

KCAC/State College

Cunningham guides McPherson upswing

By RYAN GUTSCHENRITTER

The Hutchinson News

Some folks probably thought David Cunningham was crazy for pursuing the coaching vacancy at McPherson College two years ago.

The program wasn't exactly in good shape. The team had won just four games over the previous two seasons. Facilities were below average.

And the athletic department as a whole had a reputation as one of the least competitive in the Kansas Collegiate Athletic Conference.

Nonetheless, Cunningham sought the job few wanted.

He's glad he did, too. The Bulldogs' fortunes have changed drastically since the Kentucky native was named head coach in February 2002.

Not long after Cunningham was hired, Gary Dill resigned as the school's president. Neil Thorburn took over as interim president and made a commitment to athletics that wasn't always there in the past.

In addition to the coaching staff being increased, roughly \$2 million was allocated to renovate aging McPherson College Stadium. The project - part of an overall \$4.3 million raised to improve athletic facilities - included expansion of the weight room and locker rooms, as well as the installation of a state-of-the-art artificial playing surface.

"When I got the job, it really wasn't a good job," said Cunningham, 38. "But it's turned into a really good job. I kind of lucked into it."

Yes, enthusiasm is high as McPherson prepares for Cunningham's second season, which starts with a Sept. 6 home game against Haskell Indian Nations.

Not only are the Bulldogs breaking in a new stadium, they're coming off a 6-4 season.

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Now they're looking to take the next step - delivering the school's first KCAC championship since 1952.

The situation is a far cry from where the program was when Cunningham took over for Dan Davis.

"When Coach came in, there were a lot of guys borderline on leaving because of the situation," said defensive back Dallas Blacklock, a fifth-year senior. "At the time we didn't have (many) scholarships. The football program was going down."

Davis can hardly be blamed for McPherson's plight. When he succeeded Steve Kazor following the 1999 season, the cupboard was bare.

Several key players graduated, several transferred and several weren't meeting academic requirements. That left Davis with less than 20 returning players, forcing him to start as many as 11 freshmen.

After going 7-3 in '99, the Bulldogs limped to a 1-8 record in 2000. They improved to 3-7 in 2001, but Davis was let go after the season ended.

Cunningham, the team's offensive coordinator under Davis, was first in line for the job.

Immediately, Cunningham went to work on the things he could control - mainly, establishing stability. The coaching staff sought to recruit good players, and then get them to stay.

"They did whatever it took to get guys in here," Blacklock said.

Then came the task of teaching players to believe they could compete in the KCAC.

Once support began to shoot down from



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The newly renovated McPherson College Stadium is just one facet of the overall resurgence of the Bulldog football program under head coach David Cunningham.

above, the attitude change was in full swing.

Not that the Bulldogs needed a new stadium to help home-field advantage. They established that fairly well last year, going undefeated at home.

Still, Cunningham is cautioning players that their new digs won't automatically equal similar success.

"I don't want our guys to buy into that too much," Cunningham said. "You don't want to take anything for granted and think teams are going to come in here and be awed by our facilities."

McPherson returns eight starters each on offense and defense.

Junior Erik Johnson, whom Cunningham calls "essential" to the Bulldogs' plans, is back at quarterback. A 6-foot-1, 200-pound transfer from Idaho State, Johnson passed for 1,037 yards and nine touchdowns last season and rushed for 373 yards and 13 touchdowns to earn second-team All-KCAC honors.

Blacklock, another second-team selection, will lead the defense. Coming back from a redshirt season, the 5-9, 160-pound cornerback from Houston broke up 22 passes in 2002 and had two interceptions, one for a touchdown. He also forced two fumbles and recovered two others.

Yet not everyone around the KCAC seems to think McPherson will continue its turnaround. The Bulldogs were picked to finish sixth by both the media and the coaches.

Of course, part of that can be attributed to the immense parity of the conference. Last year, six teams, including McPherson, finished logjammed in third place at 5-4.

"When you start breaking that up, you can pick almost any way," said Cunningham, who has also coached at three colleges in Kentucky. "I think we can finish higher, but we're certainly not guaranteed anything. I always hesitate to predict win-loss records because if you say 7-3, then you're planning on losing three games."

According to Johnson, the Bulldogs don't plan on losing much. Last season was simply "a good start," he said.

"But we weren't satisfied with it," Johnson added. "We have higher expectations for this year. Nothing short of a championship. We're all driving for that."

How far the Bulldogs have come. "We've been through the rough times," Blacklock said. "Now we actually feel like we have a shot."

"Things are looking good. I'm just glad I stuck around to see it."

Emporia State drawing plenty of preseason exposure

By RYAN GUTSCHENRITTER

The Hutchinson News

As summer rolled on and the college football magazines hit newsstands, it became apparent just how good the experts expect Emporia State to be in 2003.

Every week, it seemed, the Hornets were popping up in a different Division II preseason Top 25.

Don Hansen's Football Gazette ranked them 23rd. So did D2football.com. Lindy's Football Magazine tabbed them No. 22. Street and Smith's had them 18th.

"There's definitely a rise in expectations," ESU third-year coach Dave Wiemers said. "We're going to go right along with that if we can."

The hype is the effect of a 2002 season that was one of the best in Emporia State history.

The Hornets went 9-3, the high-

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lights being a 13-3 home victory over powerful Pittsburg State and a 34-27 overtime win over Winona State, Minn., in the Mineral Water Bowl. It was just the third time in the 100-plus-year history of the program that ESU won as many as nine games and the second time since it moved up to Division II in 1991.

It was also an improvement of four victories from Wiemers' first season, when the Hornets went 5-6.

"We took a big step last year," senior running back Tyler Paul said.

Now, it appears Emporia State is ready to take another one.

Paul, senior offensive lineman

Eric Martin and senior defensive end Philip Mabion were all recognized as preseason All-Americans by Don Hansen.

Paul was the Mid-America Intercollegiate Athletics Association's leading rusher last season with 1,435 yards. He was the MVP of the Mineral Water Bowl - ESU's consolation prize after just missing out on a berth to the D-II playoffs - with 224 yards and three touchdowns.

Mabion's 10½ sacks also led the MIAA. Meanwhile, Martin, a 6-foot-1, 328-pound guard from Hutchinson (Buhler High) is entering his third year as a starter.

The Hornets are also replacing an All-American, though, in Dontaye McCoy, the MIAA defensive MVP. Taking McCoy's strong safety spot will be senior Josh Williams, who started at free safety last season.

While the offense, with 10 returning starters, seems to be the team's strength, Wiemers said he's actually more excited about ESU's defense.

"I think across the board we've got better players at each position," said Wiemers, who played at Dodge City Community College. "Dontaye's hard to replace, but we're going to have a guy there who's going to be just as good. Without a doubt we feel like we've got a better team."

That's a scary prospect.

"We've been kind of planning this," Williams said. "Our motto now is just to finish what we started. We're looking forward to competing for a national championship."

Emporia State should first worry about simply winning its conference. Having taken third last season at 6-3, the Hornets were

picked fourth in the MIAA preseason coaches poll.

The three teams chosen to finish ahead of them - No. 4 Northwest Missouri State, No. 11 Pittsburg State and No. 16 Central Missouri State - are all ranked in the AFCA Top 25. ESU is receiving votes in the AFCA poll, the primary D-II rankings.

The Hornets were drubbed by CMSU, 41-13, and NWMSU, 34-5, last season but play both at Emporia this season.

"(The MIAA) is not a whole heck of a lot of fun to coach in," Wiemers joked. "You coach long enough in this league, your life span may not be very long. Fortunately for us, I think we're becoming one of those good teams. Getting third in the league last year was great, getting nine wins, but we want to be a little better than that."