

MSU eager for more after winning season

Mavericks enjoy success in Hoffner's first year as head coach

By Chad Courrier
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MANKATO — Undefeated at home, ended a losing streak of homecoming games, finally beat rivals, won a conference championship, made the playoffs.

The checklist of positives was long this season for the Minnesota State football program, which made the most of a new conference with a

new coaching staff to find results not seen in this program for 15 years.

"We had high expectations, and we lived up to the majority of those," coach Todd Hoffner said. "The last game was disappointing, but that would have been icing on the cake. Everything up to that point was impressive. It was a great year, I'm very proud of the staff and the players."

Minnesota State's first season in the Northern Sun Intercollegiate Conference ended Saturday with a 27-16 loss at Ashland University in the opening round of the Division II playoffs. It was the Mavericks' first postseason appearance since 1993, also the last time Minnesota State had more than nine victories. "I don't think there was a game on the schedule that we couldn't have won," junior

quarterback Ryan Fick said. "We knew we could be a play-off team. We knew we had the players and coaches to make it happen."

The offense was the most noticeable change from the Mavericks, who attempted 583 passes with only 211 rushing attempts in 2007. This season, the offense was more balanced, with 543 rushing attempts against 303 passes, and the Mavericks

averaged about two points per game more despite gaining 60 yards per game less.

"I think the transition (from passing offense to balanced attack) was tougher than we expected," Hoffner said. But I thought we did a great job, and next year, I expect us to break out offensively. If we don't, it will be extremely disappointing."

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Minnesota State junior Ryan Fick (left) completed his first full season as the Mavericks starting quarterback. Sophomore Matt McQuiston (right) led the team in tackles, finishing just shy of one hundred.

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The offense returns almost intact; tailback Donte Shackelford, who missed four games because of injuries, and center Jake Drossler, who didn't play much after breaking a bone in his leg in Week 7, are the only seniors.

Fick, who hadn't played much in his first two seasons, developed as the season progressed, starting all 12 games and finishing with 159 completions in 278 attempts for 2,020 yards with 14 touchdowns and 10 interceptions. He also rushed for 221 yards and five scores.

The rushing attack ended up being spread around as injuries seemed to claim at least one tailback every game. The team rushed for 2,139 yards and 30 touchdowns, with three players over 500 yards: Julian Phipps at 599, Ernest Walker at 579 and Shackelford at 530.

"(Offensive coordinator Stan Zweifel) did a great job of not putting everything on the shoulders of the quarterback or not putting everything on the running backs or on the receivers," Fick said. "But I expect there will be more responsibility on the quarterback next year."

Defensively, the Mavericks dominated the new competition, allowing only 14.3 points in league games with three shutouts. Sophomore linebacker Matt McQuiston finished with a team-high 98 tackles, six more than senior linebacker Blake Freese. Sophomore Michael Robinson led the team with 5.5 sacks, and senior cornerback Steve Robinson had six interceptions. The Mavericks forced 27 interceptions and recovered 10 fumbles.

"The balanced offense really helped, McQuiston said. "Last year, there were a lot of times that we'd be on the bench for about 30 seconds and three incompletions, we were back out there. We pride ourselves on being a good defense, and I think we'll have a good defense for years to come."

Graduation will hit the defense hard, with three defensive tackles — Chris Brunkhorst, Andrew Franklin and Jeremiah Toloumu — graduating.

Freese, Steve Robinson, cornerback Eric Taylor and safety Ryan Weinzierl also will not be back, prompting Hoffner to look at junior-college players for immediate help.

"I don't like to go that way," he said. "To get junior-college players, you usually need (scholarships)."

One area of concern is the kicking game, where the Mavericks struggled. Spencer Goff and Grady Derheim combined to go 6 of 16 on field goals, with four blocked. The two were 36 of 46 on PAT kicks.

Expectations will be higher next season, which the staff and players said will come with more pressure. Hoffner said it was interesting that two of the team's three losses came against teams the Mavericks defeated in 2007, while four of the nine victories came against teams that had seen recent success against Minnesota State.

"Every year before fall training camp, you hear the same speech as every other team in America about winning and championships," Fick said. "You can finally see

the strides we're making. We're building the foundation, we did what we had to do this season. We've put in the groundwork for future success, and it's neat to think maybe you were a part of that."

McQuiston said it's important not to be satisfied with getting to the playoffs, rather keeping the national championship as the goal.

"It's a whole different intensity," McQuiston said. "We were out of the playoffs about midway through the season last year. I think this will help guys realize that if you can get to the playoffs, anything can happen."

MSU: Defense losing players

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