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State expectations

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LaFOX – Being a Geneva football fan is a pretty sweet deal these days.

August rolls around, and the annual question is just how much butt are the Vikings going to kick?

The answer, this season, is an awful lot. Maybe everyone's.

As practice began around the area Wednesday, even the Vikings' annual preseason retreat to the LaFox countryside was not enough to escape expectations of greatness.

Not that the Vikings are trying to.

"I would really like to get a state championship," Geneva running back Michael Ratay said. "I think this is one of the teams that can do it."

Geneva's recent track record under coach Rob Wicinski suggests that is a statement that deserves to be taken seriously. The Vikings have a pair of state semifinal berths and last year's trip to the IHSA Class 7A quarterfinals to their credit the past four seasons.

Clearly, Geneva has a system in place that works. And this year, the Vikings have the personnel to maximize that system, potentially to the tune of a November trip to Champaign.

"I'm always pretty optimistic going in," Wicinski said. "It's just our nature."

It would take a pessimist of epic proportions not to be optimistic about this year's Vikings.

On offense, Geneva returns Ratay, last year's Chronicle Player of the Year, behind a powerful and veteran offensive line.

On defense, the Vikings are just as strong and just as experienced, with linemen Frank Boenzi, Cory Hofstetter and 260-pound linebacker Brennan Quinn all capable of being defensive MVPs on most teams in the area.

Geneva is breaking in a new quarterback, often cause for anxiety at the high school level, but junior Brandon Beitzel figures to blossom into yet another strength. Beitzel, highly regarded by area quarterbacks guru Steve Gregory, is skillful enough that Wicinski gave serious consideration to playing him as a sophomore, and likely would have if the graduated Mike Mayszak hadn't emerged as a dependable leader.

"He's got a really nice arm," Ratay said of the 6-foot-3 Beitzel. "Just hopefully he won't be nervous when he's going in there."

The Vikings' most unproven areas are receiver and the secondary. Wicinski said he needs some capable "little butts" to emerge.

If I'm a football coach, that's exactly where I want my concerns to be. A receiver can be taught routes, and a safety can be taught positioning. It's the big butts that can't be pulled out of thin air, and the Vikings have plenty of those.

Perhaps most crucial for the Vikings, who start Aug. 29 at Dundee-Crown, is to guard against overconfidence.

Batavia's presence alone ensures the Vikings will not have an easy time defending their Western Sun Conference championship. Quinn cited last year's Yorkville game, in which the Vikings needed to rally to beat a team that finished 2-7, as an instance when the program might have become too enamored with itself.

"That kind of brought our heads back into place," Quinn said.

It's doubtful Geneva will allow cockiness to ruin what should be a memorable season. In fact, barring some wicked misfortune, it's hard to see this team not matching its predecessors win for win.

The Vikings look awfully good on paper. Imagine what they could look like on the field after a couple months of fine-tuning.

"I think we really believe our last game is going to be our best game," Wicinski said. "The kids believe it; the coaches believe it. We'll see what happens."

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COMMENTS

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