

Optimism abounds as Redbirds begin preseason practice

by Brent Feeney, Sports Writer
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ALTON – Alton's football Redbirds learned quite a bit in the 2016 season.

Despite going through a winless season in 2016, optimism was running high as AHS began preseason workouts Monday morning at the school in preparation for their Aug. 25 season opener against Highland on the road.

“Last year was a good learning experience for our team,” said Redbird coach Eric Dickerson as preparations for the season got under way. “We were young, so we have a lot of veterans coming back, but it still comes down to performance on the field; hopefully they're ready for it and it seems like they were this summer. A lot of guys stood up and took leadership roles for us, so we're looking forward to it.”

Dickerson and his staff welcomed good numbers to the field for the opening day of drills. “We're working hard,” Dickerson said. “Our summer went really well; our numbers were great, the kids worked hard and we got a lot of good work in this summer (during the IHSA's contact days); we're hoping it translates into a good season for us.

“It's coming pretty quick (the Redbird opener at Highland); hopefully we got prepared this summer and we can fine-tune things here the next few weeks.”

Dickerson is looking forward to a good number of Redbirds stepping up this season. “We've got a lot of seniors who got a lot of experience last year,” Dickerson said. “Jonathan Bumpers, Kevin Caldwell, Darrell Smith, Kiondray Samuelton – we're looking for those guys to step up, and then on the line, we have Angelo Redding, Donovan Porter and Michael Green on the offensive line; defensive-wise, Izeal Terrell's back – hopefully he can stop the run up the middle for us – Ahmad Sanders, Ja'qui Womack; David Weaver is looking to mix in there at times, so we'll see what happens these next few weeks.”

The Redbirds added former Jersey coach Dave Jacobs to the staff this season. “Very nice,” Dickerson said of Jacobs joining the Redbird staff. “We've got a great staff this year; they've worked hard this summer and got some things installed. Dave's been great to work with and it's always great to get someone with that much experience to help you out.

“He's very familiar with the area and he's got a wealth of football knowledge.”

As always, the Southwestern Conference will be a difficult test for Alton – as it is for any team in the league. “This league is tough top to bottom,” Dickerson said. “There's some very tough teams in there – defending (IHSA Class 7A) champions in East St.

Louis; you know they're tough. Edwardsville's always tough, Belleville West, O'Fallon – there's not an easy week in this conference. It's always one of the best football conferences in the state, especially in southern Illinois.”

That doesn't mean the area's schools in lower classes can't give teams a run for their money. “(Civic Memorial) made the playoffs last year and (East Alton-)Wood River – you know those guys are going to look to build on their successful years,” Dickerson said, “and I hope they all do – that's what I want, especially in this area, is for football to be back and be successful.”

The Redbirds' home opener at Public School Stadium comes at 7 p.m. Sept. 1 against Quincy, with the SWC opener Sept. 8 at home against Collinsville; Alton hosts Edwardsville Sept. 22 and closes the season at East St. Louis Oct. 20.

