

Southern Chester County Sports

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EXPECTATIONS are HIGH for AVON GROVE FOOTBALL TEAM

After a 4-6 season in 2007, Red Devils believe they are on the verge of the first winning season in school history

By Steve Hoffman
Staff Writer

To Avon Grove Head Coach Marvin Dooley, the upcoming football season is full of potential and possibilities. The 2008 squad could post the first winning season in the program's brief history and, just as significantly, this could be the team that helps establish football as a tradition at Avon Grove High.

"Tradition is a big thing. I want us to establish that tradition," explained Dooley. "I want football to be a big positive in that building. I want the town to get excited when we have a game. The kids are taking it seriously."

Dooley played and coached at William Penn High School, a perennial football power in Delaware, and he wants Avon Grove to develop the same kind of reputation as a big football school.

There's some work to be done.

The Red Devils were 4-6 in 2007, Dooley's first as a coach, but just a handful of plays prevented Avon Grove from eclipsing the .500 mark last season.

"We were 4-6 but we could have been 6-4," Dooley said. "I certainly feel confident coming back. I come into this season knowing my team, my players, and knowing the other teams. Last year, I was learning."

Avon Grove will benefit from having key contributors in the skill positions return. Quarterback Kyle Kush gained a wealth of experience when he started the last seven games of the 2007 season, when he was only a sophomore.

"He's a smart kid, a smart football player," Dooley said of the starting QB. "The offense is really set around him."

Kush will again have his favorite target, Jordan Harris, to throw to. Harris is an electrifying player, with 4.4 speed in the 40 right now. Like Kush, he's a junior who already has experience in big games.

"He's a tremendous athlete, he's a weapon," Dooley said, explaining that the Red Devils will move Harris around to get the ball in his hands. They will line him up in the backfield on occasion and sometimes call his number for kickoff or punt returns. He might even line up as a quarterback on occasion. Kush and Harris also play important roles on the defensive side of the ball. The leadership they will provide will be essential.

"They're good buddies off the field, too," noted Dooley.

The head coach wants to rely on a strong, but diverse, running attack to win the time-of-possession battle each week. Ryan Ayers, Ren Hoilman, and Zach Johnson will lead the running attack, with Kush and Harris also contributing to the ground attack.

Explained Coach Dooley, "We're

more of a running team. We want the other team not to be able to focus on one guy, so we're going to run the hot man every night, and if we don't have a hot man, we're going to keep running until someone does get hot."

Ryan Samuels and Sam Benson are the tight ends and will help both the ground game and the air attack.

"They're both solid and we're going to rotate them," Dooley said. "Offensively, our skill positions are going to be good."

The offensive line is being completely rebuilt after the 2007 starters all graduated, but Dooley believes that this year's group could develop to a point where there will actually be an upgrade in overall performance compared to last season.

"We have three seniors to lead our line: Brennan Pankiw, Jake Disabatino, and Ryan Smith. They've all done a good job for us and worked hard during the off-season. This year, I think we have depth that we didn't have last season, so if someone goes down, we won't have a drop-off."

Mike Jeffcoats and Colin Valentine, a pair of juniors, have stepped into the starting lineup. The depth will come from younger players like Jeff Fuller and Zack Barker. Dooley said both have the potential to develop into great linemen.

Fuller also plays the nose guard position on defense, putting him in the middle of the action. Kenny Miller and Gary Hopkins play on the defensive line, with linebackers Wes Shoap and Jake Eder, and defensive backs Jordan Harris and Jordan Jones playing key roles on defense.

On the defensive side of the ball, Kush and Hoilman serve as the "quarterbacks," the signal callers who will lead the reaction to the offensive play that is in the offing. "We spot Kyle Kush on defense, but he's a player. He doesn't like to come off the field. We're very confident in Ren (Hoilman) to do the job back there," Dooley said.

On special teams, the Red Devils have a real weapon in senior kicker Tyler Wilkinson. Wilkinson is the rare high school kicker who can be counted on to consistently make field goals.

Said Dooley, "He's a weapon. He can really kick it. He's got a college leg right now. He might have a good opportunity in college."

Wilkinson is consistent from 35 yards and even nailed a 42-yarder last year—a distance untouchable by most high school kickers.

Returning punts and kicks could be the responsibility of young players like Brandon Monk or Dylan Hoilman, with speedy Harris and Zach Johnson also in the mix.

Staying healthy, confidence as a team, and avoiding penalties and

turnovers are keys to success for this year's team, Dooley said.

The coach is eager to see how his team will develop in his second season, hoping that familiarity with a system will pay dividends and turn a few of those narrow losses into wins.

"This program is six years old and there have been three coaches. There's never been continuity, and I think that's important. It's amazing that this program has had the success that it has had with so much turnover," Dooley said. "I think we're building something here now."

Avon Grove faces a grueling mix of conference and non-conference games. Playing schools like West Chester East, West Chester Henderson, Downingtown East, and Downingtown West, and Coatesville as they did last year may make it difficult to accumulate wins, but in the long run will help the program improve.

"Our conference is just great," Dooley said. "There's never an easy game. Plus we have Unionville, Kennett, Oxford, and Great Valley on our schedule. But in the end, a tough schedule is the only way that you get good."

The Red Devils will kickoff the 2008 season when they host the Kennett Blue Demons this Friday. Dooley hopes that the Avon Grove-Kennett clash will develop into a full-fledged annual rivalry, a "Mushroom Bowl" perhaps. And



Photos (8) by Steve Hoffman

most Avon Grove students already identify Oxford as a big rival.

Establishing rivalries is part of building a football tradition. Dooley said that work on that tradition is already underway.

"This team can do something that's never been done here. They can have a winning season. It's achievable."

Then, he concluded, "We have high expectations here."

