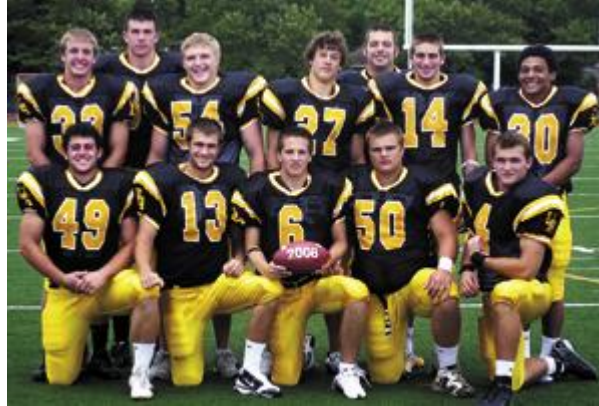


UA seeking a truly golden campaign



SNP photo by Chris Galoski

Returning starters for the 2008 Golden Bears are (from left): row one-Mark Crawford, Phil Gross, Alex Drake, Kacy Yuhus and Tommy Farwick; row two-Anthony Finissi, Nat Kell, Noah Krimm, Zach Steen and Chris Davakis; row three-Blake Annen and Chris Cennamo.

By CHRIS GALOSKI

Though the 2007 prep football campaign closed up shop last November, frenetic preparations for '08 commenced just weeks later.

Winter lifting sessions reluctantly gave way to sweltering summer conditioning, the two-a-days of early autumn and untold hours of playbook scouring.

The finishing touches are ready to be applied. The punishment is almost over -- or has it just begun?

In two days the answer will be partially revealed, when the Upper Arlington football team barrels into Marv Moorehead Stadium to open against a worthy adversary in Pickerington Central.

But this fall, like so many others, the Golden Bears are expected to administer far more beatdowns than they suffer setbacks, despite a crucible of a schedule.

"I'm thrilled right now," Bears senior running back Tommy Farwick said. "I honestly cannot wait.

"We have such a good group of guys and great leadership on the team. We have endless opportunities ahead of us."

Actually, UA, four-time state titlists (1967, '68, '69, 2000), wishes for just 15 opportunities this fall - 10 regular-season clashes and five in the Division I playoffs.

Breaking practice daily with "state champs on three," the black and gold's expectations are, well, UA-esque.

Bears coach Mike Golden, entering his fourth campaign, has grown accustomed to the August hubbub. He understands it's the nature of the beast, and seems to think much of the hoopla is centered around the return of Farwick (6-foot, 206 pounds) and fellow backfield stunners Alex Drake (5-11, 180), a senior, and Isaac Wildermuth (5-8, 185), a fellow senior.

"Tommy Farwick had 1,100 yards last year, Alex Drake about 800 and Isaac Wildermuth about 500," said Golden, his team 8-3 a year ago and playoff qualifiers for a third straight season. "So when you have three kids back like that with 2,300 or 2,400 yards, and experience, people get excited.

"Also with five or six returning starters on both sides of the ball, there's going to be high expectations, and there already are here."

Yet it'll be a newcomer handing the pigskin to the three chain-moving backs and occasionally airing it out: senior John Townsley (6-4, 195) or junior Kyle Cassady (6-2, 175), the two vying for the heralded quarterback position.

Regardless of who wins the reins, with the graduation of triggerman Brayden Layer, one upstart will handle the signal-calling duties, so it's a bonus to return senior offensive line starters Kacy Yuhas (6-1, 266, center), Nat Kell (6-0, 210, guard) and Blake Annen (6-4, 220), a tight end who's been offered a scholarship by the University of Cincinnati.

"It's nice to have an experienced center like Kacy Yuhas with whichever quarterback wins the job," Golden said. "Because our center in our program controls so much of the blocking calls.

"So that'll help the quarterback situation. We've also got a lot of great juniors competing for positions on the line. It's good that we have a lot of great candidates for line play. So we're excited about that."

Yuhas also will hunker down in the defensive trenches, along with junior Daniel Botomogno (6-0, 250), as seniors Mark Crawford (6-0, 225, MLB) and Chris Cennamo (6-3, 220, OLB) fulfill the linebacking chores. Patrolling the secondary are Anthony Finissi (6-1, 200), a senior strong safety and senior Noah Krimm (5-11, 180), a shut-down cornerback.

"We have a lot of good experience and again, lots of good competition at the rest of the positions," Golden said.

No shortage of leadership either, which is certain to come from captains Crawford, Drake, Farwick, Finissi and Yuhas.

"It's been different this year because now I feel like I'm the leader and I have to help the younger kids and help them learn," Yuhas said.

"Whereas last year the older seniors were helping me learn. I'm just giving more pointers and I'm more vocal than last year."

Oh-see-seeing is believing

Few words can be minced when discussing the Ohio Capital Conference Central Division, it's packed with heavyweight-title contenders. With UA, Dublin Coffman, Hilliard Davidson, Hilliard Darby and Worthington Kilbourne relegated to one league, the alignment is a football inferno.

Most coaches have said the champion is unlikely to surface unscathed, losses are likely. Still, the beauty of it is select victories are likely to generate enough computer points to propel a squad, if not several, into the playoffs. In UA, for one, the postseason takes precedence over all things

regular season.

"To win your league should be the goal of any team in high school," Golden said.

"But in Ohio I think getting to the playoffs is really, really important because it's the only sport where you have to qualify to even have a chance to win a state championship. So qualifying for the playoffs is our No. 1 goal."

Some of the spotlight matchups that could be decisive in the Bears' playoff push are road tilts with Kilbourne in Week Five (Sept. 19), Darby Week Six (Sept. 26) and Coffman Week 10 (Oct. 24). On the home front, the marquee meetings are with Pick Central at 7:30 p.m. Friday, Aug. 22, in Week One, Gahanna Week Two (Aug. 29) and Davidson Week Nine (Oct. 17).

Central Crossing will trudge into town for UA's homecoming night in Week Seven (Oct. 3).

Well beforehand, the Tigers represent as legitimate an opening-week trial as most anyone could crave. At 11-1 in D-I a year ago and 13-2 in 2006 (D-II state runners-up), PHSC brandishes Ohio State commits Jamie Wood (wide receiver-defensive back) and Zach Boren (LB), as well as Michigan State recruit Patrick White, a receiver with a pair of hands like few others possess at the prep level.

"Pick Central has obviously got the huge recruits, the OSU kids and one going to Michigan State," said Farwick, whom Davidson coach Brian White called "really exceptional" before a recent practice. "But it takes more than those guys to win a game, it takes an entire team.

"I think we have a better overall team and everybody wants it more."

But either way, as Week One comes and goes, one train of thought is sure to remain lodged inside the Bears' helmets throughout 2008.

"Our ultimate goal is to make a run at a state championship," Yuhas said.

"But in Ohio I think getting to the playoffs is really, really important because it's the only sport where you have to qualify to even have a chance to win a state championship. So qualifying for the playoffs is our No. 1 goal."

--Mike Golden