



Geneva has eyes on Champaign

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When coach Rob Wicinski took over the Geneva program 10 years ago, he was asked questions such as, "Are you going to win a game this year?"

Today he's asked, "Are you going to win a state championship?"

The thing is, this Vikings team might have the football players and determination to do it. They came within two games last year, losing to East St. Louis in the Class 7A quarterfinals, the only loss in an 11-1 season that saw the Vikings win their fourth straight conference title.

"What I told the kids, and I think they really believe it, is our last game is going to be our best game this year and that's going to be our focus," Wicinski said. "We're hoping that'll they'll carry on and keep believing."

One of the biggest reasons for the Vikings to believe comes in the menacing shapes and sizes of its tremendous defensive linemen.

These big, powerful agitators are led by 6-foot-4, 245-pound Cory Hofstetter (42 tackles last year), 6-foot-3, 290-pound Frank Boenzi (6 sacks in 2007) and 6-foot-5, 270-pound Andrew Clausen (4.4 tackles per game last season).

"They were committed to the weight room and each other in the off-season," Wicinski said. "They've gotten bigger and stronger, and some were pretty big already, and hopefully they'll take a little pressure off our offense if some of the young pups aren't ready to perform right away."

Geneva also returns middle linebacker Brennan Quinn, a member of the 2007 Daily Herald Tri-Cities All-Area Football Team, who has 240 career tackles, linebacker Trevor Hyslop (78 tackles, 4 sacks in 2007) and Sean Grady who will move from cornerback to safety this fall.

"We lost some defensive backs and a defensive end so now it's time for some of the others to become starters and step up," Wicinski said. "It's always a worry whenever you have juniors playing, or seniors who haven't been tested yet, because you don't know what's going to transpire when the lights go on Friday night."

While the ravenous Geneva defense should be fun to watch with its crushing blows and stinginess, senior Michael Ratay, the 2007 Captain of the Daily Herald Tri-Cities All-Area Football Team, is expected to once again dazzle and mesmerize opponents with his speed and shifty maneuvers.

Tackles Anthony Miller and John McNeil, guards Bryce Biel and Greg Gregory and center Anthony Strauss will lead the way for Ratay who rushed for more than 1,700 yards and 29 touchdowns last season. The Vikings offense is expected to feature an all-senior starting lineup, save for new quarterback Brandon Beitzel, a junior.

"Ratay is a pretty good running back and helps his cause, but the offensive line has improved from day one as juniors last year and just keeps getting better," Wicinski said. "The best thing about those offensive linemen is that they're now seniors. They performed well last year and we hope that'll continue."

Beitzel will have the comfort of sitting behind a senior line, along with Ratay and Drew Fagot in backfield. What he doesn't have yet is varsity experience nor much returning from the wideouts as only 22 of last year's 90 receptions weren't lost to graduation.

"With this experienced group, some of the pre sure doesn't have to fall on his shoulders," Wicinski said. "He's got two years down on the sophomore level, a strong arm, a high football I.Q. and he wants to do well so that is really helping him out and getting him up to speed."

While the aspirations of the Vikings are bigger than ever, Wicinski is stressing that the team takes one step at a time.

"We're focusing on the moment because you can't worry about the summit unless you take that first step," he said. "If you take care of business right now everything else will take care of itself and you'll reach that summit."

Preferably in Champaign.