

FOOTBALL

Defensive backs become leaders for North

Thursday, October 11, 2007

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Patrolling the secondary for the Westerville North High School football team are three underclassmen and one player who hadn't played the sport before his freshman year.

Heading into the season, the youth and inexperience led the Warriors to wonder how well the secondary would play.

"I think the defensive backs were kind of a question heading into the season," safety Chris McCluney said. "But me, (Ryan) Call, Chizo (Emeaghara) and Matt Schaublin have really stepped it up. We've tried not to have a letdown."

McCluney, a junior, starts at safety, wide receiver and kicker for the Warriors. Schaublin, a sophomore, is at the other safety position. Emeaghara, a junior, starts at one cornerback and Call, a senior, starts at the other, as well as at receiver.

Despite going with younger players in the secondary, the group has been a strength for Westerville North, which is 1-6 overall and 0-2 in the OCC-Buckeye Division.

"I think they've really come a long way and I think they're really doing a great job this season," coach Chad Williams said. "If you look at us, one of our bright spots has been how we've played against the pass and a lot of that is attributed to how our defensive backs have played."

Williams knew that inexperience would hamper the defense in the early stages of the season but did not hesitate to let McCluney and Call lead.

Preseason practices and scrimmages exposed the inexperience of the secondary, but patience was the key.

"It definitely was a concern heading into the season," Williams said of the secondary. "Our first scrimmage, there were some balls and touchdown passes that got behind the defensive backs.

"Anytime you have youth and new guys playing, you are a little concerned. But they toughened their skin up in a hurry and they now realize that the next play is the most important play."



BY ANN TORMET/THISWEEK

The Warriors' Chris McCluney pops Grove City's Joel Labroce last Friday.

"We're doing things right. We just need to focus on playing as a team," Call said. "If we give up a big play, we need to come back together."

McCluney, who started last year after an injury to Tim Ward early in the season, has emerged as a team leader.

"We expected him to be the leader of our defensive backfield and that's a role he's really stepped into and lived up to," Williams said. "He makes all the calls and all the checks and he's really the quarterback of our defense."

The defense has a big challenge Friday when the Warriors visit Upper Arlington.

The Golden Bears fell to 5-2 overall and 1-1 in the OCC-Buckeye last Friday with a 31-24 overtime loss at Dublin Coffman. Both UA losses have come against undefeated teams.

"They're one of the better teams in this area and maybe in the state," Williams said. "They just do a real good job. They run a real precise offense that seems like it's able to get positive yardage on every play and their defense runs well to the football and makes plays."

The Golden Bears run the wing-T offense, which the Warriors have seen this season. Leading Upper Arlington will be quarterback Braden Layer and running back Tommy Farwick.

"The two most important things are preventing the big play, forcing them to drive to score, and we have to control the football," Williams said.

Defensively, Upper Arlington runs a 3-3-5 defense that emphasizes speed. The Golden Bears use slants and stunts on the defensive line, something that is a concern for Williams after facing similar defenses in a 28-0 loss to Olentangy Liberty on Aug. 24 and a 16-10 loss to New Albany on Aug. 31.

"We've played that defense a few times and it poses a few problems for us," Williams said. "We had some problems in week 1, learned from it and week 2 we made some adjustments and did better against it."

The main priority for the Warriors will be holding onto the ball and limiting turnovers to keep the UA offense off the field.

"If we can keep their offense off the field, it will give us a shot to be successful," Williams said.