

Eagles looking forward to tougher schedule next year

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newly formed league in three tiers.

The 'A' division will include schools with the largest enrollments and school's with above-average enrollments that have had recent success in football. Gabel said that division will likely include Colby and schools like Smith Center, Norton, Goodland and Phillipsburg.

The 'B' division will be home to schools who have a low enrollment, but have had recent success on the gridiron like St. Francis and Oakley.

The 'C' division will include schools with a low enrollment and not much recent football success like an Atwood or Osborne.

"It's not fair for a school like Hill City to have to play Smith Center every year," said Gabel. "In the case of Atwood and Colby, we have a tradition and rivalry with each other. They may want to continue to play us. We'll just have to wait and see."

One of the goals for the new league was to play as many games against familiar opponents as possible to keep the league ties strong. Gabel, though, has come to the realization that playing former league opponents more often than not will not be doable.

"We want to keep our ties with the leagues, but I know it's not possible," said Gabel. "Some programs like Quinter and Atwood are really struggling. The chances of us playing Goodland both years are very good, but the chances of us playing Hoxie or Oakley are slim."

For Colby, being in the upper tier of the competitive new league could lead to one of the most challenging schedules they've ever had in the next two seasons.

The possibility exists Colby could face three of the top five teams in 2A (St. Francis, Oakley and Smith Center) and tradition-rich programs in 3A such as Norton, Phillipsburg or Ellis all in one season.

The Eagles new district should be much tougher as well, if Hugoton and Goodland are replaced with

schools like Pratt and Larned.

Despite making a winning season or playoff appearance more difficult to come by, a tougher schedule is something that both Gardner and Gabel feel can benefit the football program.

"You want to play schools like Smith Center," said Gardner. "You want a regular season that is going to prepare you for down the line. We'll play whoever they give us. We want to have a reporter go to Smith Center and ask the if they're worried about Colby."

"We're willing to play anyone," said Gabel. "If you prepare the right way, you're capable of beating anyone. When you raise the level of competition, the kids are forced to either raise their level or get embarrassed. If you simply schedule just so you get wins, you're lowering yourself."

Prior to the league schedule being worked out this afternoon, the first thing on the agenda in will be to figure out the new districts for each school. The districts are randomly assigned by the Kansas State High School Activities Association, but because of the loss of Goodland to 3A, the closest 4A school to Colby is now Ulysses, 135 miles away. Therefore, Eagles fans better get used to lengthy drives for at least one of the last three games each of the next two years.

"It's possible Clay Center (263 miles away) or Abilene (224 miles away) could be in our district," said Gabel. "It's not something we're in favor of. We're not into traveling. We have some district vehicles that have over 200,000 miles on them. No matter how much we don't like our schedule, we're going to have come back and say 'I don't like it, but we have to live with it for two years.'"

Other district possibilities that Gabel mentioned included Pratt and Concordia. But no matter who the Eagles end up drawing or how far they have to drive, Gardner is confident Eagles fans will inevitably follow, if his team is successful.

"Our fans are great," said Gardner. "They pack the place for our home games every week, and

you've seen the way they travel. It's up to our team to put a product out there on the field that people want to come see. I can't speak for any of the fans, but I know we don't have a problem with traveling further for our games."

One game Eagle fans should be able to count on for a short trip the next two years is with Goodland. Although the Cowboys are moving to 3A and can no longer be Colby's final opponent of the season, Gardner expects the rivalry to be just as intense in the future.

"I'm not disappointed that Goodland is no longer 4A," said Gardner. "We'll still play Goodland every year, and whether it's in the middle of the season or at the end, it will still be a rivalry game."

Smith has similar feelings, but he is more concerned about losing the rivalry in other sports.

"For years we've been the largest school in the league, and we've gone out and competed against 1-2A schools," said Smith.

"Enrollment doesn't affect the intensity of a rivalry. However, this is still not finalized, but there's a very good chance next year that we won't play Colby in sub-state basketball, wrestling or volleyball."

Even more so than the impact of the new realignment on the Goodland/Colby rivalry, Smith is more concerned about viable long-term solution for a population problem in the area that doesn't appear to be getting any better any time soon.

"I think there needs to be a discussion on where we're heading," said Smith. "Each school needs to look at their own situation and what we're trying to do. We've focused primarily on remaining competitive in football, but what creates a problem is that not every school in our league offers the same sports. The Northwest Kansas League has to look beyond football. I foresee some changes to be carried out here soon. I think it would be silly for us not to do some planning for each school and for the league as a whole."

Colby's football schedule for 2008 and 2009 will be available in Thursday's Free Press.

Lady Eagle tennis girls ready to step it up at regionals

By Joey Falkoff

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Heading into Thursday's regional tournament at Fike Park, the 4A #8 ranked Colby Lady Eagle tennis team is a confident bunch after winning seven of eight regular season tournaments.

No player exudes that confidence more than senior #1 singles player Logan Wark. Wark finished the regular season with four tournament victories, a 27-4 match record, and was one of three Lady Eagles to qualify for state last year.

Wark isn't shy about how well she thinks she can play Thursday.

"I have complete confidence in myself right now," said Wark. "I've been playing better the last few tournaments, and I'm hitting the ball a lot harder. I guarantee victory at regionals."

Lady Eagle head tennis coach Jordan Sharp won't go as far as guaranteeing victory for his team, but is very optimistic about how he thinks his girls will perform.

"I'm ready and excited for them," said Sharp. "I know what they're capable of, and I have confidence in every player. I believe that we can qualify all six girls for state, but they have to believe that."

Seeding for the regional tournament will take place Thursday morning and play is scheduled to begin around 10 a.m.

A change in the playoff format in class 4A tennis means this year regionals won't determine who gets to state, but rather who makes it to Saturday's sub-state tournament in Russell. The top four singles players and the top four doubles teams will advance to sub-state. The top two singles players and top two doubles teams at sub-state will advance to the state tournament in Pratt Oct. 13.

The Colby regional will include Russell, Ulysses, Goodland and Pratt.

The Lady Eagles have a little history with every team in their region,



JOEY FALKOFF/Colby Free Press

Eagle #1 doubles player Lindsey Wilson got ready to take a backhand during Tuesday afternoon's practice at Fike Park.

and most of that history should give the Eagles even more confidence.

In their first tournament of the year at WaKeeney, Dougherty and Hockersmith lost in the finals to Russell's #2 doubles team of Bailey Driscoll and Brittany Rohr (5-8). However, a week later, in Russell Dougherty and Hockersmith avenged that loss with an 8-6 win Driscoll and Rohr.

Dougherty and Hockersmith also knocked off Pratt's #2 doubles team of Emma Shrack and Katie Kocker 8-0 in Lindsborg.

The Eagles #2 doubles team won four tournaments during the regular season, but they will now be facing other #1 teams at regionals and possibly sub-state, but Dougherty isn't using that as a crutch heading into Thursday.

"I'm pretty confident," said Dougherty. "It will be a little different for me, because I'll be playing against other #1 doubles teams now. We're playing really well right now, and we've definitely improved a ton this year."

Wark has beaten Russell's #1 singles player 8-0, and has defeated Pratt's #1 singles player, Andrea Clarkon, 8-1 and 8-0 the two times they have matched up this year.

Wark faces the added pressure of being a senior and not wanting her career to end, which is something

she is aware of.

"Yea there's more pressure being a senior," said Wark. "I want to make it back to state. I know I can always screw up and that would suck."

Despite the regular season success against all of these schools, Sharp knows post-season play is an entirely different animal.

"I know we beat these teams during the regular season, but it doesn't mean it will happen again," said Sharp. "We can't rely on that. We have to play hard and act like we are playing an opponent that has the potential to beat us."

The Lady Eagles had one of their best regular seasons in recent memory. Sharp feels that will add pressure on the girls, but says his team has an opportunity to do something very special.

"I hate to put more pressure on the girls shoulders, but yea, our regular season does raise our expectations for regionals and sub-state," said Sharp. "If all of these girls could make it to state, it would be the perfect ending to an unforgettable season. It would prove to schools in eastern Kansas that we can play some tennis out here. It's been an unbelievable year, but hopefully it's the start of a tradition rather than just one great season. We know what we can do and now we have to go out and prove it."

Junior varsity Eagles keep rolling

Led by three Ethan Stickel touchdown runs and dominating defensive performance, the Colby junior varsity football team improved to 5-0 on the season after an impressive 38-8 win at Oakley Monday.

After a scoreless first quarter, Stickel gave the Eagles a 6-0 lead with a 75 yard touchdown run early in the second quarter. On the next drive, Stickel took one the distance for a 65 yard score. Quarterback Stephen Dinkel completed a two-point pass to Chaz Winger to put the Eagles on top 14-0.

Colby tried to add on to that lead with less than a minute left in the first half, but Dinkel had a pass that was picked off and returned for a touchdown. The Plainsmen added the two-point conversion to cut the Eagle lead to 14-8 at halftime.

Stickel, though, made sure that was as close as the Plainsmen would get. He added his third touchdown of the game in the third quarter on a 3 yard run. Fullback Adam Weber scored the two-point conversion to boost the Eagle lead to 22-8.

The score remained the same until the fourth quarter, when Dinkel

showed off his huge arm by completing a 65 yard touchdown pass to wide out Eric Blanton. Stickel ran his second two-point conversion of the game to make the score 30-8.

Stickel's three touchdown performance came on the heels of a rough varsity game for him Friday. His ability to bounce back like he did impressed his coach very much.

"His performance says a lot for him," said junior varsity head coach Jerad Johnson.

"He's a good athlete and a good young kid. I hope he wouldn't get discouraged after a tough night on varsity. It shows what a good player he is and what a great running back he'll be for us in the future."

Stickel was replaced by freshman running back Andrew Flanagin late in the game, and he picked up right where Stickel left off. Flanagin scored his first junior varsity touchdown on a 35 yard run and added the two-point conversion to bring the final score to 38-8.

"Our most explosive game was our opening 54-6 win over Hoxie, but I would say last night was our most balanced offensive game,"

said Johnson. "Dinkel threw some nice passes, and Kalen Rasmussen and Ethan Zwegardt caught some balls. We had a lot of success running the ball, and I think a lot of that came from good blocking."

We caught Oakley blitzing a couple of times. Our offensive line held up well and our running backs got out on the edge and outran them."

With both the freshman and junior varsity team's still both undefeated more than half way through both of their seasons, Johnson believes the hard work varsity head coach Chris Gardner and rest of the staff have put in is starting to bare the fruits of its labor.

"It says a lot for the future," said Johnson. "The kids are starting to understand the offensive and defensive schemes. We have a good weight program now, which is something we struggled with in the past. Last fall was the first time these kids have had a consistent weight program to start on, and I think it's starting to pay off for them."

The junior varsity Eagles next play Monday versus Oberlin.

Eagle girls golf team preparing for state

Over the past six days, the Colby Lady Eagle golf team has competed in tournaments in Lakin and Oakley.

Saturday, the Lady Eagles played an 18-hole tournament in Lakin. The field included Goodland, Holcomb, Hugoton, Lakin, Larned, Syracuse and Ulysses. The only two golfers that head coach Rick Williams sent to this tournament were Courtney Ress and Jessica Leiker. Ress shot a 115 and finished 16th, while Leiker shot a 137 and finished 30th.

"What a terrible day for golf," said Williams. "The wind was about as bad as I have ever experienced at a golf tournament. It was hard to stand out there, much less play golf."

The Eagles struggles at Lakin followed one of their best performances of the year, when they played at Oakley Thursday. Oakley's nine-hole tournament featured Trego, Scott City, Goodland and Oakley. The Lady Eagles' three top

finishers all placed in the top 11. The team was led by Ress, who finished 6th after shooting a 55. Leiker shot a 58 and took ninth, and Audra Fleming shot a 61 and finished 11th. The rest of the participants at Oakley included Heather Griggs (70), Kayla Ziegelmeier (72), Kayla Sloan (74), Katie Houtz (74), Michelle Schroeder (75) and Kelly

Trenkle (80).

Individual medals were awarded to Ress and Leiker.

"This was great for us to get to play a tournament this close to home, and we got to take all nine of our golfers over," said Williams. "We brought home two individual medals and placed third as a team. Audra Fleming played great."

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