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PREP FOOTBALL

Welcome Wagon

New coaches at Amherst, A-B set to revitalize programs

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As first-year varsity football coaches at Amherst and Almond-Bancroft High Schools, Brian Toelle and Jason Zdunek are charged with more than putting a team on the field on Friday night.

In addition to hopefully putting more notches in the win column than the loss, both Toelle and Zdunek are charged with invigorating their respective programs which have struggled recently.

"The first year is always a stepping stone," Toelle said. "You want the kids to know that you are committed to the program and making it successful in the long-term."

At Amherst, Toelle hit the ground running in his attempt to turn around the fortunes of the Falcons, who fell to 1-8 last season after making the playoffs for the first time in school history on 2001.

After accepting the position back in February, Toelle has helped to implement several changes in the football program.

In addition to a new team lifting program, which was boosted by the addition of \$30,000 of new equipment, the school hosted a clinic by Bigger Faster Stronger and brought in former Green Bay Packer Bryce Paup to the team's four-day summer camp. The school has also recently put in an irrigation system for the field.

"The main focus of all this is to show the kids that you should bring excellence to everything you do," Toelle said. "To bring this program up to a high level, these kids have to prepare like they expect to succeed and they need to see that we are willing to put that same kind of effort into it."

That mentality seems to be paying dividends both on the field and off. When preseason camp got underway on Monday, 57 players reported to prepare for this season, which begins Aug. 26 when the Falcons travel to Iola-Scandinavia.

Off the field, Toelle said a non-profit booster club has been formed to help raise money for events and projects.

The team is also planning to have a pig roast prior to its home opener Sept. 2 against Wild Rose in addition to having bands play prior to the start of games. The team also expects to bring a large contingent of fans and students when they travel to Camp Randall Stadium for its Oct. 8 game with Tri-County.

"It's been a lot of fun," senior Jim Blanke said. "We have good coaching here, and everyone is excited to be a part of the football team."

Zdunek, who a little more than three years ago was a player himself at Northern Michigan University, didn't get the same early start on the season.

He wasn't brought on until this summer, but he is still being proactive in trying to turn around the fortunes of Almond-Bancroft, which has gone 6-12 in two seasons since reaching the Division 7 state quarterfinals in 2002.

He started a weight training program upon his arrival, focusing primarily on core strength due to the lack of available players. With about 25 players out for football at the school, conditioning and health will be at a premium for the Eagles.

"We have less players than a lot of schools," Zduna said. "A lot of the kids who play are going to have to probably play on both sides of the ball, so they need to be ready to do that and be able to stay relatively healthy."

Zduna has also spent considerable time before and after preseason practice at school, which he says is important when trying to build a rapport with players that can be used to help build the program together.

That has had a positive effect on players, who consistently showed up in the weight room before the start of practice and who have enjoyed working with their new coach.

"We've focused on some different things in the weight room that I think have helped us out, and we've had some good practices so far," senior Brad Skibba said. "You want to have someone who wants to make you a better player and wants to see you succeed."