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Wanted: Another chance, and backups

GAIL WOOD; Staff writer

Pete Fulton finally has the starting lineup he's been hoping for as coach at Northwest Christian.

And Jeff Zenisek is finally back coaching.

If Northwest Christian doesn't make it to the playoffs this season, it won't be because of a lack of talent. But with only 15 players turning out, Fulton will likely have to go with 11 two-way starters.

"Our starting group is impressive," Fulton said. "If they can stay healthy the whole year, we can make it to the playoffs."

Zenisek, after sitting out of coaching for five years, is the new head coach at Tenino, taking over in place of Kevin Ridout. Zenisek coached Central Washington to the NAIA championship in 1995 with John Kitna at quarterback.

"My daughter was a freshman in high school, and in college coaching you're moving all the time," Zenisek said. "I wanted to stay put. I was a family man and I loved it."

With his daughter now a freshman in college, Zenisek is back on the job, aiming to rebuild the program at Tenino.

"It's good to be back coaching," Zenisek said.

Josh Hatfield, at 6-foot-2 and 265 pounds, is the cornerstone of Northwest Christian's offensive and defensive lines. He has the size and quickness to be an impact player.

"He's really something special," Fulton said. "He's smart. He's got quick feet."

Hatfield has a sore Achilles' tendon, limiting his practice.

To avoid injuries, Fulton has had his players practice without pads.

"We've got to be careful," he said.

At quarterback, Ben Conner is back after suffering a high ankle sprain in the third game last year and missing the rest of the season.

"He's back strong," Fulton said. "He's really gifted. He does everything well."

"Whatever we ask, he can do. We just hope he stays healthy."

Steven Dunn is a power running back who could make Fulton's spread offense explosive.

At 6-foot-2, 190 pounds, Dunn has the speed and power to break big plays.

“He’s the tailback of the old fullback style,” Fulton said. “He’s Larry Csonka. He’s really good. At the skill positions, we’re set.”

Because of a lack of depth on the line, Fulton opted for a pistol spread offense. Without a tight end, he’ll spread the field.

“We’ll go with four wideouts because we have only five linemen,” Fulton said.

At Tenino, Zenisek has seven returning starters on offense and five on defense. Brad Engebretth, a 6-3, 255-pound senior, and Brian Bender, a 6-2, 240-pound senior, are keys on the offensive line. But Engebretth and Bender are inexperienced, with both in their second year of football.

Brandon Pettit, a senior running back who became a starter three games into last season, will again be Tenino’s go-to guy. Derek Mozzone and Ryan Schlessler are sure-handed receivers.

“It took a while to figure out what we were,” Zenisek said. “We’ll spread people out. It’s more of a wing spread. We’ll change it up. We’ve got a little speed to get outside. We’re packaging things.”

Zack Chamberlain is Tenino’s quarterback and the playmaker Zenisek needs to make his offense work.

Zenisek is glad to be back in coaching.

“Coaching makes you young again,” Zenisek said. “Coaching is coaching no matter what level you’re at.”

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HEAD COACH: Pete Fulton, fifth season

COORDINATORS, SETS

O: Fulton and Ben Briggs, spread/pistol

D: Terry Shaw, multiple

TOP PLAYERS: G/LB Gerad Cate, sr., 6-0, 175; OT/DT Josh Hatfield, sr., 6-2, 265; C/DT Brett Boogerd, sr., 6-0, 175; G/LB Tyler Tracht, sr., 6-0, 180; OT/DT John Wagner, sr., 6-0, 190; RB/OLB Steven Dunn, sr., 6-2, 195; QB/OLB Ben Connor, sr., 5-11, 180; QB/CB Zach Thomas, sr., 5-9, 165; SE/CB Trevor Magruder, jr., 5-9, 175; FB/CB Jesse Stacey, jr., 5-9, 175; SE/CB Kevin Damitio, jr., 5-10, 145.

OUTLOOK

Northwest Christian has improved its win total by one game every year since the program began in 2006. However, with overall turnout having dwindled to 20 players, depth could be an issue for the Navigators as this season progresses. Dunn was a 1,000-yard rusher last season, and Connor returns after playing only three games in 2009 because of injury. The team’s coaching staff has plenty of football experience. Fulton is the former head coach at Timberline High. Ron Holmes played in the Super Bowl.