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Panther Sports News

EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY - Charleston, IL 61920
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

CHARLESTON, IL--For the first time in four years the Eastern Illinois University football Panthers will open spring practice with a new head coach and no SEAN PAYTON and ROY BANKS playing pitch and catch.

That doesn't dampen the enthusiasm of Head Coach BOB SPOO, who will greet approximately 60 players on Monday (March 30) for the beginning of four weeks of practice.

As in past years spring drills will conclude with a Blue-Gray intrasquad game on Friday evening, April 24 at Charleston High School.

SPOO, who replaced Al Molde as head coach in early January, has succinctly identified the spring priorities. "We want to come out of spring ball with a swarming defense . . . an aggressive and disciplined unit that rallies to the ball on every snap.

"Controlled frenzy is the image we want to project because I believe you win championships with defense and special teams. And that's our other priority . . . special teams. We're going to be very serious about our kicking game.

"We'll stress an offense that makes few mistakes so that once we're in position to score we can take advantage of the situation."

Five returning starters on offense and four on defense will most likely be responsible for achieving those goals as the '87 unit sets its sights on a tenth straight winning season.

The 1986 team finished 11-2, reached the quarterfinals of the NCAA I-AA tournament, won the Gateway Conference Championship and was ranked No.3 in the final NCAA poll.

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Returning starters are led by Associated Press and Football News HM All-American JOHN JURKOVIC (CALUMET CITY-THORNTON FRACTIONAL NORTH), who chalked up 13 QB sacks and 14 more tackles for loss.

Others on defense are Second Team All-Gateway corner ROD REYNOLDS (DETROIT-KING), lineman CARL PARKER (EVANSTON) and inside linebacker JEFF MILLS (WINNETKA-NEW TRIER).

Second team all-league running back JAMES MARABLE (CHICAGO-SCHURZ), who accounted for 112.7 all-purpose yards p/game, leads the offense. HM All-Gateway picks SEAN O'BRIEN (JOLIET-CATHOLIC) and JIM MITEFF (LIBERTYVILLE) are back for their third year on the offensive line as is MARK PETERSEN (MOMENCE). TE DERICK WILHELMS (FREEPORT) is the leading pass catcher back with 18 for 343 in '86.

One known commodity in regard to specialty teams is placekicker RICH EHMKE (EL CAJON, CA/GROSSMONT CC), who was an All-Gateway Conference Second Team pick and second on the team with 83 points.

"Our impression, based on the conditioning and weight training program, is that we have talent on this team. . . young men who could have started at Purdue last year," says SPOO, who coached there the previous seven years.

"There are some critical areas of concern. The obvious one is wide receiver. We have some Proposition 48 players who still won't be able to practice this spring, and our JC recruit won't be here until fall.

"The other segment is the secondary. This group had the second highest attrition due to graduation. But I think we have sound interior lines, a good tight end, depth at linebacker and running back.

Spoos said the Panthers would probably return to a two-back system in order to utilize the services of both MARABLE and DUWAYNE PITTS, simultaneously.

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Pitts was the starter two years ago rushing for 968 yards and is No. 5 on the Panthers all-time career list with 1806.

Four quarterbacks, '86 backup PAT CARROLL (DUNDEE), redshirt freshmen BURGESS WATTS (WARRENVILLE-WHEATON CENTRAL) and ERIC ARNOLD (PEKIN) and transfer KURT SIMON (MORRIS), will wage a strong campaign to replace Sean Payton.

Going into spring practice, SPOO was not hinting at any one of the four taking an early lead in this battle.

He did outline a unique plan for the first week of practice. "We're going to split the squad into halves and have two practices per afternoon. This has nothing to do with a first or second team but just a way to get the 30-40 players in each session a few more reps," Spoo explained.

"The whole idea is to have each player know they'll be evaluated better besides giving them more opportunity to improve their skills. After the first week we'll go into our regular routine with one practice a day. We're trying to get it all into four weeks so we want to practice as many consecutive days as possible."