

Blackhawks set to defend APFL title



Staff photo/Tony Boone - Running back Mell Holliday ran for 29 touchdowns last season for the Iowa Blackhawks, who open their season tonight at the Mid-America Center.

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Prior to last summer, Iowa had spent its entire existence in the American Professional Football League chasing the Kansas Koyotes.

Now that they've turned the table on their longtime rivals, the Blackhawks are now the hunted.

The reigning APFL champions from Council Bluffs open their 2010 season tonight against the Missouri Mustangs at Mid-America Center. When the ball is kicked off shortly after 7 p.m., Iowa becomes the team to beat.

And the Blackhawks know it.

"This year, we're coming in as defending champs," defensive standout Chris Moore said. "We have something to prove – that it wasn't just a fluke. We have a big target on our back now. Everybody's coming out to get us."

Iowa coach Mike Wolff said he's comfortable with his team's new role as the top dog. He wants his players to feel that way too.

"We've talked about that with the guys on a couple of different occasions during camp," Wolff said. "We've let them know that the bull's-eye is squarely on their backs so they have to bring their 'A' game every night."

That starts tonight against the Mustangs of the Central Plains Football League, an outdoor league based in Missouri and Kansas that plays by indoor rules.

Missouri, which is already 4-0 this season, is the first of three CPFL opponents for the Blackhawks before play begins in the four-team APFL. Iowa hosts teams from Independence, Mo., and Junction City, Kan., before traveling to Topeka, Kan., to face the Koyotes on May 8.

Wolff said the three nonleague games will give this year's Blackhawks time to come together. A number of key players return for Iowa, but a few rookies are expected to make an impact as well.

"It helps that we have three nonconference games to start the season," Wolff said. "We should be able to get those guys a lot of snaps before we hit the heart of our schedule."

Wolff said the Blackhawks have talented lines on both sides of the ball. The skill-position players on offense and defense are also solid, he said.

"We just need to get them in the right positions on the field and let them do their jobs," Wolff said.

Although he hinted that he might hang up the pads after last year's championship game, Chuck Wright returns to quarterback Iowa for the seventh straight season. Former University of Colorado running back Mell Holliday will again join him in the backfield, and the Blackhawks have a handful of talented receivers.

"The young guys that have come in have just been phenomenal and picked stuff up really fast," Wright said. "And I've probably had the best line in the league. They're all experienced. They're all big, physical, aggressive guys."

The defense has some of those guys also, including C.B. natives Jeff McQuinn and Albert Rodriguez and journeyman Lamain Rucker. Rucker was once a free-agent signee of the NFL's Miami Dolphins and has played in a number of indoor leagues. Moore, another C.B. native, will again captain the defense.

Overall, the Blackhawks appear to have the pieces needed to repeat.

"We're looking like we can make another serious shot," Wright said. "It's not going to be a cakewalk, but we're going to do like we did last year. We believe every game we go into, we're going to win. That's the bottom line.

"We've eliminated the underdog persona. Now, we're the champs. And we need to play like that."