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A sneak peek at the 1st day of practice

 Comments (No comments posted.)

Batavia

Why we're here: Batavia opened practice in a position completely unfamiliar to the program. For the first time, Batavia is coming off of a state-title game appearance, having dropped the IHSA Class 6A title game to Normal last November.

The challenge for coach Mike Gaspari is making sure the team does not rest on last season's success. On Day 1 of practice, Gaspari likes what he sees.

"Every year there is excitement at this level," Gaspari said. "Regardless of whether you finished the season 0-9 or 12-2, the kids always have a sense of anticipation and a renewed excitement and enthusiasm. They tend to forget the previous year."

Sight: On Wednesdays, the team does its traditional "victory" breakdown chant until erupting in cheers. After a refresher course from Gaspari, a rousing version was done before the second session of Wednesday's two-a-day practices.

Sound: The locker room was in mid-season form, blasting rap music to the limits of the speaker system before practice.

Head-turner: There were plenty of benefits to the late playoff run, particularly for players who were thrust into the spotlight earlier than expected. Linebacker Ethan Huggins is one of them. He stepped in for injured Nick Bex during the championship game and continued the momentum into the off-season.

News of the day: Conventional wisdom suggests junior Jordan Coffey would slide into the quarterback slot after his memorable playoff run in place of injured Alex Schroeder. But lost in the shuffle is senior Jack Creed, who appeared in three of the five playoff games, as well. On Day 1 of practice, there was competition for the spot.

"Right now, no one really knows who will be playing," Coffey said. "It's a friendly little competition between me and him. It's good for both of us because we're pushing each other. It's only going to benefit both of us and the team. That's a positive."

— Paul Johnson

Geneva

Why we're here: Geneva's motivation for 2007 comes from getting back to where the Vikings left off in 2006. They made that obvious in Wednesday's morning session at Broadview Academy in La Fox with players and coaches using their IHSA Class 6A semifinal loss to Batavia as motivation to put forth the extra effort.

"I thought our spirit was really good today," coach Rob Wicinski said. "I'm just glad we have 15 days to get things going, though."

Sight: The Vikings wrapped up their morning session by running hills. Split into two groups, players lined up side by side and sprinted up a hill next to the playing field at Broadview 14 times, one for every game they plan to play this



Geneva football players, Jimmy Radecki, left, and Jason Holmes work on pass coverage during the first day of practice held at Broadview Academy Wednesday. (Bob Gerrard photo)

season.

Instead of counting to 14, Wicinski's coaching staff rattled off the name of each week's opponent. When Kaneland and Batavia were named, players grunted through their pain and seemed to work a little harder.

Sound: After the hills workout, Geneva athletic director Jim Kafer spoke to the players, explaining the expectations the coaching staff has. "The bar is way up here," he said, holding his leveled hand above his head.

Head-turner: Speedy running back Michael Ratay, who broke his ankle last season, is back in shape for Geneva and should help relieve the pressure put on first-year quarterback Michael Mayszak.

By all indications, Ratay is back to 100 percent and expected to be the Vikings' workhorse in the backfield.

News of the day: Geneva's afternoon session was cut short by thunder. A new IHSA rule requires coaches to get the team off the field if thunder is heard, even if lightning is not seen.

– Kevin Chroust

Kaneland

Why we're here: A year after fielding a team that could score points at will, the Knights are focusing on retooling with a new head coach and quarterback.

Coach Tom Fedderly had his players honing in on the game's mental aspects on Day 1 and emphasized that just because there are new guys at many of the skill positions, the offense is going to be spread just as wide as it has been in the past.

"They're getting as many reps as we can so they're not having to think as much out there," Fedderly said.

Sight: A 10-minute downpour soaked the team at 3:45 p.m. during the Knights' afternoon practice, but it had little effect on anyone's concentration. Receivers were running routes, running backs were taking handoffs and linemen were working on footwork as if nothing had changed since the morning's sunny skies.

Sound: "Look sharp," was the phrase consistently uttered by Fedderly. He focused as much on how his players carried themselves as he did on results. If the offense wasn't breaking the huddle with enthusiasm, he'd make them regroup.

Head-turner: New quarterback Jody Henningson was as focused as any of the players working on the Kaneland practice field.

Fedderly is expecting big things from Henningson and was impressed with his work in the afternoon session.

"He's going to be a really good athlete back there," Fedderly said.

News of the day: Wide receivers Brian Claesson and Alex Blazek will be stepping into more prominent roles in the Knights' offense this season and spent the majority of the afternoon working on routes with Henningson.

"Those are two guys I think could have started on a lot of teams last year, but we had such good receivers that they were just kind of waiting for their turn," Fedderly said.

– Kevin Chroust

Marmion

Why we're here: Marmion last season had its first winning season since 1998, going 5-4. But it was not enough to return to the playoffs because of a shortage of playoff points.

To get over the hump, third-year coach Dan Thorpe is trying to instill a new attitude.

"Marmion needs to expect to win," Thorpe said. "The coaches expect to win. Too many times, especially in the big games, we hoped to win. Now, we have paid the price in the weight room. We had a great summer. The work ethic has been outstanding."

Sight: The Cadets had their first practice session set up into nine stations. Groups of players jumped between stations every 2 minutes, keeping up a chaotic pace before the first water break.

Sound: The sound of the whistle signifying the end of the players' 2 minutes at their station was unmistakable. It was

so loud that soccer players practicing a field away could hear it.

Head-turner: Senior kicker Alex Picini figures to be a huge weapon for the Cadets after moving to town from Alabama. Picini attended Marmion his first two years of high school and now is back, fresh off of two national kicking camps over the summer.

“His kickoffs will all be in the end zone,” Thorpe said.

News of the day: The Cadets had the luxury of workhorse running backs Ryne Reder and Brian Petrandi the past few seasons.

This year, there is no clear-cut candidate. Thorpe estimates his best returning rusher ran for less than 150 yards last season, and he can't even name the player.

“I don't even know who it is,” Thorpe said. “It will be a running back by committee, at least six or seven [players competing].”

– Paul Johnson

South Elgin

Why we're here: Perhaps it was just faith in his guys, or, South Elgin coach Dale Schabert acknowledges, perhaps it was naiveté. Whatever the reason, Schabert thought his team could compete for a playoff spot last year, even without seniors.

Nine straight losses later, Schabert, the former Larkin coach, realized how far his Storm would have to come to contend in the Upstate Eight Conference.

Now armed with a senior class, South Elgin seems poised to make a big jump in its second year of varsity play.

Sight: South Elgin kicker Erik Stade, after missing a handful of kicks consecutively, banged in a 35-yarder at the end of the afternoon practice, drawing robust cheers from his teammates.

Sound: Storm weather didn't take long to roll in – a tornado siren wailed as the players walked off the practice field in the afternoon, forcing the players to be sequestered in a school hallway until the threat passed.

Head-turner: Travis Eubanks has one of the team's most improved physiques. Eubanks and Mike Schomer both are moving from linebacker to defensive end.

News of the day: South Elgin softball coach and former girls basketball coach Jason Schaal is one of three new varsity assistants. The others are Chris Neibch (defensive backs and receivers) and Mike Mackender (offensive line).

– Jay Schwab

St. Charles East

Why we're here: St. Charles East football coach Ted Monken said his mission has been to take small steps with the program each year.

After a 4-5 showing in his first year, Monken coached East to consecutive playoff berths the past two seasons.

If his objective of taking another step forward is met in his fourth year, it would mean a big season for East.

Sight: An East player who struggled during a drill was forced to run back and forth between the practice field and a goal post– twice – while carrying a heavy log.

Coaches admonished the player as he ran, but offered words of encouragement once he completed his punishment.

Sound: Monken, who emphasized the importance of tending to technique in the days before East can practice in pads, at one point became exasperated at the start of a drill.

“Right foot on the line. Right foot on the line. Right foot on the line!” he shouted for a third time, before the player caught on. “There you go. Thank you.”

Head-turner: Senior defensive back Tom Kuebel has transformed his game in the off-season, Monken said.

"He really has gotten faster," Monken said. "He's figured out that's what's going to make him a great player, he worked at it, and it's going to pay off for him big time this season."

News of the day: Perhaps most crucial for the Saints leading up to their Aug. 24 opener at Batavia is the development of an almost completely new offensive line.

Quarterback Sam Gunther acknowledges "a lot of restless nights" thinking about all the new faces up front, but senses potential.

"It's such a hard position to learn," Gunther said. "The O-line just baffles me, but I've already seen improvement."

– Jay Schwab

COMMENTS

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