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Chiefs itching to get started

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By [Tim Smith](#)

Observer Staff Writer

Tim Baechler and his Canton Chiefs aren't dwelling over what happened during the 2010 state football playoffs.

The Chiefs — favored by many prognosticators to reach the Division 1 title game at Ford Field — were tripped up by campus rival Plymouth in the second round of the postseason. Then, to rub salt into the wounds, the Wildcats marched all the way to the finals.

But the new season is about to start and the Chiefs won't be thinking about extracting revenge against Plymouth, at least not until they meet on Oct. 7.

Instead, the mission is to gear up for visiting Walled Lake Central (the opener is 7 p.m. Thursday) and keep improving for the long haul.

“Anytime you lose the last game of the year, you're upset about it, you're not happy,” said the 14th-year Canton coach, watching his players run through calisthenics to open Wednesday afternoon's practice. “Two years ago we lose in the third round in overtime to CC (Novi-Detroit Catholic Central) and the only thing we felt good about was we played very well.

“We played real well and lost. And that's easier to live with. But we're still upset. Even when we lost in '05 in the state championship ... there's only eight teams in the state that

Busting loose for a big gainer last season for Canton is halfback Kevin Buford (No. 1). He will reprise his role as an offensive catalyst again this year. / Bill Bresler | staff photographer

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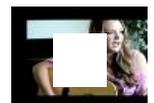
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Zac Merillat (No. 21), shown in this 2010 game, figures to be a key performer on both sides of the ball for Canton this season. / Bill Bresler I staff photographer

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are really, truly happy at the end of the season. And when you lose you're motivated. What can we do to get an inch better? That was our focus this offseason."

Once again, a creative, high-octane offense won't be among Baechler's worries entering the opener. The focus will be how the Chiefs' defense handles the potent Vikings.

"We don't have a lot of depth at certain positions, and we've got a few injuries going on right now," he explained. "But they're going to be a great defense — eventually.

"Unfortunately, we play Walled Lake Central and Grand Blanc right out of the gate. They're two very good, offensive teams. So they need to get great, soon. And three weeks (of practices) is not a lot of time."

Scoring threats

Of course, it helps that many of the key components are back from the 2010 season, when the Chiefs finished 10-1 and won their division and conference.

Quarterback Kyle Adams and the triple-back formation of halfbacks Kevin Buford (who recently made a verbal commitment to the University of Toledo), Ryan Jones and Zac Merillat are all seniors and looking ready to

embark on a mission.

"Their speed and explosiveness are big," Baechler said. "Kevin Buford, this will be his third year starting and he's just a great talent.

"He's just got that big-play ability, so does Ryan Jones and so does Zac. And so does Kyle throwing the ball and running the ball. All four of them have big-play ability."

The coaching staff can plug juniors Malcolm Hollingsworth and Kendall Scott into the backfield mix and not lose much. Baechler heaped some extra praise on Adams' plate, particularly about how sharp he's looked during the preseason workouts.

"We're extremely happy with him, he's going to be a very good quarterback," Baechler said. "He reads well, gets rid of the ball on time. his ball-handling is good as far as faking and taking care of the football. We're very high on him, he's doing a great job."

Adams will throw to several targets, including runners out of the backfield as well as tight ends/wide-outs Nick Tata, Evan Rinke, Matt McKoy and Scott Gring.

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The compressed training camp (17 days) is one reason for Baechler to be slightly cautious about predicting what kind of offensive line he'll have.

"That's what's so frustrating, the whole state of Michigan's doing the same thing," he noted. "This is our sixth day with pads and it's not nearly enough. We've got a long way to go just as I'm sure everybody else does.

"Blocking's always a work in progress, but we're getting there."

There are linemen who are looking solid on the eve of the season opener.

Baechler mentioned junior left guard Mike Ditzler, second-year starting right tackle Cameron Dillard (a junior), senior center Blake Lelo (a backup center and guard in 2010), and either junior Darian Evans or junior Luke Denzer at right guard.

Double duty

On defense, the only returning seniors are defensive back Buford and linebacker Merillat. But that's a pretty good start, according to Baechler.

"Zac's very quick, very tough, he's our hardest working kid on the team," Baechler said. "He transferred from Tecumseh last year as a junior. We're just lucky we got him. A great kid, great worker."

Other members of the offense who can swing over to the defensive side of the ball include Scott (defensive back), Hollingsworth (linebacker), Dillard and DeRoso (defensive line).

"Until our depth improves they may see some time playing some defense," Baechler said.

The Chiefs will have seniors Zachary Smilo and Michael Boes augmenting Buford in the defensive backfield.

"They're very quick kids, even though they haven't had a lot of experience," Baechler added. "They've had a good summer in the passing league and we're liking what we see right now.

"In practice they're not afraid to come up and hit and they both can run well."

Baechler said senior John Chadwick, who is nursing an injury, is a player who can help the defense.

"He didn't get a lot of reps last year on defense, but he should start somewhere," he continued. "Either outside backer or d-end."

Canton will use quarterback Adams at the punter position, and juniors Scott Piwowar and Connor Shennan (both also varsity soccer players) will adequately handle placekicking and kickoff

duties.

“It’s a good competition,” Baechler said. “Connor’s got the stronger leg but Piwowar’s very accurate. We should be taken care of there.”

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