

Explorers open drills with much enthusiasm for 2017

by Brent Feeney, Sports Writer
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ALTON – Marquette Catholic's Explorers enjoyed much success in the 2016 season, winning the Prairie State Conference championship in going 7-2 in the regular season and an automatic berth in the IHSA Class 4A Football Championship.

The Explorers were eliminated in the opening round 32-24 to Taylorville, but Explorer coach Darrell Angleton is looking to build on last season's success as practice began Monday for the Explorers' season opener Aug. 25 at Public School Stadium against Civic Memorial.

“We've got pretty good participation,” Angleton said. “We've got good numbers, so that's good, and the weather looks like it's going to cooperate for us this week (temperatures for the opening drills were in the low 80s with some overcast skies and reasonable humidity), which makes me happier. It's a good start.”

As always, optimism abounds when the first drills of the season get under way. “You've got to be,” Angleton said. “By our numbers, we should have 18 seniors this year – that's good numbers for a school our size; we've got eight or nine juniors, and throw in the skill level of our juniors – every one of them is a starter-kind of guy. At our level, that's big numbers; I don't have to rely on sophomores and freshmen to really fill in the problem spots.

“I've got some really wonderful incoming freshmen; the issue there is a lot of them haven't matured yet, and a lot of the 18-year-old kids are men; I've got three kids coming back from (U.S. Army) basic training (two at Fort Benning, Ga., and one at Fort Leonard Wood, Mo.)”

The Explorer running game will be a key to the team's success in 2017. “One of the things we bring to the table is a heck of a running game,” Angleton said. “I'm returning both of my running backs, D'Avion Peebles and Treven Swingler – they were dominate last year (Peebles running for 785 yards and 12 touchdowns, Swingler running for 777 yards and 11 TDs). They divvied up snaps; it didn't allow them to have monster stats within the (PSC), but the thing is, if you put them together and throw in what Jeremy Strebel would steal from them (Strebel ran for 285 yards and had a TD in 2016) and my quarterback (Brady McAfee), we were an effective running team, and those two guys are coming back.

“Throw in Aaron Gregory – he missed last year with a separated shoulder – but as a sophomore at the JV level, he had a 400-yard game; he brings a piece of talent to the table, so I've got three running backs, plus both of my quarterbacks – we haven't settled on who's going to be (the quarterback) this year – but both of them are runners too. My running game should be something to be feared.”

After last year's playoff appearance, the Explorers would like to return to the postseason this season and go a bit deeper into November's run to the state championship. "It was a good experience (the MCHS loss to Taylorville in the Class 4A opening round)," Angleton said. "We gave them a good game; that's one thing about our single-wing package; it's pretty deceptive. It's power, though; we're pretty excited about it."

Marquette's PSC opener comes at Nokomis Sept. 8, with the Explorers hosting league and backyard rival East Alton-Wood River Sept. 15 and PSC newcomer Dupo Oct. 7; the regular-season finale comes Oct. 20 at home against South Fork of Kincaid.

