

Spring Football Report – Wildcat Football Focused on Building a Championship Program

4/11/2007

WAYNE, NE - After winning four games in 2005, followed by a five win campaign in 2006, the Wayne State Football Team opened spring practice March 28 with designs on continuing that trend of upward mobility.

Wildcat Head Coach **Dan McLaughlin**, beginning his third campaign at WSC, said that the WSC football program has big goals as the Wildcats head into the final season of Northern Sun Conference Division II football. In the 2008 season, the Conference will add four new schools: Minnesota State University – Mankato, St. Cloud State University, University of Minnesota – Duluth, and Augustana College.



LB Nick Baldetti

According to McLaughlin, the prospect of success begins with hard work in the off-season and in the spring football session. "I am really pleased with how we have looked so far," said McLaughlin, who noted that the Spring Game is set for Saturday, April 21 at 1 p.m. at Cunningham Field on the WSC campus. The **next spring practice** for the Wildcats will be held at **10:00 a.m. on Saturday, April 14** at the WSC practice fields, located north of the Rec Center.

"We have seen marked improvement since the first day. While the weather has been somewhat of a headache, the kids have fought through the wind and rain and shown tremendous energy," said McLaughlin.

McLaughlin added, "Overall, I am very pleased with the progress that has been made. We are a much better football team at this point than we were a year ago, and we are a better football team now than we were at the end of the season last fall."

The Wildcats return 12 starters, including eight on offense and four on defense. One of those seniors lost is a big one – All - Conference running back **Zach Molacek** of Stanton, NE. Zach capped an outstanding career at Wayne State by being named the Northern Sun Conference Player-of-the-Year, as he led the conference in rushing with 1,155 yards, finishing his career as the second leading rusher in Wildcat history (3,391 yards). The Wildcats also lose all four starting defensive linemen, three of the starting defensive backs, All – Conference tight end Jake Robinson and five other seniors who played major roles in the turnaround at Wayne State.

From these early days of spring practice, McLaughlin noted that the offense was picking up steam behind the leadership of new Offensive Coordinator **Gene Suhr**, the former head football coach at Papillion – La Vista Senior High School. Coach Suhr is a legend in the Nebraska prep ranks, winning state championships in 1990 and 1996, and winning over 200 games. He is widely respected as an offensive guru, and the wrinkles he has brought to the Wildcat offense are already bearing fruit. Coach Suhr is coaching the quarterbacks, and while **Travis Dietz**, of Indianola, IA, and **Silas Fluellen**, of Bellevue, NE are relatively young, they are not without experience, as Travis started seven games in 2005, and Silas started eight games in 2006.

McLaughlin emphasized the leadership of three year starter **Jay Winter** (Miller, SD) as well as returning All – NSIC offensive guard **Brian Okonofua** (Dallas, TX) who anchor what looks to be a very strong offensive line. Leading receiver **Logan Masters** (Storm Lake, IA) is sitting out spring practice with shoulder surgery, but **Ricky Massa** (Lincoln, NE) and **Brian Chapman** (Battle Creek, NE) have looked very good so far in the early stages of the spring.

Despite the return of eight offensive starters, the biggest question mark is filling the running back spot held by Molacek the last three years. Front runners in that competition include **Alex Hall** (Lincoln, NE) who started seven games at tailback in the 2005 campaign, and sophomore **Eric Meyer** (Hooper, NE) who has impressed the coaches with his explosiveness in drills and scrimmage situations.

McLaughlin noted that former first team All – NSIC wide receiver **Marque McCray** of San Mateo, Calif., has returned to school after a year away from the program. McLaughlin says McCray looks confident and fast. "He has picked up where he left off two years ago," said McLaughlin.

McLaughlin also mentioned that sophomore **Brian Locke** (Omaha, NE.) has shined at tight end in the early days of spring ball. He pointed out that **Scott Umphenour** (Mapleton, KS) is pushing for time at the number one (offensive) tackle spot. He was also pleased with the work of **Brandon Carlson** (Cherokee, IA). "He continues to get better and I believe Brandon will be a premier lineman in the league next season," said McLaughlin.

On the defensive side of things, honorable mention All-NSIC linebacker **Nick Baldetti** (Phoenix, AZ) has started fast. Baldetti led the Wildcats with 73 total tackles including 23 solo and 50 assisted. He also added four tackles-for-loss, one sack, one interception and four pass breakups.

Second team All-NSIC linebacker **Luke Hoffman** (Wakefield, NE) has also sparked the defense. Hoffman led the Wildcats in tackles in 2006, recording 100 tackles (47 solo, 53 assisted) with nine tackles for loss, two sacks, two interceptions, five pass breakups and one forced fumble. "Luke has started the past two seasons for us, and that experience is showing through to us coaches. He is playing faster than in the past, and is making a lot of plays thus far in the spring," said Defensive Coordinator **Clint Brown**. Brown added by saying, "Luke has become a mentor for our young linebackers."

Troy Pribnow (Scribner, NE, 20 tackles, three sacks), defensive lineman **Tyler Krueger** (Pierce, NE, 20 tackles, four sacks) and **Austin Stanley** (Lincoln, NE, 16 tackles, 1.5 sacks) have had strong starts on defense that again looks to be quick, fast and strong and deep. "Pribnow looks good. He is strong and physical and gives us great presence off the edge," said McLaughlin. "Before next season we want to have four defensive ends and six tackles on the defensive front who can play, and there is spirited competition for those slots," he said.

If the Wildcats had some holes to fill from a year ago, it is in the secondary where WSC lost seniors **Omari Green** (second team All-NSIC), **Laron Striplin**, and honorable mention All-NSIC safety **Adam Peterson**. However, McLaughlin noted that WSC had a lot of depth on the defense, as several young players got on the field for the Wildcats a year ago. Sophomore **Matt Greenway** (Lincoln, NE) and junior **Ryan Molacek** (Stanton, NE) are improving every day, and have begun to build on their experience from the 06 season. "Both Greenway, and Molacek are both physical players and have shown greater consistency with their play thus far," Brown said. Sophomore **Bruce Mastin** (Arlington, NE,) who played the 06 season at corner, redshirt freshman **Derek Buckridge** (Spring Hill, KS), and mid-year transfer **Reno Bloomquist** (Phoenix, AZ) have all shown flashes through the midway point of spring drills.

Sophomore corner **Robert Manuel** (Houston, TX) is the lone returning starter in the secondary from the 06 campaign. Manuel started 11 games for the Wildcats, but is experiencing stiff competition from junior **B.J. Campbell** (Vermillion, SD), junior **Sherrod Richards** (Oxnard, Calif.) and mid-year transfer, junior **Benny Collins** (Phoenix, AZ). "We have been impressed with the overall athleticism from the secondary group, and we are excited to see the competition unfold over the next eight practices," Brown added.