MOUNT UNION LOOKS TO RECLAIM TITLE STATUS FROM MARY HARDIN-BAYLOR

BY M.D. GOENS

The dynasties are over, at least for one season. Mary Hardin-Baylor interrupted an impressive run by Mount Union and Wisconsin-Whitewater last year by taking the NCAA Division 3 title. Prior to last season, Whitewater (6) or Mount Union (5) had won every championship since 2004. The two teams each other for the title nine times during that stretch.

"It felt like we were getting really close," recalls Mary Hardin-Baylor coach Pete Frenzlieb. The Cru’s only coach since the program began in 1998. "We had played Mount Union three times and were close. Mount Union always has players and championship experience.

“We have players, too. The inner workings of our program are very similar to Division 1. We’re centrally located in Beloit, Tennessee, among a lot of our good football players who might be an inch or two shorter and just as passionate as Division 1 players.

The key is repeating last year’s achievement. "I have high expectations," Frenzlieb says.

TOP 25 Mount Union coach Vic Kehres knows the weekly excitement, too. He has never worked elsewhere, serving on the staff at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater the past 10 years.

"Absolutely fine. It’s a lot of fun. We’re very pleased with our 7-0 record," Kehres said. "We’re not getting to the playoffs, but we’re in the mix and we’re in the top 10."

Mount Union expects a return to the top this year. The defense, with six starters back, will be key. The Purple Raiders also return big play players on offense. The defense will be strong up the middle with returning linebacker

Danny Robinson and tackle Mike Vidal. Three players who started at QB also return along with three linemen and solid receivers.

"We’ve got to improve our passing game," Kehres says. "A lot of big play starters return for us.

Mary Hardin-Baylor, including six on both sides of the ball. Although the Cru scored 50-plus points 10 times last year, it was defense that led the way by yielding 14 points against Mount Union in the semifinals and seven to Wisconsin-Whitewater in the final. That’s just fine for coach Pete Frenzlieb, a former defensive line coach at LSU.

A new QB, three linebackers and a defensive line will dictate the success. Running back Mark Miller (160 rushing yards, 12 TDs last year) and receivers T.J. Jones (52 catches, 1,093 yards) and Bryan Williamson (504 rushing yards, 2 TDs last year) are some of the key returns. However, there are some holes in the defense, where linebackers Mason McKnight and blue-liner Ryan Brown are expected to lead and make big plays. A talented trio at linebacker including Nick Wollenberg, 6-4 receiver James Oikle and running back J.T. Last. Offense welcomes back running back Adam Johnson and big receivers Andrew Jarosz and Nick Yost. Defensively, the strength lies up front with linemen and cornerbacks (Urban Lowry). The defense stands up with 6-5, 295 pound tackle Hassan Adams and 6-4, 235 pound end Aijay Panama.

Wisconsin-Whitewater has advanced to the NCAA quarterfinals in 8 of the past 12 years and has 86 meets since 1999. Quarterback Cael Wilber has key performers returning around him in center Nathan Cumpian, running back Drew Patterson, tight end Jordan Tjoemra and guard Marcus Hudson. On defense, linebackers Matt Bertinette and Bryce Lenzscher, linebacker Ben Thiel and cornerback FuMarrico Hardy are solid.

Matthiesen /Robbins provides a spark for Saint Thomas. He rushed for more than 300 yards in 11 occasions in 2015 before missing most of last season due to knee surgery. He will share the ball-carrying load with Tucker Tretten and Josh Paris. PBA transfer from South Dakota State (1004 yards, 11 TDs) and Cael Wilber from Wisconsin-Whitewater will battle for the QB job.

Wisconsin-Whitewater made its first trip to the national title game last year. The defense led the way, yielding 12.7 points per outing, but 0-0 backer Adrian Beza (118 rushing yards, 7 TDs) and running back Dylan Neckar (1,154 rushing yards, 7 TDs) is the only returnee on that unit. Nine starters are back on defense for the Titans, including QB Brett Kuehler (2,889 rushing yards, 0 TDs) and running back Dylan Neckar (1,154 rushing yards, 7 TDs).

A team loaded with weapons in NORTH CENTRAL. The Cardinals start with quarterback (Buster Rosterl) (2,268 yards, 23 TDs), wide receiver (Walters) (2,268 yards, 23 TDs), wide receiver (Walters) (2,268 yards, 23 TDs) and running back (Walters) (2,268 yards, 23 TDs) and receiver (Walters) (2,268 yards, 23 TDs). On defense, linebackers Nick Doyen, (Walters) (2,268 yards, 23 TDs) and running back (Walters) (2,268 yards, 23 TDs) are expected to lead.

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