

Love of the game; Out of the limelight, Granite, Oilers set to kickoff

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Shoulder pads slap violently against each other. A biting whistle starts and stops drills. A booming voice instructs players on the execution of patterns and plays. Helmets crack helmets.

These were the sounds yesterday at Cavanaugh Field, where the Eastern Football League's Quincy Granite readied themselves for the league's 41st season.

At 8 tonight at Randolph High School's Memorial Field, the Randolph Oilers host the Rhode Island Prowlers in the first game of the 2002 EFL season. Quincy travels tomorrow to Wakefield for a 2 p.m. kickoff to the season against the Bay State Thunder.

The EFL is the nation's longest-running amateur football association. Nobody is paid, there are no shoe contracts, and there is no limelight. The EFL exists because players and fans love the game.

As the Granite closed practice yesterday, it was obvious that each player had only one thing on his mind.

"They want to win, end of story," said Granite head coach Ken McPhee, the former North Quincy High School coach.

"That's why we all do this.

"This is a league of love. Everyone on this field loves the game and that's why we're here."

In Randolph, Oilers head coach Ed Penn was busy yesterday preparing his troops for battle, and also preparing for the team's annual pasta dinner at the Randolph VFW.

"This is a great way to get camaraderie going between guys," Penn said by cell phone as he strolled the aisles of a supermarket, looking for ingredients. "It's good for guys to break bread together. It helps with the nucleus of the team and getting the new guys introduced."

Penn echoed McPhee's sentiments about the attitude of the EFL's players.

"I'll give you an example of these guys," Penn said. "We practiced in steady rain on Wednesday and when I called practice, the guys were disappointed they had to stop playing."

Granite general manager Paul Doherty said more players are becoming aware of the league, and interest in playing is at an all-time high.

"Tryouts were day and night from last year," Doherty said. "Three or four years ago we were getting 20 guys showing up (for tryouts).

"We've had outstanding numbers this season. Seventy-five, 80 guys have come through to try out. It's been unbelievable."

Quincy will attempt to recreate last year's 9-0 regular season, but also to avoid the disappointing, first-round playoff upset that came courtesy of the Springfield Blitzin' Bears.

Returning quarterback Liam Higgins, a North Quincy product and a former Hofstra signal-caller, will be the centerpiece of the Granite offense under new coordinator Greg Wilson.

Veteran wide receiver Billy McDougal retired, but Jeff Lang, an NCAA Div. 3 All-Star from Curry College, has been added, and Bo Orlando remains a featured part of the offense.

The running game, where tailback Ed Mazzuchelli (5-9, 200-lb.) joins Jacson Vetiac, John Barr and John Morant, gets a makeover as well.

"(Mazzuchelli) is a very good running back and he's going to complement the rest of the guys back there," McPhee said.

Quincy's offensive line averages about 315 pounds, behind center Mike Zawilinski, guard Ron Pierre-Louis and newcomer Matt Baldassari (6-6, 335) of Sharon.

Much like last year, the Granite coaching staff thinks the fate of the team rests on the shoulders of the defense, which is led by veterans Al Casey and David Wilson.

"This year, I think our defense is going to score us some points," Wilson said. "They're going to be putting (the offense) in position to score and getting a lot of turnovers. They're the heart of this team.

"Offensively we'll be OK, but our defense is going to carry us."

McPhee and his players are trying to distance themselves both from last year's unbeaten regular season and playoff upset.

"Last year was a great season for us, but it's over and done with," the head coach said.

The Oilers also had a successful 2001 season (5-4-1), but suffered a first-round loss to the Prowlers.

"We beat (the Prowlers) twice in the regular season last year," Penn said. "We are definitely looking forward to a little revenge (tonight)."

Some major shakeups are afoot on offense, starting at quarterback: Anthony Comer, last year's Eastern Football League offensive MVP, will concentrate this season on his duties at outside linebacker. Mike Lear of Quincy, who played for the defunct Hockomock Colts, is the new quarterback.

"He's very mobile, he's got great feet, and he's developed such a touch on his passes," Penn said.

"He reminds me of Steve Grogan. He's a roll-out quarterback. He knows the system and he's not afraid to tuck and run with the ball."

Another new recruit is 5-9, 190-pound running back Mike Green (5- 9, 190), a native Californian who moved to Wareham and played last season in Hyannis.

Chris Williams, the brother of running back Charles Williams and a former college track star, will be used at wide receiver, and Brockton High grad Gabe Boatrite will line up at flanker.

The defense will be led by coordinator Jon Gate, who is also the head coach of the New England Storm women's football team.

Penn thinks the Oilers have the talent to improve on last season's 5-4-1 mark.

"We're going to move up a few notches," he said. "We're looking forward to this year and we've got a great group of guys.

"We're ready for this season."

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