

Randolph Oilers set sights on EFL Title, Summer Football season opener set for Friday

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Friday night the Eastern Football League kicks off its 32d season.

And there are plenty of questions to be answered.

Can the Marlborough Shamrocks retain their EFL title?

Will the Randolph Oilers regain the winning form that carried them through an unbeaten season to a league title in 1990?

Will the Mansfield-based Hockomock Colts, the Most Improved Club of '92, gain strength in its third year of operation?

Can the Middleborough Cobras, the oldest and most productive club in the EFL, garner another championship?

All of these questions will be answered. It will take until Labor Day before the champion is crowned, but Friday night's opener between Marlborough and Hockomock in Mansfield should set the tone for another long, hot summer in the Eastern Football League, which also includes the Methuen Outlaws, the Ocean State Buccaneers, the Medway Tigers, the Hyde Park Cowboys, the Charlestown Townies, the Maine Lions from Old Orchard Beach and the Maine LA Warriors from Lewistown.

Last year Marlborough went 9-1 in the regular season, undefeated in the playoffs and advanced to the eastern sectionals of the Minor League Football Association playoffs.

The Shamrocks have won more titles than anyone else in the league.

"Why have we been so successful?" Marlborough coach Bill Brennan said. "Tradition, maybe. There always has been a pride in our town and on our team."

The Shamrocks tuned up for the regular season by playing a Russian team, the Moscow Giants, on June 20. Marlborough walked away with a 26-13 victory that could have been a lopsided game.

"They have a lot of athletic players on the Russian team," Brennan said. "But their players lack the experience of playing the game. They didn't grow up with it like we did."

The Russians just played the wrong team. The Shamrocks could give the New England Patriots a rumble. Since 1983 Marlborough has won six league titles. Marlborough's record since organizing in 1965 is 206 wins, 73 losses and 2 ties.

"We've lost some people from last year's squad that we have to replace," Brennan said. "But we've picked up some good people, too."

One player picked up is Rob Lambert, who was an all-conference selection last year at Worcester State College. Other players coming back for the Shamrocks include former University of Massachusetts quarterback Dave Palazzi, who was named the EFL's Most Valuable Player last year. Palazzi threw 20 touchdown passes and moved the ball more than 2,500 yards in the air.

Also back is linebacker Larry Heindle. He was the EFL's Defensive MVP.

Another award winner is wide receiver Greg Moore, who caught 39 passes for 640 yards and 7 touchdowns. He was the EFL rookie of the year.

Other receivers who are primary targets for Palazzi are tight end Mike Kelly (32 catches, 478 yards, 6 TDs) and Rich Flecca (32 catches, 629 yards, 8 TDs). Another target for Palazzi this year is newcomer Mike Tobin, who was a teammate of Palazzi's at UMass.

When Marlborough does not go to the air, the ground game is quite competent. Frank Fay was the EFL's leading rusher before the Shamrocks became Air Palazzi. Also in the backfield for Marlborough are Pete Jackson and Mike Grassis.

In addition to Heindle on defense, there are all-league linemen Carl Hume and Larry Dorey, plus defensive backs Steve Cavallo, Tom Grasso and Wayne Beckwith.

"We might be stronger this year, but that doesn't mean too much," Brennan said. "Every year the whole league gets stronger."

A look at the Randolph Oilers proves that. Last year the Oilers were a better team.

Added to the squad was Lance Olberding, a 6-foot-6-inch, 311-pound offensive lineman. He was so good that he was a first-round selection by the Cincinnati Bengals.

You would have thought the Oilers would have barreled through the Eastern Football League as they did in 1990. Instead, Randolph started with a pair of losses before winning their final eight games.

"The league is always getting much better," Oilers owner Peter O'Kane said. "We've made some changes, too, hopefully for the better."

The Oilers have lost quarterback Bobby Witt. Filling in will be John Pina and newcomer Bill Shaunnessey. Pina filled in for Witt last year when he went down with injury. Pina carried the team for a month in 1990 on the way to the EFL title when Witt was getting married and on his honeymoon.

Shaunnessey is one of those players loaded with potential. The Quincy native split his collegiate career between UMass and Curry College.

"I always thought he'd get a crack at the pros," O'Kane said. Shaunnessey split the quarterbacking with Pina during an exhibition game with the Ocean State Buccaneers last Saturday night.

"The first play he was in there he threw a 50-yard touchdown pass. The next time he was in the game he threw a 75-yard touchdown pass," O'Kane said.

Certainly Randolph will have plenty of bodies. "We have 75 players on our roster," O'Kane said. "We usually dress 45 for a game."

In the August dog days, that is an asset.

Among the players who will play defense for the Oilers are linebacker Bubba Pina, Leo Cooney and Mike Tisone, lineman Rich Santos and backs John Epps, Sean Frazier and Tom Dennehy.

On offense, Jay McGee and Mike Waithe will do most of the ball carrying, and Mark and Kevin Harding and Ricky Witt will do the receiving along with tight end Ron Cassford.

Leading the offense for the Hockomock Colts will be Bernard Wiley. Last year he became the fifth EFL player to rush for more than 1,000 yards as the Colts went from 1-9 their first season to 6-4 and a playoff contender last season.

Another highlight for the Colts last year was second-team All-American Mike Mulgrew, who set a league record for kickoff returns when he scampered 100 yards for a TD.

But the sleeper this year could be the Middleborough Cobras, the oldest team in the EFL. Last year the Cobras were 8-2 and have several veterans and a handful of newcomers to strengthen their lineup.

Quarterback Todd Levine leads a host of all-EFL players with newcomers such as safety Jason Walmsley of Southern Connecticut and center Tom McSweeney from UMass-Dartmouth.