2007 Season Preview

A remarkable turn around for the Ferris State University football team last campaign resulted in mixed emotions for our returning players, coaches, and fans alike. While a renewed sense of excitement was restored into the tradition-rich FSU program by virtue of the school's best outing in nearly a decade, disappointment lingered among many when the Bulldogs narrowly missed earning a NCAA Division II playoff bid.

The disappointment from being left out of the post-season hunt, however, could help spark the Bulldogs to bigger and better things this season.

Expectations are much higher this time around as the Bulldogs figure to play a prominent role in the Great Lakes Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (GLIAC) race and contain one of the top first place teams in the nation making five-plus straight season trips from 1992-96.

Last year's disappointment has helped fuel those expectations, which according to 13th-year head coach Jeff Pierce, are based on several factors including last year's tremendous finish, a strong off-season regime and the addition of yet another talented recruiting class.

“We’re excited about the upcoming season and the expectations are extremely high in our program,” Pierce said.

“Last year, we took a huge step forward and came within striking distance of earning a playoff berth. While we didn’t get it, we’re excited to take the next step and be on top of your game and then some to prevail.”

Pierce knows his squad will have to be ready to continue to build on the success of last campaign, an expectation which according to Pierce’s squad is far from the only option in a deep and talented area.

There won’t be much cause for concern though, as the league and nation’s toughest Division II conference. The Bulldogs won four of their first five games and did likewise in the final five encounters of the year. Among the highlights in FSU’s noteworthy campaign was a step back into the national picture as the Bulldogs topped nationally top-five ranked Saginaw Valley State in their home opener with a goal-line stand in the closing seconds.

“We had a tremendous season last year and it gives us plenty of reason for optimism as we head into 2007,” said Pierce. “While we lost a number of key players to graduation, we have a great nucleus of players back who gained significant experience a year ago and several other younger players who hopefully are ready to step into bigger roles.”

An always challenging conference schedule won’t make anything easy this season, but Pierce feels the pieces are in place for the Bulldogs to challenge both the league and nation’s best each and every Saturday.

“I love the look of this schedule, with a good mix of returning starters and young talent. It will be a great luxry to have those opportunities to play in front of our fans. Additionally, the majority of our coaching staff has been together several years now and we’re all hungry and on the same page in terms of what we want to accomplish,” he added.

If the Bulldogs hope to accomplish more in 2007 and continue to build on the success of last campaign, Pierce knows his squad will have to be ready to compete every time they take the field.

“In our league, it’s like having 10 title fights,” he said.

“You’ve got to be ready to go every Saturday because every game is critical. Expect the unexpected in our league, things extremely interesting for everyone involved.”

Offense

Quarterback – Versatile senior C.J. Van Wieren (6-4, 239) returns for his final collegiate campaign after gaining experience of the Bulldog signal callers. Van Wieren displayed his athletic talents last campaign in a variety of ways as he ran for 464 yards, completed 22-of-40 passes for 364 yards and accounted for 48 yards.

The talented quarterback led the Bulldogs in scoring with nine touchdowns and often shared time at the position with graduating senior Ryan Kaul. Van Wieren, a three-sport athlete, also had another standout campaign in GLIAC men’s basketball, displayed improved consistency in his passing skills this spring and figures to play a prominent role in the Bulldog offense. Sophomore Eric Grozneski (6-2, 222) is also listed as a possible top option who could challenge for additional time with redshirt freshman Kyle Foster (6-3, 200) also in the mix.

Running Backs – Last year, the Bulldogs lost speedy back Paris Holoman (5-8, 194) to an injury early in the campaign. The injury, along with new wrinkles in the Bulldogs’ wide-open offensive attack, resulted in the majority of the team’s rushing yards coming from unexpected sources. Highly-talented slot receiver Robert Miller (5-8, 185) and Van Wieren ranked as FSU’s two-leading rushers and combined for nearly 1,000 yards on the ground.

“Along with the players coming back, it will be nice to see if this spring’s play could be an effective option out of the backfield if he can return to the prior form he displayed. A number of other returnees could also figure into the mix along with a few newcomers,” said Pierce.

Seniors Erik Covey (5-11, 211) and sophomore Dan Underhill (6-2, 215) battle for starting duties at the H-Back position in the Bulldog game plan.

Wide Receivers – Senior Robert Miller put on a show for the Bulldogs in his first season last year after arriving from the junior college ranks. The 5-8, Miller garnered All-GLIAC Second Team honors after leading the Bulldogs in rushing (351 yards) and receptions (34). He tallied a team-high 107 yards per game of total offense and gave the Bulldogs a potent option with the ability to produce in a variety of ways. Expect the high-effort, playmaker to play an integral role once again in the FSU offense this campaign. Miller, however, is far from the only option in a deep and talented area.

Seniors Nate Frick (5-8, 175) and Mike Guevara (5-10, 180), along with junior Cole Meredith (6-0, 199) all caught 20 or more passes and averaged over 13 yards per catch in 2006. Junior Raheem Jones-Salaam (6-0, 188) and sophomore Chris Wilson (6-6, 230) received extensive game action and lead a list of quality reserves hoping to make anything easy this season.

Offensive Line – While the Bulldogs return one of the league’s best in All-GLIAC First Team offensive guard Bill Bourdlais (6-2, 290), the other four starters from last campaign have departed by graduation losses. A converted defensive tackle, Bourdlais will anchor a somewhat inexperienced unit, which was aided by the emergence of several new faces in the spring. Senior Cory Jones (6-4, 303) will likely start at the other guard spot and has the most returning experience behind Bourdlais after appearing in nine games as a reserve last fall. Sophomore tackles Adam Taylor (6-4, 272) and Brad Bammert (6-2, 280) along with sophomore center Joe Doman (6-0, 291) are other returning letterwinners contending for starting roles.

Additionally, the Bulldogs will likely count on the services of several other returning junior Tom Thornton (6-4, 295) and Josh Brennan (6-6, 285), sophomore John Rasch (6-2, 326) along with redshirt freshmen Matt Wielman (6-4, 248), Joe Voiles (6-2, 270) and Scott Shadbolt back to either in a starting role or as a member of the supporting cast. An incoming group of recruits will be asked to supply added line depth.

Defensive Line – There won’t be much cause for concern on this side of the line of scrimmage as the Bulldogs return one of the nation’s top units. There likely won’t be a better interior combination around the line with returning junior Jake Visser (6-2, 275) and senior Kurt Hout (6-2, 276) at defensive tackle. A GLIAC First Team selection last season, Visser has earned plenty of praise and could find himself starting once again as a following a standout sophomore campaign. He led the league in tackles for loss last year with 16 (74 yards) and netted 86 stops en route to earning all-region and honorable mention All-America laurels. Hout, who has already drawn the attention of professional scouts, tallied 39 tackles including all-conference second team kudos in 2006 after transferring from NCAA Division IAA Northern Colorado.

On the outside, the Bulldogs also return two experienced guys in junior Erik Schumacher (6-4, 248) and junior counter-part Kyle Walker (6-1, 250). The 6-2 Schumacher was an honorable mention All-GLIAC honoree and finished with 42 stops, four sacks and four quarterback hurries. Walker chipped in 25 tackles, two hurries, one interception and a forced fumble last season. Highly-talented slot receiver Eric Grozneski (6-3, 282) headlining the list of reserves on the inside.

Linebacker – Although the Bulldogs may have lost highly-publicized scholar-athlete and team leader Mike Klobucher to graduation, this squad will once again be an extremely solid unit. Junior Kevin Noe (6-3, 243) will most likely be asked to fill Klobucher’s shoes on the inside with a returning starter in junior Jeff Hollowsworth (6-0, 235) and senior veteran Jordan Moore (6-0, 226) handling the duties on the outside.

Together, this trio produced nearly 130 total tackles a year ago. Juniors Rob Eezenboer (6-1, 232), Will Caldwell (5-9, 225) and Matt Mau sollo (6-0, 220) all earned letters last campaign in reserve action and will challenge for additional playing time. Sophomores Nick Butler (5-10, 235), Matt Ryan (6-1, 190) and Chad Schoen (6-0, 206) team up with redshirt freshman Kyle Fitzpatrick (6-2, 211) in trying to claim a spot in the rotation.

Secondary – The Bulldogs lost one of the league’s best in All-GLIAC wide receiver and returner C.J. Van Wieren, a majority of the squad’s punt and kick returning duties last fall. Seniors Kyle Williams (5-10, 175) and Joe Hardy (5-9, 175) in addition to sophomore Angelo Williams (5-10, 185) return to handle the corner positions. Meanwhile, senior Patrick Wells (6-1, 200) is back to man the one safety spots along with two sophomores in Chad Wilson (6-0, 197) and Santino Favot (5-11, 185). Junior Bradd Vander Veen (5-11, 180) and redshirt freshman Landon Jones (5-9, 185) are the top candidates to provide additional depth although several newcomers could play a prominent role as the Bulldogs try to replace three starters from this unit.

Special Teams – Ferris will welcome back junior Jim Yates (6-1, 213), who handled the punting and kickoff duties a season ago. However, the Bulldogs will have to replace place kicker Josh Eicher, who connected on six-of-13 field goal attempts and nailed all 14 of his PAT tries in 2006. Yates most likely will be the forerunner for the job if he can improve upon his consistency, but the Bulldogs could bring in a pair of freshman kickers to challenge for the position. Senior Levi Sla ger (6-1, 181) has seen significant punting experience throughout his career and is the squad’s primary holder. FSU will also look to replace long snapper Jared Sawonis.

Robert Miller, Nate Frick and Mike Guevara all handled kick return duties at various points last season, which should help offset the loss of Skodak.

The key is in terms of creating competition at a number of positions,” Pierce said. “Along with our returning veterans, we should have a number of new faces competing for positions and helping us fill the gaps as we try to get the best players we possibly can on the field this fall.”

2007 Ferris State University Football