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All-knowing?

Coaches' familiarity could make it difficult for East, Geneva to pull off surprises

Most offenses strive for baffling balance, for scenarios that scream run or pass far less often than the players on the sideline.

Vary your attack and keep it moving. Among other teams, budding rivals St. Charles East and Geneva enter tonight's football season opener with that exact aspiration.

East would figure to have a leg up on the Vikings there, what with new coach Mike Fields' 10-year history as a Geneva assistant. Fields most recently presided over the offense of last season's IHSA Class 7A state finalist, so the logic follows he'll be barking all-knowing instructions to the Saints' defense all night, right?

Keep guessing, players and coaches say. They're promising a game filled with the same level of intrigue that greets the retooling playoff teams.

"They're going to execute well and we're going to execute well," East senior safety Matt Payne said. "The minute we think we know something they're doing is the minute we get beat deep."

That statement shows nearly as much confidence in Geneva senior quarterback Brandon Beitzel as Vikings receivers – and even Fields – did during the offseason.

Limited last fall by the record-setting success of graduated running back Michael Ratay, Beitzel was slow to establish himself as the elite passer he wanted to be. To what extent a momentum-filled summer of workouts and exposure camps has paid off ranks as one of the biggest things to look for when the Vikings have the ball tonight.

Others include watching the attentiveness of Geneva's understudies from a year ago. Five new starters will comprise an offensive line that bullied its way to plenty of room for Ratay, who left a hard-working legacy to seniors Jay Graffagna and Michael Santacaterina.

"Everything Michael did was 100 percent in practice, and that's kind of how we take it," Santacaterina said. "We looked up to him last year and everything we do, we learned from him."

Vikings coach Rob Wicinski suggests the same about Fields when it comes to Geneva's new batch of juniors. Fields coached the group as sophomores and might have been useful in evaluations when camp opened earlier this month, but he still figures things have changed.

"Personnel-wise, I knew these young men," Fields said. "They're great young men and I think the world of them and I hope they win eight games – not this first one, obviously. But that's not going to dictate what we do. We're going to go strength against strength, and I think we're a pretty strong team."

East and Geneva went 29 years between meetings before their Class 7A second-round playoff game in 2007, won by the Vikings. Host Geneva also defeated the Saints in Week 2 of last season, and tonight's game was on the schedule before Fields joined East or Geneva agreed to join the Saints in the Upstate Eight Conference beginning in 2010.

"The past few years, we've have some pretty marquee games," Payne said. "We think this one will be no different."

Except for the result, the Saints hope.

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