



When it comes to Canton Chiefs football, the more things change the more they stay the same.

We're talking triple-back sets that confuse defenses. Plus efficiency on offense, doing what it takes to move the chains and find the end zone. And of course, there are stacked lines on both sides of the ball.

Add it all up, and the Chiefs usually find their way into the playoffs and have a chance to do damage once there. There is no reason that should change this season, either. Canton opens the season 7 p.m. Friday in the Prep Kickoff Classic at Wayne State University, against Dearborn Fordson. "I feel real good," said 18th-year head coach Tim Baechler, during a recent practice. "I like our front seven (on defense). We still got some question marks at DB. I think we've got the athletes, we just got to get them some experience so they're going to be tested and make good things happen. "Offensively, we got a few starters back on the O-line, in Devin Obrec and Ben Phillips.

But again, we had some good JV linemen off a 9-0 team last year that are coming up and competing hard. We're going to be a very good offensive line."

Talk about a pipeline. A perfect junior varsity squad sending strong players Baechler's direction. That spells trouble for the rest of the KLAA and potential playoff opponents.

Sour taste

Plus, the Chiefs have a collective chip on their shoulder, particularly as they ruminate over what transpired during last year's state playoffs.

Canton went 9-3 and won the KLAA South Division last season before reaching the Division 1 regional championship game against Saline, losing a 42-35 heartbreaker.

"Our kids are still kicking themselves, they felt we should have had it and we should have had a chance at Cass Tech," Baechler said. "They definitely want to put themselves back in that situation this year and have another crack at Saline."

The schedule will be like a 10th opponent for the Chiefs, but Baechler said the squad is ready to take everybody on.

"We have a great schedule," he said. "Dearborn Fordson, who we open with, had 10 wins. Hartland (the Week 2 opponent) was a playoff team.

"And of course you've got (Westland John) Glenn, (Livonia) Churchill and Plymouth, three very good division teams. And then our Week 8 crossover is going to be a toughie."

Canton then will need to travel out of state to play Galesburg High School.

"And Week 9 we got to travel to Galesburg, Illinois, and they're a playoff team in Illinois," Baechler noted. "Winning six games is not a gimme."

Winning formula

As in previous seasons, the Canton game plan will continue to be about long drives on offense and defensive prowess.

Despite the graduation of quarterback Greg Williams, the Chiefs expect to not miss a beat with junior QB Joel Foster taking the spot.



Throwing a pass during a practice is junior quarterback Joel Foster. (Photo: MICHAEL VASILNEK)

"Replacing Greg Williams is always a big deal, a three-year starter," Baechler said. "But Joel Foster was a JV running back last year and was just OK at it. He asked if he could try quarterback in the summer, we made the switch.

"The kid has literally gotten better every... single... day. so he's not there yet, but he's going to be really good."

Also on the depth chart at quarterback are juniors Jimmy Weeda and Jake O'Donnell.

Foster will take snaps behind a big, physical offensive line that features more than enough interchangeable parts.

Baechler ticked off the names of junior David Gunnis (6-0, 255), junior Jake Warner (5-11, 215), senior Josh Dunn (5-8, 215), junior Mike Maes (6-1, 215) and junior Tyler Santoro (6-1, 235). Senior Jesse Haddad (5-8, 205) provides another solid option.

Also helping with blocking duties — when they aren't catching short passes — will be "four or five physical kids that are all getting mega reps" at tight end.

In the mix will be likely starter Brennon Pelland, a 6-0, 195-pound senior, senior Jesse Warner (6-2, 195), senior Jalen Cochran (6-4, 235), sophomore Lou Baechler (5-9, 200) and senior Jake Stephan (6-1, 205). The Chiefs again will foil rivals with a who-has-the-ball running game led by 5-7 junior Markus Sanders — who rolled to more than 2,000 yards in 2014.

"It's huge having him (Sanders) back, plus he's just a tough kid to tackle, too," Baechler said. "He can lower his shoulder."

Sanders won't be a one-man show. Canton also will line up third-year starter Jake Wickens (a 6-1, 195-pound senior), 5-9 Julian Thornton and versatile junior Reid McDonnell.

Whenever Foster needs to throw the ball, he will target "skill guys" who can run for miles after catches such as seniors Jared Stephens, Micah Rinke, Cochran and junior Sanders.

Handling placekicking chores will be junior Ben Tubaro, with junior Jake Donnelly slated for punting duties.

"I'm glad we have them for the next two years," said Baechler about his kickers. "They're both very solid."

Deep on D

Canton's defense again features plenty of talent and numbers, good to help keep players fresh.

Up front will be senior tackles Tom Evely (6-2, 215) and Ali Mashhour (6-3, 245), along with nose guards Jake McKinnon (5-10, 185-pound senior) and Gabe Teichman (5-9, 175-pound junior).

They will be augmented by Jake Warner, Maes and 6-1, 200-pound senior Connor Savage.

"We've got a lot of depth on both sides of the line this year," Baechler said. Slated at inside linebacker will be Lou Baechler and Stephan backed up by promising junior Chris Thomas.

The Chiefs have several other linebackers for the outside slots, including Cochran, McDonnell, Wickens and Pellond.

"Our linebackers are not going to be the fastest we've had," Baechler said.

"But we're much bigger, thicker and smart. We'll be much more stout inside than we've been the last couple years.'

The defensive secondary is a work in progress as Baechler and his assistant coaches help younger players gear up.

At cornerback, sophomore Colin Troup is "looking good back there," with Thornton and junior Eddie Lang vying for another spot.

Taking care of the safety spots will be Stephens and Rinke, backed up by O'Donnell and Donnelly.

Meanwhile, Baechler said the team is looking forward to playing the game at Wayne State against Fordson (10-1 last year).

"They're excited to play on the big stage," Baechler said. "Coaching-wise I don't really like it because you're out of your comfort zone, you don't have your regular warmup times and space. So that's a little different."

"But hopefully we've got enough experience that the kids get there and they'll get locked in, go out and play well."



Things are looking up for Canton head coach Tim Baechler (back row, left) and the Chiefs' offense as the 2015 season opens. (Photo: MICHAEL VASILNEK)

tsmith@hometownlife.com
Twitter: @TimSmith_Sports