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Ready to tackle football again

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New Haven hopes it can revive glory days

By Craig Larson, Globe Staff | September 5, 2009

The excruciating wait, measuring 2,276 days from one kickoff to the next, will end this afternoon, on a high school field in West Grove, Pa.

The University of New Haven will officially relaunch its football program with a nonconference matchup against Lincoln University, determined to lay the groundwork for a successful future while also trying to recapture some of the magic from a glorious past.

"We are fired up to get going, the wait has been difficult," said coach Peter Rossomando, a two-way lineman at Boston University and former New Haven assistant who was hired in January 2008 to rebuild the program from scratch.

"Everyone, the players, the coaching staff, has worked their tails off for a year, and we just want to get better every day," said Rossomando, whose team will be competing in the Northeast-10 Conference.

In the late 1980s and through the '90s, there was no Division 2 program in New England any better.

And that success: three trips to the NCAA playoffs, including a run to the Division 2 national championship game in 1997, was cultivated under a collection of impressive young coaches, all with the creativity and ability to develop high-throttle attacks and all who went on to have successful careers in the NFL and at the Division 1 level.

Chris Palmer wore the headsets for two seasons (1986-87). Mark Whipple came aboard for six years. His 11-1 juggernaut in '93, fueled by Harlon Hill winner Roger Graham, averaged 45 points per game. Tony Sparano, now head coach of the Miami Dolphins, took it from there, directing the program for five years, including the march to the title game in '97.

But the program was competing as an independent, and the pursuit of quality foes started to take its toll: in travel, expenses, and academics.

"That was the main stumbling block," recalled Rossomando, a five-year assistant on Sparano's staff before leaving for the University of Albany. "We had to travel all over the country, and it was taxing on our players. You were leaving at 5:30 in the morning, gone for 12 hours, and academically, it was hurting the kids."

The end came in 2003, when New Haven put the wraps on a forgettable 1-9 season with 28-17 loss to Tiffin.

This afternoon, lining up against a Lincoln program that is in its second season, the Chargers will start anew, with a very green, but enthusiastic roster featuring 43 freshmen, 35 sophomores, and seven upperclassmen. And in Year 1, that roster is a melting pot.

The headliner is sophomore Ryan Osiecki, a 6-foot-4-inch, 238-pound highly recruited quarterback from nearby Seymour High who transferred after trying to make it as a walk-on at Louisville.

"When I was in prep school [Milford Academy], I had talked to Coach Rossomando, and when I wanted to transfer, I thought of him. I wanted to play right away, and this is 20 minutes from my house, and my family can come and watch me play."

Rossomando says that Osiecki "can make any throw on the field," while also noting that the Chargers will be explosive at the skill positions while a young line develops.

One of those receivers, senior Devin Robinson, was a member of the last New Haven team, in 2003, before transferring to Saginaw Valley State. He left school, worked out some personal issues, "and called the day I was hired," Rossomando said of the Cambridge Rindge & Latin grad.

And then there is Wayne Parks, a firefighter from Fairfield, Conn., who decided at age 43 that he wanted to go to college. "He walked into my office one day, and I thought he was dropping off a game tape of his son," said Rossomando with a chuckle.

The 5-11, 235-pound reserve nose guard has not missed one workout, and in noting Parks's youthful exuberance, Rossomando said, "He's eight years older than me, and I know that I couldn't do what he's doing."

In trying to sell the merits of the program in recruiting, Rossomando and his staff have pointed to the past, "and it was kind of like the perfect storm, when Tony [Sparano] was hired by the Dolphins, and Darren Rizzi [now a Dolphins assistant] went to [Rhode Island]," he said. "That helped, and there was a tradition."

Rossomando and Sparano talk at least once a week, either by phone, text, or e-mail. "Just a great sounding board," said the coach.

All the hard work comes to fruition today.

"We want to beat Lincoln, that's our No. 1 goal, we've been prepping for this since spring football," he said. "Long term, we would like to win six games this year, but our goal is to get better every day."

The Chargers kick off a challenging NE-10 schedule next week at Assumption before showcasing their dazzling blue and yellow turf field ("Only two teams in the country have it, us and Boise," - boasted Osiecki) the following week in the home opener against Bentley.

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