

Cardinal returners looking to fill shoes left by historic senior class

Hoisington football 2017

By Mike Courson
 With 32 wins in just three years at Hoisington, coach Zach Baird has a way of reloading. The task will be all the more difficult this fall with the loss of one of the most decorated classes in school history.

"I don't know if you ever replace kids but we'll have some guys who will step up and get an opportunity where they probably haven't had that opportunity because of the guys before them," Baird said. "But I think all the effort and work those guys put in, these guys were around that and see how this program runs. I think they're excited about the opportunity."

Hoisington went on to play in the state quarterfinals for the first time in school history last fall. The Cardinals fell to Hesston 35-19 to end a perfect season at 12-1. Hesston fell in overtime to Rossville 48-42 in the state championship game.

Being a run-team first - Baird's 2016 Cardinals ran the ball 565 times last season and threw just 68 times - Hoisington will have to replace three of its top-four backs from a year ago, including the school's all-time leading rusher in Hunter Hanzlick.

Hanzlick played in just 11 games but still paced the Cards with 1,493 yards and 25 touchdowns on 181 carries. Right behind him, Cameron Davis rushed for 1,384 yards and 20 scores on 103 attempts. Quarterback Tyler Specht was fourth on the team with 586 yards. He scored 12 touchdowns on 76 carries.

Baird does have some firepower returning in the backfield. Senior Sean Urban missed a game but still broke the 1,000-yard bar-



2017 Hoisington Cardinal football team

rier with 1,034 yards and nine touchdowns on just 115 carries. Junior Jake Curtis averaged better than nine yards a carry, running the ball just 19 times for 119 yards.

"For me it's not too much about me or how many yards I get, it's about the wins and losses," Urban said. "Personally, I'd like to get over 1,000 yards again, maybe 2,000, but it all reality it's more about winning and doing whatever you have to do to win."

Senior Rudy Gearhart will also see more touches this year after carrying the ball just four times for 41 yards and a touchdown last season. Sophomore Wyatt Pedigo rushed for 88 yards and a score on 16 attempts last season and will be another option for Baird. Specht was a three-year starter under center. His absence leaves the door open for a trio of potential quarterbacks in junior Derek Boxberger, sophomore Alex Schremmer, or freshman Mason Haxton. All three can throw, but Baird plans on sticking with his bread-and-butter ground attack.

"We want to throw the ball but make no mistake about it, we want to run the football," he said. "Our

identity as an offense isn't going to change. We're still going to run the football."

As good as the offense was in 2016, the defense may have been even better. The Cardinals held five of their nine regular-season opponents to one touchdown or fewer. Even in four playoff games, Hoisington held its first three opponents to a combined 21 points.

"I'd like to think the last 5-8 years our defense has been really good," said Baird. "That's something we take great pride in. We don't have much of a choice but to try to get to the standard that's been set, regardless of who's playing. We'll look to get after it defensively just like we have in the past."

Missing in the middle will be linebacker Landen Urban, who won 3A Defensive Player of the Year honors before heading off to Washburn. Urban was the heart of last year's defense with 105 tackles.

Baird must replace six of his defensive starters. In the secondary, Brenner Donovan led the pack with four interceptions. Gearhart and Pedigo each return with three interceptions from a year ago.

Sean and Landen Ur-

ban played linebacker last year alongside Hanzlick, Pedigo, and Eric Barrett. Sean Urban was second on last year's squad with 67 tackles, and Pedigo was not far behind at 59 tackles. Pedigo will move to inside linebacker this fall, and Urban will stay on the outside.

Curtis returns to the defensive line with 50 tackles from a year ago. Missing there will be big names like Grant Dolechek, Jeremy Schneider, and Jeremy Breit.

The empty shoes continue to pile up on special teams. Exchange student Inigo Barrera-Carpio did the kicking last year, and Davis and Sean Urban did most of the kick returns. Davis led the team with 12 kick returns and 16 punt returns for a total of 423 yards. Urban was a big-play guy with 287 total return yards on just 11 tries.

Down the schedule, the Cardinals can expect an early test in week two with a road game at Collegiate. This year, Hoisington plays reigning 4A champion Pratt at home, and the Cards should again have a mild district run with home games against Ellsworth and Larned, and a road game at Lyons.

Sept. 1	@Kingman
Sept. 8	@Collegiate
Sept. 15	HILLSBORO
Sept. 22	@Washington Co.
Sept. 29	PRATT
Oct. 6	@Nickerson
Oct. 13	ELLSWORTH
Oct. 20	LARNED
Oct. 26	@Lyons

Runnin' Bears

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Hugoton graduated its top runner, thought the Eagles should have enough back to remain a powerhouse.

Four Lady Bears back

Brownlee will have plenty of returning varsity experience on the girls' side. Senior Alley Rowland will be joined by juniors Debi Schmidt, Nikki Clark, and Zoe Miller. All four runners gained varsity experience last year.

"We have battled health problems with Debi and Nikki the last two seasons and we hope to have them both in good health all season," said Brownlee.

Miller led the team with a 25th-place finish at the regional meet last year. Schmidt finished 12 spots back in 37th.

Senior Madison Morgan and junior Jillian Millhouse also return with varsity experience. Incoming freshmen Risa Boeken and Macy Brownlee will be vying for varsity spots as well.

With lots of youth on the squad, Brownlee is ready to watch his team get stronger over the course of the season. "I always look forward to watching the athletes become more competitive as the season progresses," he said. "Especially with a lot of young athletes, it takes a while for them to really understand the sport and begin to figure out race strategy. It's fun to watch that progression."

Sterling

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skill positions will have good senior leadership as well, but will also need some underclassmen to step into a larger role this year. I'm excited about what we have this year and I think our seniors will be able to guide the younger guys throughout the year. We will be lacking in depth at all positions with low numbers overall, so it will be important for us to stay healthy."

Defensively, Sterling allowed three or fewer touchdowns in half its 10 games last season. The squad offers nice athleticism in the secondary with a host of returning players like Comley, Richter, and Briar. Missing in action will be standout linebacker Brandon Frederick.

Sterling will play entirely within the Heart of America League before running into former Central Kansas League foes Haven and Halstead in the final two weeks of district play.

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