

SPORTS

Progress made, but can Minnesota take next step?

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — For the first time since coach Jerry Kill took over, Minnesota has made significant progress.

In 2013, the Gophers doubled their Big Ten victory total of the previous two seasons. The eight wins were the most the program has had in a decade.

Oh, but taking that next step can be tough. Minnesota must find a way to improve an offense that went 13 straight quarters last year without a touchdown until a couple of late scores in a bowl loss to Syracuse. Three starters from the defense are currently in NFL training camps.

Then there are those trips to TCU, Michigan, Nebraska and Wisconsin plus back-to-back November home games against Iowa and Ohio State. But the Gophers believe the confidence gained last season set the foundation for

greater success, which Kill told the players after the Texas Bowl they should be “starving” for.

“Our team last year set the tone of where we need to go and where we need to be. However, that’s in the past. Now we’re in the future. New team. New situation,” Kill said.

Here are five things to know about the upcoming season for the Gophers:

QUARTERBACK QUANDARY, NO MORE

Philip Nelson left the program, so sophomore Mitch Leidner was given the reins. While Nelson and Leidner were switched often last year, even in games when both of them were healthy,



Jerry Kill

Kill said the coaching staff made a mistake by rotating them too much and creating instability.

With clarity established at quarterback, at least four games of starting experience for the five projected offensive linemen (Ben Lauer, Zac Epping, Tommy Olson, Foster Bush and Josh Campion) and assumed improvement by a raw group of wide receivers, the Gophers have the building blocks of a more-productive offense after ranking next-to-last in the conference last season with an average of 343 yards per game.

“This year it’s just a different foundation. We know Mitch is our guy,” running back David Cobb said.

RUNNING MEN

Cobb rushed for 1,202 yards last season, ending a streak of six straight years for the Gophers without a 1,000-yard guy.

With fellow senior Don-

nell Kirkwood and bruising junior Rodrick Williams totting combined career totals of 1,975 yards and 14 touchdowns behind him, there’s as much depth in this backfield since NFL players Marion Barber and Laurence Maroney shared carries 10 years ago. Berkeley Edwards, a prize of the 2013 incoming class who severely sprained his ankle in practice and took a redshirt season, is also in the mix.

Minneapolis native and touted recruit Jeff Jones has been accepted to the university but not cleared academically by the NCAA due to low ACT scores. The Gophers are hoping he can practice this fall and be ready to contribute in 2015.

“He understands where he’s at,” Kill said. “We need him next year more than anything.”

STILL STOUT

Defensive tackle Ra’Shede

Hageman (Atlanta) and defensive back Brock Vereen (Chicago) were drafted by NFL teams, and linebacker Aaron Hill signed with St. Louis. That’s a lot of talent to lose, but there are plenty of productive, experienced players returning with safety Cedric Thompson, linebacker Damien Wilson and defensive end Thieren Cockran leading the list.

Defensive coordinator Tracy Claeys, who led the team when Kill was ill and unable following epileptic seizures, engineered the group that finished fourth in the Big Ten with 22.2 points allowed per game.

“I can’t really put my finger on what it is about him, but you know that he’s giving everything he has,” said defensive tackle Cameron Botticelli.

STIFF SCHEDULE

Beating Nebraska was this team’s biggest accom-

plishment of 2013. Wisconsin, which owns a 10-game winning streak in the series, is the next giant to slay. The Gophers finish the season with consecutive road games against the Huskers and Badgers.

Gulp.

“We expect those other opponents to look at us and know this is not the same Minnesota of the past,” Cobb said. “They’re going to have to come ready to play. ... We feel like everybody on the schedule, we can beat. Home or away, we expect to win.”

NEW TENANTS

The Gophers are sharing their stadium the next two years with the Vikings while the NFL team’s new facility is built. The chance to see pros like Adrian Peterson up close can’t hurt, right?

“If I get a chance, I’m going to have to slip AP a letter,” Cobb said, smiling.



STAFF PHOTO BY KEVIN BONESKE

Derek Riley, shown putting Tuesday on hole No. 9 at the Falls Country Club, placed second in the men’s club championship with a 27-hole score of 110.

GOLF

► continued from B1

graduate who won this summer’s Smokey Bear Golf Invitational at the Falls Country Club, ended up in fourth place in the men’s club championship with a 27-hole score of 115 (77-38).

Falls Country Club PGA professional Tom O’Connell said the men’s club championship, which had 38 entries with 30 finishers, was split into three flights of 10 with the golfers in the championship flight playing an additional nine holes after the first 18 to determine the top finishers based on their gross scores.

In the other two flights, which played just 18 holes,

2014 FCC Men’s Club Championship

August 12 – 38 players

Championship Flight

- 1. Travis Blais 70-33 – 103
- 2. Derek Riley 74-36 – 110
- 3. Mike Katrin 74-39 – 113
- 4. Glenn Walls 77-38 – 115

First Flight

- 1. Jim Moss
- 2. Rick Anderson
- 3. Eric Cann
- 4. Doug Dault

Second Flight

- 1. Don Svir
- 2. Steve Blair
- 3. Bob Ewald
- 4. Steve Takaichi

Closest to the pin:

- #6 – Brady Walls
- #11 – Charlie Dalton
- #14 – Travis Blais
- #16 – Brett Musich

O’Connell said the top golfers were determined based on their net scores (gross scores minus handicap).

He said the top-four finishers in each flight received gift certificates from the Falls Country Club worth \$60, \$40, \$25

and \$20, respectively, while the players with shots closest to the pin on holes No. 6, 11, 14 and 16 each received a gift certificate worth \$20.

The prize winners are listed in the chart with this story.

Interview with Minnesota Vikings’ Marcus Sherels

Editor’s note: Today’s edition of The Journal features an interview Robin Bjorkquist had earlier this month at Minnesota Vikings training camp with defensive back Marcus Sherels, who joined the Vikings as a free agent in 2010 after playing at the University of Minnesota.

RB: Who or what is going to make a difference this year?

MS: The whole team.

RB: Do you have any personal goals for yourself this year?

MS: No, I don’t really set personal goals, just team goals.

RB: How have you prepared for the outdoor weather?

MS: I’ve been in Minnesota all my life so, you know, I’m used to it.

RB: What is the best advice you’ve ever been given?

MS: Don’t let anybody tell you you can’t do anything.

RB: Who is your mentor?

MS: Darrel Thompson, he’s from Rochester. He went to the University of



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO BY ROBIN BJORKQUIST

Minnesota Vikings defensive back Marcus Sherels (35), shown walking earlier this month at training camp in Mankato, has been with the team since 2010 after being acquired as a free agent.

Minnesota and then played for the Green Bay Packers. He mentored me in college. He’s a great, great man.

RB: Do you have a char-

ity you work for?

MS: The Arts and the Autism Foundation based out of Rochester, Minnesota.

Versatile Thielen trying to stick with Vikings

MANKATO (AP)—Adam Thielen has delighted the crowd at training camp several times with difficult, diving catches.

In the first preseason game for the Minnesota Vikings, the second-year wide receiver showed some elusiveness with three punt returns for a total of 52 yards.

The moment that might have solidified his spot on this team, though, came during a punt at the end of the first half Friday against Oakland. Thielen played the protector position and sprinted down the field to slither around a blocker and tackle Raiders returner Denarius Moore for a 4-yard loss.

“We’ve got a saying around here: ‘The more you can do,’” coach Mike Zimmer said.

Consider that message received.

“Whatever they ask. I’m going to try to give it my best ability in whatever they want me to do,” Thielen said.

With his average size and undecorated background, Thielen has become a fan favorite around the facilities at Minnesota State University.

That starts, of course, with the fact that he went to school here, parlaying a standout career with the NCAA Division II Mavericks into a spot on the practice squad last season with the Vikings.

He’s a native of Minnesota, too, raised in Detroit Lakes about 200 miles northwest of the Twin Cities.



Adam Thielen

Zimmer called Thielen the “superstar” of Mankato, this riverside college town on the edge of the prairie.

“He’s a guy that has a lot of toughness, a lot of heart. He wants to make the football team, and he’s giving his best effort to do it. You can win a lot of football games with guys like him.”

Thielen’s friend, roommate and fellow wide receiver Cordarrelle Patterson has a spot all sewn up. He’s the first-round draft pick from last year and kickoff returner extraordinaire whom the Vikings have been trying to build much of their offense around.

The 6-foot-2, 195-pound Thielen would only be kept for depth and special teams, so he’s naturally unsatisfied with his status.

“I’ve been trying to give him confidence, but he just feels like he’s not part of this team, man,” Patterson said. “I tell him every day, ‘Man, you’re a part of this team,’ and he’s still saying, ‘I’m not. I’m not, man. I’ve still got to go in and prove myself.’ But you need that out of a guy, man, feeling like you’re not a part of this team. It’s just making him work harder.”

Cornerback Marcus Sherels is the incumbent punt returner, and he was

held out Friday because of a hamstring injury. Special teams coordinator Mike Priefer said Sunday he expects Sherels to keep that job for the start of the regular season.

“Obviously he’ll feel a little bit of a pressure from Adam or any other young returner, but Marcus is a guy that we’ve relied on heavily the last three years and we’ll see him have continued success, I hope,” Priefer said.

Thielen, then, must continue to prove his worth in other ways.

He’s comfortable enough, though, to threaten Patterson about taking his nickname.

“He tried to call himself ‘Mankato Flash.’ He’s trying to steal my name and stuff, you know. But he’s a great guy, man,” Patterson said. “At the end of the day, man, hats off to Adam. I know he’s going to make this team.”

Patterson, keeping his general manager hat on for another moment, said he and other veteran players agreed that Thielen should have made the active roster last year.

“He’s my good buddy, so of course he’s going to say that. Everything happens for a reason, and I wouldn’t trade anything for last year,” Thielen said. “I learned a lot of stuff from those guys and was able to watch how they prepare and the way they play, and I’m taking a lot of that stuff with me.”



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