

Oilers aim to reload with experienced line and incoming athletes

by John Hough, Sports Writer
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WOOD RIVER - The East Alton-Wood River Oilers are an up-and-coming program.

Head coach Garry Herron took over in 2015, and after going 1-8 his first year, he's guided the Oilers to a 13-7 record over the past two seasons, including back-to-back playoff berths. The atmosphere around the place is changing for the better, and they aim to stay consistent.

Now in 2018, the Oilers are faced with the challenge of replacing a talented senior class who were key factors in turning the program around on and off the field. One thing Herron aspires for his seniors this year will be to pick up on the graduated senior's leadership.

"We hope that senior class last year left some leadership in the guys that are seniors now and that's how we keep it going," Herron said. Those guys take the torch from the seniors last year and instill that in our young guys, and play hard. That's the main thing for us."

Defensive end Hunter Morales (6-2, 170 pounds) returns after leading the team in sacks with four and second in tackles. An addition to the defensive line will be Gavin Haynes (6-2, 213 pounds) at nose guard and defensive end Mark Vann (6-0, 230 pounds). Shawn McKee will step in as the mike linebacker after playing stack next to Zach Kincade last season. He was third on the team with 55 tackles.

"All summer long the defense has been the strong point," Herron said. "The defense as a whole has looked pretty good so far. They're going to lead the way."

The Oilers have a lot of shoes to fill on offense graduating almost all of their production from running backs Zach Womack, Gabe Grimes, and Brayden Young as well as quarterback Justin Englar, along with other key players. Despite the heavy losses, Wood River might have more athleticism this season.

Junior Tavion Walker (5-9, 140 pounds) will take over at quarterback, and he adds an element of speed to be a dual-threat. The starting running back, Reggie Newtall (6-0, 170 pounds) transferred from Alton a year ago and now is eligible for his senior season. The two could pose as a tricky dynamic duo for opposing defenses.

"It's nice to have him," Herron said of Newtall. Very good athlete. Great kid. Does well in the classroom."

Walker, who initially transferred from Carbondale High School, played primarily as a cornerback last year as a sophomore and will be there again this season along with Newtall on defense. Other starting halfback is sophomore Ryan Dawson (6-3, 170 pounds).

“We’re really excited about him,” Herron said of Walker. “We were pretty athletic last year, but all-around now we have some guys that if we can get the ball in their hands, they can do something with it.”

The Oilers do have the luxury of bringing back four linemen who saw plenty of game time.

“We shuffled them around a little bit, so they are in different positions. We did them that way so we could be more athletic up front and we still have a pretty good sized front five,” Herron said.

Expectations are the same as they’ve been for the last two seasons and that is to get a playoff berth along with slaying some old nemesis’ in order to give the Oilers a great opportunity at a Prairie State Conference championship.

“For me, they’re still high because I know the talent we have. Our expectations are to get back into the playoffs,” Harron said. “We have to get through our first two weeks with Breese Central and . If we come out of that 2-0 or 1-1, we’ll be alright.”

“As far as conference play we have to be ready for Marquette. For whatever reason, we never seem to show up and play, and they do. If we knock them off, I think we have a really good shot at winning the conference, but we gotta beat the big dog first.”



