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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

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CHARLESTON, IL--Eastern Illinois University's football Panthers begin the first step towards defending their Mid-Continent Conference crown as second year coach Al Molde and his staff welcomes over 100 varsity candidates for preseason drills this week.

Everyone will have checked into camp as of Friday (August 10) with double sessions commencing on Monday (August 13). EIU, a NCAA I-AA playoff participant the past two years, will open the season at Grand Valley State on Saturday, Sept. 1.

However, for the first time in several seasons Eastern will not carry the label as the MCC favorite as only four fulltime starters return on defense and just two on offense.

The remainder of the league schools also recognize the challenge facing the Panthers as EIU has been picked to finish third in the MCC preseason poll conducted by a vote of league coaches, athletic directors and sports information directors.

"It's definitely going to be a rebuilding year but the returning players have a positive attitude and aren't accepting any fate or predictions . . . everyone is accepting the challenge and working to be competitive," said Molde.

"We have quite a few talented young players who haven't had a chance to play . . . this fall they'll get that opportunity.

"We also have several juco transfers with the potential to help us. Everyone is expected to report to camp on time . . . and ready to go. The staff is anxious to get started to see who is ready. This will probably be Eastern's most competitive preseason camp in several seasons and that alone will keep it interesting through double days," Molde said.

The two players back with the most accolades are Associated Press Honorable Mention All-Americans Jerry Wright (Chicago-Collins) at wide receiver and Tyrone Covington (Chicago-Morgan Park) at linebacker.