

# Mustangs look to playoff berth

By Ashley Conklin

Hoping to do what no Heppner football team has done since 1981, the Mustangs return 15 lettermen and 26 players overall in hopes of returning to the Class "A" state playoffs.

The Mustangs annually saw post season action in the late 1970s and early 1980s as the top team, most often, in the Columbia Basin Conference.

In 1981 the Mustangs took a team of stars such as Robert Bier, Earl Hammond, Doug Holland, John Murray, and Lee Rice and a 10-0 record into the state quarterfinals before falling to a talented Oakridge team.

Since then, Heppner's successes on the gridiron have been few with records of 5-4, 3-6, 0-9, and 3-5 respectively.

However, the 3-5 league and overall record under rookie head coach Tim Birkby placed Heppner fifth in the nine-team Columbia Basin Conference last season.

With the 15 returning lettermen and 26 returning players overall on the 35-man roster, optimism is running high in the Mustang camp according to Birkby.

"Our number one goal this season is to make the playoffs," Birkby said. "Everybody came to practice with a good attitude and everybody has worked hard and hustled in practice. They know what they want, and what they want is a playoff berth."

To advance to the playoffs Heppner must finish first or second in the CBC. However that will be no easy task as league champ Wahtonka returns a strong nucleus of last year's team. Umatilla, last season's other representative in the playoffs, also will be strong this year, as will Riverside.

"We should be one of the top four teams in the league," Birkby said. "From there it's who knocks off whom."

"We have Umatilla and Wahtonka back-to-back in the middle end of the schedule," Birkby added, "and if we can beat one of those two we should be in good shape for a playoff berth." Heppner travels to Umatilla on Friday, Oct. 3 and hosts Wahtonka on Thursday, Oct. 9.

Last season the Mustangs struggled offensively, only scoring a little over a touchdown per contest. The defense kept the Mustangs in mostly every game last season allowing only 13 points per game. However, the opposite may be true this season.

Heppner will start any five of six seniors on the offensive line.

The center position is set with Kevin Curnutt (5'11", 145 lbs.). The tackle positions are also set with Jason Palmer (5'10", 195 lbs.), an honorable mention all-conference pick a year ago, and Bob Riehl (5'9", 175 lbs.) last year's Most Valuable Player. The guard spots are between Scott Dougherty (5'8", 165 lbs.), Troy Hyatt (6'0", 150 lbs.), and Arkie Smith (5'6", 150 lbs.). All except Smith started at times last season.

Birkby brought back the option as the main offense last season, run out of an "I" formation.

The Mustangs will again run the option, and running it will be senior Joe Taylor (5'6", 140 lbs.) who started the last four games last season after then sophomore Ryan Duncan went down with an injury. Since Duncan has moved to Washington, sophomore Dick Devin (5'11", 140 lbs.) will back up Taylor this season.

Competing for the two offensive backfield positions are seniors Scott Buschke (5'11", 170 lbs.) and David Pedro (6'0", 180 lbs.) and junior Scott Jones (5'8", 140 lbs.).

Pedro, last season's starting fullback, gained 207 yards rushing

and Jones, in limited action as a tailback, rushed for 183 yards. Jones was also the league's top punt returner with a 14.2 average.

The one weak spot offensively, will be the inexperienced receiving corps. The Mustangs were counting heavily on junior Duane Ball who started at times last season. However, Ball was unable to come back after a bout with mononucleosis last spring.

In his absence, sophomores Craig Angell (5'10", 150 lbs.) and Bryan Padberg (5'7", 135 lbs.) will start at split end and flanker respectively. Junior Mark Fishburn (5'10", 135 lbs.) who saw time at tight end split end last season. This season he will start at tight end.

"With the loss of Duane our biggest weak points will be our receiving corps and defensive secondary," Birkby said.

Ball, a starter at safety last year, intercepted three passes and was a second team all-conference selection.

Replacing Ball at safety will be Devin, while returning to start at the corner spots will be Padberg and Taylor.

The linebacking corps is solid with Buschke, Curnutt, Palmer, and Pedro. Palmer was an honorable mention pick last year at linebacker as well as his offensive tackle position. Pedro was second on the team in tackles with 87, placing him in the league's top 15. All of them, except Curnutt started a year ago.

Riehl, led the league with five fumble recoveries and was fourth with 116 tackles. He will start at one defensive tackle spot. The other tackle spot will be between Dougherty, senior Gene Harris (5'8", 120 lbs.), junior Gene Lancaster 6'3", 270 lbs.), and Smith. Fishburn and Hyatt will start at the two defensive end spots.

Palmer, who was the punter last season, is being battled in practice by Angell. At press time, the kicker's spot was still up for grabs. Besides returning a handful of experienced players, the Mustangs also return a veteran coaching staff.

Birkby is in his second season as head coach, but had four years of experience as an assistant coach before taking over as head coach. Les Payne also returns for his ninth season as an assistant coach. The other assistant coach will be Steve Brownfield who is in his first season (see related story).

Returning non-lettermen from last season are juniors Scott Davis and Doug Marlatt; and sophomores Jerry Brosnan, Jim Brosnan, Jess Jeffreys, Brian Kollman, Barney Lindsay, Mike Mahoney, Jess Osmin, and Ted Schwarz.

Those turning out for the first time are sophomore Jeff Rauch; and freshmen Russell Britt, Phil Estberg, Jason Maben, Slater Mitchell, Ryan Miller, Dean Munkers, Casey Pedro, and Cory Rill.

The Mustangs open the season at home on Friday with a non-league date with the Weston McEwen Tiger-Scots.

"It's good to have a game this early in the season, especially a non-league game because we can learn a lot of things," Birkby said. "It will give us a good chance to see the kids in a game situation. We'll try and play as many people as possible and use the game as a learning experience for everybody."

"Everyone on the team knows each other real well and can play together as a unit, which is my philosophy of how football should be played," he added. "We should be able to work well together."

The Mustangs could well work their way into a playoff berth come November if the blend of experience and inexperience can, as Birkby said, "work well together."

# Mustangs grab new coach

By Ashley Conklin

Steve Brownfield who this year is entering his 16th year as a biology teacher at Heppner High School has decided to add a new twist to his career as he enters the coaching ranks.

Brownfield, with no prior coaching experience, has replaced Lee Block as an assistant football coach for the Heppner Mustangs.

"I wanted a change in my career and something different so I decided on coaching," Brownfield explained. "I wanted to find out what it would be like to coach."

Brownfield's duties consist of being a receivers and linebackers coach for the varsity team and serving with fellow assistant coach Les Payne in watching the junior varsity team.

"It's been a learning experience so far, but I'm starting to feel comfortable with it (coaching)," Brownfield said. "I'm just learning

as time goes on."

A lot of talk has been made of Heppner reaching the Class "A" state playoffs this year. How does Brownfield see the Mustangs chances this season?

"It's hard for me to say after spending the last eight years working in the concession stand during football games," he said of his past responsibilities as a junior class advisor. "I do know we have some talent this year and everybody's hustling and working hard in practice."

How long does Brownfield plan on serving as a Mustang football coach?

"I'm just taking it one year at a time," he said. "I'll wait until after this year is over to decide if I'll continue in coaching. If I feel comfortable with what I've done and feel I'll help the team with my presence, I'll be back. But if I don't think I did a good job this year then I won't continue coaching."

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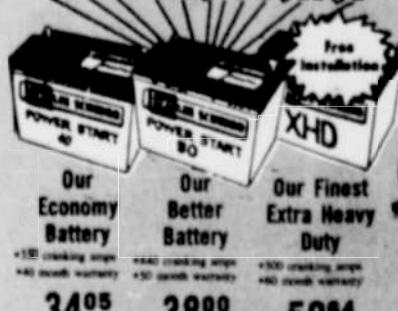
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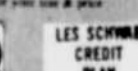
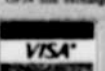


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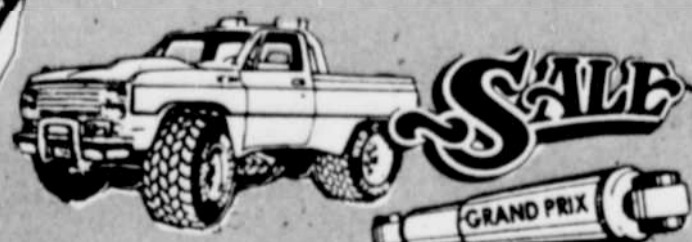


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