

# **After successful 2016 football campaign, Oilers look to bigger things in new season**

by Colin Feeney, Contributing Sports Writer  
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WOOD RIVER — The 2016 football season for the East Alton-Wood River Oilers was one of its most remarkable ever. The Oilers finished the regular season 6-3 and made the Illinois High School Association playoffs for the first time in 10 years before falling to Carlinville 76-19 in the Class 3A first round.

That was then. This is now and things look even brighter a season later.

“Last year was great, but now the bar's set higher,” Oiler head coach Garry Herron said in an interview on the opening day of practice. “We had a really good first day, and we had 55 kids come out for the opening day. I'm really excited about the new season,”

Almost all of the Oilers' key players return for their senior seasons, and they're lead by quarterback Justin Englar, who passed for nearly 1,000 yards in 2016. Joining Englar with be running backs Zach Womack and Gabe Grimes. T.J. Lawson, who also starred in the backfield, moves to wide receiver but will also see time in the backfield. Brayden Young will also see playing time in the Oiler backfield, while on the defensive side, expect Zach Kincade and Lukas Westbrook to be the leaders.

Herron is very proud of each of his senior players who have made incredible contributions to the revival of EAWR football.

“They're all amazing kids,” Herron said. “We expect nothing but big things from them, both on and off the field.”

And there's always newcomers who are eager to make a positive impact on the team. Three juniors to watch will be linemen Geoff Martinez, Marc St. Peters and Mark Vann, and they're all competing for a spot on the line. “The guy who gets it is definitely going to earn it,” Herron said.

The sophomore class is also well represented by nose guard Blake Wright, tight end Gavin Haynes and wide receiver-defensive back Tavion Walker, who comes to EAWR as a transfer from Carbondale. In addition, 26 freshmen came out for the opening day, of practice and hope to make a contribution as the season progresses. All could see some playing time as the season goes on.

The added depth is a good thing, according to Herron. “We'll try to have guys not go both ways as much, and get them some rest from time to time,” Herron said.

The Oilers came out on the opening day full steam ahead.

“The kids hit the ground running,” Herron said. “The kids know the system, and we spent the day fine tuning everything.”

And the players' work ethic and commitment is tremendous as well. Herron is very proud of all of their efforts.

“I'm not the greatest coach in the world,” Herron said, “but I've got kids who work hard and have the will to win.”

The 2017 schedule has a few tweaks to it. Last year started with Dupon and Class 4A power Taylorville to open the season, but this year, the Oilers open at Breese Central, then host Civic Memorial in week two. Week three sees EAWR hosting Madison, who will be fielding a team for the first time since 1992 and was in a co-op with Metro-East Lutheran the last two seasons.

The Prairie State Conference schedule starts in week four at Marquette Catholic, and the Oilers travel to Dupon, a new addition to the conference, the next week. A key game will be at Kincaid South Fork, which will be played on Thursday, Oct. 5 instead of the next day, due to a scheduling conflict at South Fork. The Oilers conclude the regular season with back-to-back home games against Nokomis and Bunker Hill-Mt. Olive, who will play as a co-op this season.

And Herron and his team are anxiously awaiting opening day on Aug. 25.

“I think after day one, we're really excited,” Herron said. “It was a great day of practice, very uptempo and energetic. It was a great day for sure, and we're looking for great things this season.”





[Dan Brannan also contributed to this story.](#)