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8-10-1984

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Recommended Citation

University Marketing and Communications, "08/10/1984 - Linebackers" (1984). 1984. 406.
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Panther Sports News

EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY, Charleston, IL 61920

DAVID KIDWELL, *Sports Information Director*

OFFICE: (217) 581-2920 HOME: (217) 345-4166

Aug. 10, 1984
LS-AS-Hometowns

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LINEBACKERS (SECOND IN A SERIES)

CHARLESTON, IL--The pressure will be on Eastern Illinois University's linebackers.

First, that is one of the most experienced segments on the team. Secondly, it is sandwiched between two of the most inexperienced units, the line and secondary.

The Panthers will probably have the Mid-Continent's best pair of inside 'backers with Associated Press HM All-American Tyrone Covington (Chicago-Morgan Park), 5-11, 210, and three year letterman Dave Fergurson (Alton), 6-2, 210. Both are seniors.

Covington led the team with 99 tackles last fall despite missing all or parts of three games with an injury. "Cov is the type of player that takes charge . . . others rally around him," says segment coach Sheldon Herd. "He's strong, quick and plays every snap as hard as he can. His training habits rub off on everyone else."

Fergurson, who played both inside linebacker and down lineman last season, has more career tackles (175) than anyone on the team. "Dave had a great spring, is healthy, has his weight down to about 212 and is moving much better. Putting all those together there's no reason he can't be one of the best in the league," says Herd.

The surprise entry in the group may be redshirt freshman Chris Nelson (Wheeling), 6-1, 190, who earned an outside starting spot with a strong spring showing. "Based on his consistency, Chris had the best spring of any outside 'backer," says first year assistant Dana Chambers, who handles the coaching duties for 'backers on the corner.

"He has the knowledge and ability to play the position but we'd like to see him add 10-15 pounds because he needs more strength."

The other outside starter will likely be Mel Black (West Haven, CT), a transfer from Santa Ana (CA) CC, who was here in the spring and became acclimated to the system.

"He has all the physical tools but needs to become more aggressive," Chambers says. At 6-2, 230 he is the most physically imposing of the entire segment.

His main competition will come from Al Jennings (Chicago-Collins) and/or Will Smith (Markham-Thornwood). Jennings, a 5-11, 195 senior, is a two year letter-man playing mostly on special teams. Smith is a 6-2, 200 junior who has played very little.

"Al shows good speed but is a bit unsure of himself yet," says Chambers. "With work on my part and his, he could be in there quite a bit. Smith came on better in the spring but early on will probably be used as a backup."

The top inside backups are Rob DeVita (Wheaton-Central), 6-1, 205 sophomore, and redshirt freshman Derick Wilhelms (Freeport), 6-1, 220. DeVita played on specialty teams last year but "has shown signs of becoming a good inside 'backer . . . he still needs to be more consistent," says Herd.

Wilhelms switched in the spring from defensive back to the outside spot. "Derick runs well but needs to become more aggressive and since the position is new to him he needs to gain experience . . . before he's through, though, he'll be a good one for us."