

SPORTS



STAFF PHOTOS BY KEVIN BONESKE

Littlefork-Big Falls’ offense sets up with a “T” formation backfield during Wednesday morning’s practice. The Vikings open the regular season at home Aug. 29 against Silver Bay.

L-BF football team takes the practice field

JOURNAL STAFF REPORT

John Larson is entering his second season as the Littlefork-Big Falls head football coach with 22 players on the nine-man team’s roster for 2013. The Vikings, who began formal practices this week, host their season opener against Silver Bay at noon Aug. 29. Prior to the regular season starting, L-BF will be hosting a scrimmage at 10 a.m. Friday against Lake of the Woods at John Thompson Field. The Vikings won only one game in 2012 and finished the season 1-8 overall.



From left, Littlefork-Big Falls’ Darian Erickson runs with the football while head coach John Larson looks on during practice Wednesday morning.



Littlefork-Big Falls’ Rylan Henrickson flips over a tire as part of a conditioning drill during football practice Wednesday morning.

COLLEGE FOOTBALL

Minnesota momentum? Gophers feel good about progress

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Touting a strong finish to the previous season is a natural talking point, when applicable. At Minnesota, momentum has been trumpeted all summer, despite a bowl game loss last year that left them with a 6-7 record, and only one victory after Halloween. This was still a sign of progress for a program languishing in the Big Ten’s bottom tier for a large part of the last half-century. The Gophers are determined to build off that despite being in the conference’s rugged Legends Division. After back-to-back 3-9 finishes, the Gophers won all four of their nonconference contests in 2012, blew out Purdue and beat Illinois on the road to return to the postseason with a decent showing against Texas Tech. In coach Jerry Kill’s third year, though, another 2-6 record in Big

Ten play won’t perpetuate any optimism, no matter how competitive they might be or how tough the opponents are. “The next step is we need to keep climbing the mountain,” Kill said, declining to specify a tangible measure of success for Minnesota this season. Here are five things to know about Minnesota this season: 1. HAGEMAN IS HUNGRY: The best player Minnesota has might be senior defensive tackle Ra’Shede Hageman, a 6-foot-6, 310-pound former high school basketball star and converted tight end. He had six sacks last season, his first as a starter. With the frame and the athleticism to flourish into a legitimate NFL prospect, the soft-spoken Hageman has also grown into a leader for the Gophers. “When you have a freak of nature like that who has

the ability, who does make the plays like he does, guys are naturally going to follow him,” senior safety Brock Vereen said. With Cameron Botticelli, Scott Ekpe and Roland Johnson, the Gophers are confident in their depth at defensive tackle. They have defensive ends with starting experience in Michael Amaefula and Ben Perry. They have a senior linebacker, Aaron Hill, who had 74 tackles, three forced fumbles and two interceptions last year. Vereen and Cedric Thompson are seasoned starters at safety. The onus, then, will be on players like James Manuel and Damien Wilson to emerge as reliable linebackers and cornerbacks Jeremy Baltzar, Briean Boddy, Eric Murray and Derrick Wells to increase their combined career interception total from three. 2. NELSON NEEDS TO

IMPROVE: Philip Nelson started seven games as a freshman, but quarterback is one of many positions that must be settled this fall. Freshman Mitch Leidner is expected to be the backup, but rookie Chris Streveler is another promising prospect. Kill and offensive coordinator Matt Limegrover have shown a willingness to substitute to keep the starter fresh or give the defense a different look, so even if Nelson thrives as a sophomore he probably won’t be the only one taking snaps. Nelson completed only 49.3 percent of his passes last year for eight touchdowns and eight interceptions. “You’ve got to be able to be accurate and make the right decisions and just be able to utilize the players around me and let them make some big plays,” Nelson said of his biggest lesson from last season.

“Not every play needs to be a 50-yard bomb. You can dump one down and let some of the athletes take over.” 3. WIDE RECEIVERS WANTED: Those athletes Nelson would love to let take over include Andre McDonald, whose freshman year was washed out by injuries and off-the-field issues. Jamel Harrison, who ripped up his right knee in the season opener, is another candidate, along with freshman Drew Wolitarsky. Derrick Engel and Isaac Fruechte are the most experienced returners, and K.J. Maye is a versatile option who has also carried the ball and returned kickoffs. 4. CAN KIRKWOOD CRACK THE FOUR-DIGIT MARK? The Gophers used to dominate opponents on the ground under former coach Glen Mason, but they haven’t had a 1,000-yard rush-

er since Amir Pinnix in 2006, Mason’s last year. With Donnell Kirkwood, who had 926 yards and six touchdowns in 2012, and a returning offensive line, they’re in position to end that streak. Kirkwood is the kind of bruising running back they want to base their attack around. 5. KILL KEEPS ON: Kill’s first two seasons have been marked by seizures, some of them on game days, but he has appeared as healthy as ever this summer after taking extra steps to keep his epilepsy under control and changing doctors. University officials, medical specialists and Kill himself have insisted the condition won’t hinder his ability to handle this demanding job. “I feel like I’m in the best shape of my life,” Kill said. Predicted finish in Big Ten Legends Division: Sixth

