

Who will win: 2017 Central Kansas League predictions

By MIKE GILMORE
It is said that the best way to predict the future is to create it. Last year’s playoff season had its share of surprises. Holcomb was all set to repeat as state champ, but ran into a streaking Class 4A-DII Pratt team and fell one game short. The Greenbacks beat Holcomb twice by a touchdown. The only way to go for the Greenbacks, which opened with a win against the playoffs-bound Larned Indians 31-16, was forward to its first state title since 1995 over Topeka-Hayden.

Hesston, meanwhile, rode the combined talents of quarterback Zach Esau and receiver Zach Vogt to a barn-burner of a 3A title game, won by three-time champion Rossville in OT. In three seasons under coach Jason Grider, the Dragons are 31-6 and have gotten used to an extended season and is pursuing its fifth consecutive trip into the playoffs. Hoisington’s solid, senior-laden OL made room for senior all-time rusher Hunter Hanzlick for 1,493 yards and wins over both Pratt and Wichita Collegiate.

Where will the Larned Indians fit in the CKL in 2017? Well, coach A.B. Stokes doesn’t make predictions. “You have to play the game,” he says. The Indians went 0-6 against arguably the hardest 3A strength of schedule in the state in 2016. Beginning with a bi-district upset of Cimarron, they found themselves at home in the 3A bracket against Phillipsburg. Teams in Kansas play a two-year football cycle, so those same teams are on the season schedule again, beginning with Pratt on Friday.

So here’s the list. They’re numbered, because they have to have a number. In the CKL, however, bet that both teams – whomever they may be and wherever they may play on Friday night – will show up to play the games each week.

1. Pratt – Coach Jame Cruce’s focus on strength produced a senior-laden squad in 2016. But they are gone, leaving 10 holes to fill on defense and three on the offensive line. Junior Travis Thies will be a good place to start the defensive rebuild, hammering out 89 tackles at safety last year. On offense, Thies strolled for 1,975 yards and 24 TDs. Adding to that, QB Landen Studer returns as a senior, throwing for

some 1,000 yards and 11 TDs with 500 yards from his own two feet. The newbies coming in have a lot of work to do.

2. Hesston – The Swathers spread the field in 2016, but that was with Zach’n’Zach and coach Clint Riley. The Z’s are graduated and Riley is off to Blue Valley. A basically-new cast awaits a new coach and it remains to be seen whether first-year coach Tyson Bauerle will continue the spread or employ his ground-based playbook he used at Sterling last year. It’s going to take those 14 returning lettermen a while to learn the ropes.

3. Halstead – The Dragons have had three 10-win seasons and three district titles, raising expectations from the Dragon faithful. Last year, a trio of running backs contributed 100 yards apiece to the Dragons’ 422 yard rushing attack and took advantage of Indian miscues for a 22-0 lead in the first 12 minutes and a 54-7 win in Larned. Offense will again be strong as Dalton Kraus moves from leading receiver at tight end to quarterback. The defense won’t be too shabby either.

4. Nickerson – Nickerson was once the doormat of the former Mid-State Activities Association. Those days are gone with the MSAA. The Panthers were 6-4 last season, with coach Mike Vernon now in his third year. They’ve learned to run the flexbone against the CKL, losing to Smoky Valley in overtime along with Pratt, Hoisington and Wichita Collegiate – opponents which, combined, had a 39-9 record.

t-5. Hoisington – For the Cardinals, it’s not so much who is gone as who is coming back. Hanzlick, Shrine Bowl OL Landen Urban, Cameron Davis and QB Tyler Specht are gone; but nine return – four on offense and five on defense. For the Cards, that may be enough. Sean Urban returns as a senior with 115 rushes for 1,034 yards from last year. Senior Wyatt Pedigo had 59 stops.

t-5. Larned – The Indians took a while to gain their game legs. In a litany of could’ve- and should’ve-beens, Larned was in sight of Pratt through three quarters. The next week, 83 penalty yards and turnovers gave Smoky Valley a 19-12 win in Lindsborg. The Indians moved to

0-6 in the last game before district, as Phillipsburg blanked Larned 50-0. Changed offensive strategy turned the tide in district, however, and the Indians felled Cimarron and Ellsworth along with district opponent Lyons. In their first playoff game since 1985, the Indians had Phillipsburg on the ropes before losing 14-7 on Earl Roberts Field. Coach Stokes has hopes that his multiple-I offense led by senior QB Carson Smith and a revolving door of running backs will put the Indians frequently into the red zone this season.

7. Smoky Valley – Last year, a talented Viking junior class surprised some people and went 8-3, and coach Tim Lambert turned around his third program. The Vikes posted wins over Larned, Lyons, Rock Creek and Chapman, then clinched district over Clay Center and beat Nickerson 21-20 in the playoffs. But – and it’s a big one – everyone has had time to pore over the game films over the summer and the same crew is back as seniors in 2017.

8. Kingman – Kingman went 3-6 and 0-3 in district in 2016. Workhorse Payton Pickering is gone and the QB spot has three hopefuls gunning for the job. Running the triple option requires some savvy. Upperclassmen – 13 seniors and 14 juniors – will make practice a continuing audition early on.

9. Haven – Haven has won only 15 games through the past decade. They went 1-8 in 2016. With a 12-game home losing streak and 12



Hoisington made an historical run in 2016. Can the Cardinals repeat the magic in 2017?
(photo by Mike Courson)

consecutive lost district games, it could be another long season for the

Wildcats.

10. Hillsboro – Hillsboro went winless in

Mustangs looking to extend season turnaround

By MIKE GILMORE
Last season, the Macksville Mustangs turned things around. The Mustangs were 1-8 in coach Jeff Kuckelman’s last season in 2013, then went 0-9 and 1-8 in the first two years under coach Chet Skinner.

Last year, the Mustangs bumped up to 4-5, their best record since the same mark in 2012.

In Skinner’s fourth season (5-22) the Mustangs return five offensive and defensive starters for a squad that last made the Eight-Man playoffs in 2011.

Skinner’s early goals include a team GPA of 3.0 and above; increased offensive production; holding opponents to under 20 points a game; have five or more dynamic plays a game and win the turnover battle.

“The Mustangs’ keys

to success in 2017 rely on the returning players,” Skinner noted. “WE have a solid core group of guys that have been starters for multiple years now. Our athleticism will look to stretch the field and give defenses trouble on both the run and the pass. A strong summer weights and conditioning off-season will be vital for the Mustangs to improve on their 4-5

2015 and picked up the pace a little at 3-6 last season. Jacob Funk, a 6-5, 190 senior, was a second-team CKL pick at wide receiver, but he has to have someone to throw him the ball. Senior QB Kaden Kliener will have three offensive linemen return in front. They did beat Southeast of Saline 30-28 in their last game of regular season.

11. Lyons – Lyons’ only contest within 30 points last season was a 22-13 loss to Minneapolis the third week. Their last winning season was 5-4 in 2013.

Macksville football 2017

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| Sept. 1 | NESS CITY |
| Sept. 8 | @Victoria |
| Sept. 15 | KINSLEY |
| Sept. 22 | @St. John |
| Sept. 29 | SOUTH CENTRAL |
| Oct. 6 | @Kiowa County |
| Oct. 13 | SKYLINE |
| Oct. 20 | @Attica-Argonia |
| Oct. 26 | FAIRFIELD |

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