

Wave of new football coaches making splash at P-CEP as season looms

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Aligned from one side to the other of the Plymouth-Canton Educational Park football stadium end zone are the campus' three high school logos. Canton's red, Salem's blue and Plymouth's black share turf space in equal parts — even though their football fortunes have not always been so balanced.

But 2018 could be the start of new Park turf wars, with the Chiefs, Rocks and Wildcats each starting anew with a new head coach, fresh ideas and plenty of optimism.

“You don't see that too often,” said Salem coach Justin Reed, taking over from Kurt Britnell. “I think we're the only place in America that has all three schools on one campus. There's others with two.

“But having all three here — and with all three new head coaches — is a challenge and an exciting time, all in the same breath.”

On-field results haven't always matched preseason enthusiasm, but at least two of the Park's three squads have been consistent contenders — especially Canton, from 1998 to 2017 under the watch of now-retired hall of fame coach Tim Baechler.

Conversely, Salem's playoff spot last season (with a 5-4 mark) was its first since 1991.

Meanwhile, Plymouth has been a playoff regular during Mike Sawchuk's decade-long regime.

But as clean of a slate as it is across the Park, the first marks on the board will be made this weekend, good or bad. The Rocks will be first out of the tunnel, squaring off Thursday, Aug. 23, against Wayne Memorial.

On Friday, Aug. 24, Plymouth (4-5 in 2017) will face Livonia Stevenson in Ann Arbor, at the annual Battle at the Big House, while Canton hosts Livonia Churchill later that day.

“I think it’s pretty cool, because everybody’s got a fresh canvas,” said Brian Lewis, who succeeds Sawchuk. “I think guys are able to show us who they are, who might have had a certain persona for the previous staff.

“So I think it’s pretty cool that guys got a fresh canvas and myself, I got a fresh canvas, and we kind of get to create an identity together and create a team together with everybody with a fresh slate.”

Chiefs know the drill

The Chiefs probably have a bit of a jump on the Wildcats and Rocks, simply because of familiarity both in the coaching staff and roster. Last year’s 10-2 team lost a heart-breaker to Novi Detroit Catholic Central in the Division 1 regional championship.

New head coach Andy Lafata (who was on Baechler’s staff for a number of years) welcomes back a number of players from a season ago.

“High expectations ... the kids are working,” Lafata said. “A lot less sleep being the head coach, after being the assistant ... but we’re excited about it. We’re just trying to outwork people right now and teach things up.”



Leading Canton's impressive cast is potential Division I recruit Darius Robinson, who towered over just about every other player during an afternoon practice earlier this week.

"Hype is not real," Lafata said about lofty D-I projections following senior defensive lineman Robinson. "So we hope that Darius *is* real and that he lives up to the billing of what people are saying. But for us, he's just another guy playing a position. If we put someone else in there, we expect the same results.

"He's been a good leader, a good vocal leader for us. We've yet to play a game, so we haven't seen him live yet."

The Chiefs have much more talent, including record-smashing senior tailback Steven Walker, senior tight end/defensive end Noah Van Berkel and senior linebacker Seth Troszak.

"It feels great. We're getting our team chemistry up and we're all coming together. It's a nice thing to see," Van Berkel said. "New coaches, new faces everywhere, we're doing good."

They also have a lot of others hungry to make their mark and keep the Canton tradition of success going.



“Helps a lot that there’s people familiar with the system, so that we’re all on the same page on what we’re coaching and we’re familiar with the practice schedule and who the kids are,” Lafata said. “That helps. But every year’s different. Even if you have carryover, the kids are different. Every single year, you got to come and and teach them.”

Robinson and Van Berkel took a knee together during a water break, discussing some of the day’s schemes and assignments. Just like the Baechler days, a lot is expected of the Chiefs.

“It’s a new era, a little bit. We’re running the same offense,” Robinson said.

“Everything’s still practically the same, it’s just new coaches, new bond, new chemistry. But all in all, we’ve been transitioning really well.

“We still want to win games, win our division, make a playoff run. We just got to keep pushing ourselves even further, further, harder, harder, every day at practice to get to the ultimate goal we want to be at.”