



FILE PHOTO: NICK WIEBE

ON YOUR MARKS, GET SET, SHOVE The offensive line shouldn't be a problem for this year's Bears, but the defensive secondary is more of a question mark, with several key members having graduated.

The boys of autumn are on the rebound

After last year's disappointing record, the Bears football team hopes that different means better as they get ready to open this season with a younger lineup and several significant coaching changes

ANDREW RENFREE
Sports Staff

The best word to describe the Bears football season last year is mediocre. Alberta finished the season with a 4-4 record, leaving the Green and Gold out of the playoff picture for the first time in four years. With the 2007 season about to officially begin, the Bears will try and put last year's struggles behind them.

Head coach Jerry Friesen has plans to bring his team to the top this year. He vowed in the off-season that missing the playoffs in 2007 isn't an option for the Bears, and he noted that making the playoff cut should be Alberta's focus every minute of each game.

The Bears started trying to put their new focus to work last weekend in an exhibition game against the University of Calgary Dinos, but couldn't pull out a win. The Bears were down nine at the end of the first quarter and trailed for the rest of the game.

They ended up losing 26-18, but the loss didn't phase Friesen too much. In addition to the fact that several starters sat to give some younger players game time, he pointed out that preseason is practice: it gives coaches a chance to finalize their lineups, make adjustments to their team structure, and get used to changes made during the off-season.

For the Bears, there were changes both to the roster and the coaching staff, and fans this year will be guaranteed to see a different Bears football team for the '07 campaign. The biggest hole to fill will be the defensive secondary, with halfbacks Neil Ternovatsky and Steve Boyko and corner Jason James all having graduated last season.

The other challenge on defense will be filling the shoes of David Lowry, who anchored Alberta's linebackers for the last five years and is now trying to crack the lineup of the CFL's Winnipeg Blue Bombers.

"We have a lot of young players filling in the voids from graduating players, but the guys we have coming up are athletic, so it should be interesting to see how they step into those roles," Friesen said.

Perhaps the biggest criticism Alberta faced last year was the passing game and quarterback situation. Cam Linke and Quade Armstrong split the pivot duties, but it seemed that neither could really get consistent offensive momentum throughout the year.

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BEARS FOOTBALL HEAD COACH

Linke graduated, so at this point Armstrong is the top contender for the starting QB role, but Friesen noted that sophomore Evan Hoffman will be competing with Armstrong for playing time—a situation Friesen thinks will be better for the quarterbacks and the team.

"Quade has been working hard this off-season and so has Hoffman; they'll be competing for handling the offence this year," Friesen noted, adding that having two capable quarterbacks pushing for a starting position is ideal.

"I think that having two guys improves the situation. It's great because they end up looking after the team. Not only is it competitive to have two quarterbacks vying for the starting role, it's best for the team as a whole."

Another obstacle Alberta faced was having to

deal with the departure of offensive coordinator Terry Eisler, who left the Bears to pursue a coaching opportunity with the Eskimos. Rick Walters, who used to coach the receivers, will be calling the offensive plays this year and has been adjusting to the offensive coordinator role during training camp.

"Things are coming along really well with Rick in the offensive coordinator role. But you can say as much as you want, the real test is when we get out on the field," Friesen said, adding that fans can expect to see some differences to the offence this year. "Changes? Oh yeah, there will be changes—improvements hopefully. You can't stay the same every year if you want to compete."

The Bears first real test will come with their regular season opener against the University of Saskatchewan Huskies. The Huskies are coming off their third straight appearance—and third straight loss—at the Vanier Cup, and are a perennial rival.

The Bears have had trouble against the Huskies recently. Saskatchewan emerged victorious both times the two schools met last year, and also vanquished Alberta in the 2005 Hardy Cup. Friesen acknowledged that it would be hard to find a more daunting opponent to face on its own turf for the first game of the year.

"It's always a test in Saskatoon. There's nothing more challenging than playing against Saskatoon on their home opener," he said.

Nonetheless, Friesen said that they would be equipped to face the challenge as long as they played their best.

"This year, with all our new players, it's just a matter of getting used to playing with each other," he added. "We've just got to get back to basic football and execute correctly."

Alberta will open their season Friday night at 7pm at Griffiths Stadium in Saskatoon. The game will be available on Shaw TV and the TEAM 1260 radio.

SCHEDULE

Friday, 31 August

@ University of Saskatchewan Huskies
Griffiths Stadium, Saskatoon
7:00 pm

Saturday, 8 September

vs University of Regina Rams
Foote Field
2:00 pm

Saturday, 15 September

@ UBC Thunderbirds
Thunderbirds Stadium, Vancouver
3:00 pm

Saturday, 22 September

vs Simon Fraser University Clan
Foote Field
2:00 pm

Saturday, 29 September

@ University of Calgary Dinos
McMahon Stadium, Calgary
1:00 pm

Saturday, 6 October

vs University of Manitoba Bison
Foote Field, Winnipeg
2:00 pm

Saturday, 13 October

@ University of Regina Rams
Taylor Field, Regina
3:00 pm

Saturday, 20 October

vs University of Saskatchewan Huskies
Foote Field
2:00 pm

All times are Mountain Standard Time.

If you don't feel like following the team bus across Western Canada in a van, you can catch all Bears football games with Bob Stauffer on the TEAM 1260 radio.