

# Larned Indians want 'good start' to season in 2017

By MIKE GILMORE

Sixth year Larned high school football coach A.B. Stokes felt moved to set the record straight on the Indians' 3-8 season in 2016.

"I wouldn't say that the guys didn't believe that had it in them early on last year; we were an extremely young group and it wasn't necessarily that they didn't believe. I've hear people say, 'how did you (coaches) keep it together after starting that way?' Well, it wasn't us. We changed a few things, but the kids chose to believe and play hardball."

Last year's 0-6 season start was the hardest hit that Stokes had yet to face as the Indians' coach; especially after his great start in 2013 leading the squad to its first playoff game since 1985, with a 7-3 record.

Larned started 0-6 against what many believe was the hardest strength of schedule in Class 3A last year, but they finished strong – clinching their district with wins over Ellsworth and Lyons, then upsetting Cimarron 35-30 on the road for their first bi-district title since downing Haven 10-6 in '85 to finish 10-1.

Beginning with Pratt, the Indians fought through the September slate and games that largely could have gone either way, Stokes said.

"Some of it was unforced errors, some of it was bad bounces of the ball," Stokes said. "I think that if we pulled off the Pratt game it would have changed the course of those six games."

"We're up 8-3 and they hit a trick pass that we should have stuffed; in the fourth quarter it

was 24-16 and they got that last touchdown to put us away. They went on to win state.

"I've heard it said by some great coaches that you never want to get too high or to low during a season. Your best effort is to try just to handle your business, the day-to-day, and prepare for just what's ahead of you. You have to keep going to work."

A shift to a downhill running game gave the Indians the offensive boost they needed, but it was defense through the past 10 games that held Phillipsburg to 14 points with a chance to advance in the playoffs.

"As I've said for years now, it's part of the high school football game," Stokes said. "At the end of the day, you evaluate what you've got coming back and you work on making what you've got coming back better. You work on plugging up the holes to put forth a great effort and hopefully experience some on-the-field success through the season."

The 2017 returnees had a successful summer at camp, which included a trip to Nebraska as the only Kansas squad on the program. "Aw man, that camp was brutal," Stokes noted. "There were a couple teams from Texas, a bunch of teams from Missouri, Iowa, Nebraska and a team from Wyoming."

"They stuck us with a team from St. Louis – Lutheran North – who was just by far the best competition that we've ever faced on the field. They had a bunch of DI prospects and one guy who is ranked 13th in the



Above: Carson Smith (2) at quarterback, and left: Anthony McConnell (1) at running back.



Wes Davis

country at tight end.

"We played them once and on the second day the head coach of Concordia University came to me and told me that our team was the only one who wasn't afraid to play 'em. Well, I wasn't afraid to play 'em, but at the same time, I don't want my kids hurt. That first time they were knocking us down and barking over us and just trying to intimidate us the best they could. But by the last couple times, we were having our share of positive plays and then, when they made a tackle, they were helping us up. We'd earned their respect out there on the field. I think it was a great learning experience for our guys."

After Pratt, the Indians have Smoky Valley for homecoming, "who will be bringing it," Stokes said. Then we have Hesston after that. It's a tough start again for us."

The Indians return nine offensive starters, including four linemen, where Stokes believes lies his team's strength.

"We've got Jordan

Taylor Tim Gardea, Jeremiah Slattery and Kelton Barrett all back that all started for us this year. I think our biggest strength will be the offensive line."

Carson Smith returns as a 5-9, 160 senior quarterback. "Carson really grew up this summer and he's going to command this offense," Stokes said. "At camp, he managed the ball very well and he didn't take a sack, either; he was getting out of trouble."

Anthony McConnell, a 5-5, 184 senior, returns at running back, as does Shevin Martin, a 400-yard speedster who will rotate with 6-2, 190 senior Damontay Phillips. "We're going to have a lot of fresh backs ready," Stokes said. "There we have targets to throw to but we will be wanting to run the ball."

On defense, we'll have to replace three out of our four linebackers, but we've got Shevin in there to start and he's probably the fastest linebacker we've ever had."

The Indians begin their 2017 slate tonight at 7 p.m. in Pratt.

## Larned football 2017

Sept. 1	@Pratt
Sept. 8	SMOKY VALLEY
Sept. 15	HESSTON
Sept. 22	@Halstead
Sept. 29	@Nickerson
Oct. 6	PHILLIPSBURG
Oct. 13	LYONS
Oct. 20	@Hoisington
Oct. 26	ELLSWORTH

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