success running it," Francis said. "We don't work on it very much. Basically, it's hard to judge where to take (the defender), and the back has to read it right."

Blocking has turned into a science all its own. Some defenses do some moving around before the ball is snapped. Wetters, for example, might have a noseguard over him when he reaches the line of scrimmage, but that man may jump either left or right over either McMillin or Francis.

"We just yell it out when we see it," said the 250-pound Wetters. "We have a down call and when we call it, the guard blocks my man and I block the (line) backer. That's how you pick it up."

Wicinski's offense is based on a balanced attack. Ratay will throw the ball on any down and Modjeski is likely to run when defensive coordinators expect a pass. The offensive line must work hard on both run and pass blocking.

"I think it's easier because the defense doesn't know what's coming at them," Wetters said.

One of best in state

While Geneva's record might be surprising in some quarters, it isn't to the Vikings. Even after losing running back Michael Ratay, Shaun's sophomore brother, to a broken leg, they entered the season confident they would be one of the top teams in the state.

They haven't missed a beat since the opening game, a 37-0 pounding of always-outstanding Morris.

"We have a lot of talent on the team and, when we beat Morris, we knew we were going to be good," Francis said. "We just want to keep going as far as we can into the playoffs."

Reed is the newcomer. He was brought up to the varsity last year but didn't get much playing time. He's learned quickly about playing varsity football.

"There's more competition up here," Reed said. "It's tough going against seniors because everyone has a year on you and you're the baby of the group."

Geneva's four seniors started last year and were also starters on the sophomore team three years ago.

"And at the same positions, too," Francis said.

"It's a huge advantage," McMillin said. "We have a lot of experience together and we know how each one is going to react, more or less, on certain plays."

Looking for perfection

Geneva goes after an undefeated regular season when it plays host to rival Batavia at 7:30 p.m. Friday. A victory over the Bulldogs also would give the Vikings the first-ever Western Sun Conference championship. Geneva, 6-0 in conference play, clinched a tie for the title by beating Kaneland, 24-21, a week ago.

Then, and only then, can the Vikings concentrate on the postseason.

"I think we're going to go pretty far in the playoffs," Francis said.

Credit for that goes to those five interior linemen up front --big uglies or not.

