

St. Ambrose University Football – 2008 Preview

Fresh off back-to-back Mid-States Football Association (MSFA) Midwest League titles, the St. Ambrose University football team will enter the 2008 season with several questions but plenty of potential answers.

More than 150 players reported to preseason camp as the Fighting Bees brought in what is believed to be the largest recruiting class in program history. There are holes to fill as SAU returns only eight starters from a 2007 team that finished 8-3 overall and a perfect 7-0 in MSFA Midwest League play and advanced to the NAIA playoffs. Gone are 10 all-conference players, including 2007 MSFA Midwest League Offensive Player of the Year Jim DuPage. Even with the inexperience throughout the lineup, second-year head coach Mike Magistrelli expects his young Bees to compete.

"We have a lot of talent across the board. It's just one of those years where we lost a lot of seniors which opened up opportunities for younger guys," said Magistrelli. "But expectations are extremely high within the football program. We go into each season expecting to compete for a conference championship. And even with all these younger guys, our expectations do not change."

Outside expectations certainly did not change. Despite the inexperience, St. Ambrose is 10th in the NAIA preseason coaches' poll and was once again tabbed as the MSFA Midwest League favorite according to the MSFA preseason coaches' poll. The Bees, who have won six of the last eight conference crowns, garnered seven of the eight first-place votes to earn the top spot. McKendree grabbed the other first-place vote and is second in the poll.

"It's a nice honor but it's really based on what you did a year ago," said Magistrelli. "It's great to be the preseason number one, but it's really not something we put much stock into. We still have to line up each and every Saturday and work for it."

Here is a position-by-position look at the 2008 St. Ambrose University football team:

Quarterbacks

Will Ducey, a senior transfer from Western Illinois University, will be asked to fill the shoes of DuPage, who threw for 2826 yards and 30 touchdowns while completing nearly 60 percent of his passes in 2007. Ducey, who received limited playing time for the Leathernecks, will be backed up by starting wide receiver Michael Hayward.

"Will will bring a lot of experience and athleticism to the quarterback position," said Magistrelli. "In his short time with us, just one semester, he's done a great job of leadership and he's been just one of the guys at this point. We expect big things out of him."

Running Backs

St. Ambrose will need to find a replacement for Vernon Reed, who rushed 146 times for 592 yards and five touchdowns in 2007. The leading candidate is senior Brennan McCarron. McCarron rushed for 396 yards and one score on 97 carries last year.

Returning junior Kyle Ryon will vie for time while freshman Tim Brown, freshman Jake Eikenberry, and Eastern Illinois University transfer Mike Larocco will also add depth.

Wide Receivers

Although many of the questions entering the 2008 campaign are on the offensive side of the ball, one position Magistrelli, the reigning MSFA Midwest League Coach of the Year, doesn't have to worry about is wide receiver, where the Bees return a pair of all-conference selections. Sophomore-to-be Michael Hayward caught 78 passes for 883 yards and nine touchdowns while senior Kyle Korth chipped in with 64 catches for 820 yards and four scores last season.

"We're in good shape," said Magistrelli. "Michael Hayward was our leading receiver and had a tremendous red-shirt freshman year a year ago. He'll team with Kyle Korth. They are our top two leading receivers from a year ago. Expect big things out of those two; they'll do an outstanding job."

"Nick Smither is another guy who did a great job a year ago in limited opportunities. "His opportunities will definitely increase this year."

Smither, who caught 10 balls for 204 yards and a touchdown last year, and senior Dave Kietzman return. Freshman Billy Rembold is also expected to see playing time.

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Tight Ends

St. Ambrose will need someone to step in at tight end to replace Tyler Driscoll. Driscoll caught 46 balls for 601 yards and a team-high 11 touchdowns to earn first team all-conference status in 2007.

“We lose Tyler Driscoll who was an outstanding player for us last year, but we have a couple guys who we’ll look to fill that need – junior Austin Hochstetler and sophomore Alec Kiburz. Austin had a great spring for us and looks like he’s in the same mold as Tyler – a really athletic tight end who’s a dual threat as a wide receiver and blocker. Alec really has done some great things in his short time here. Look for those two to play a lot for us at the tight end position.”

Hochstetler, Kiburz and junior transfer Matt Byers will compete at tight end.

Offensive Line

The only other returning starter on offense is junior center Mike Lazetto. The big loss on the offensive line will be at the tackle spots where the Fighting Bees need to replace first team all-conference picks Russ Monk and Dru Filkins. Both guard spots are also up for grabs.

“Obviously filling those needs on the offensive line will be a big challenge for us,” said Magistrelli. “We do have some good players coming back, but they just don’t have a lot of experience necessarily.”

“We do return Mike Lazetto at center, who’s been starting a couple years and has played a lot of football for us. We expect him to be a leader for us up front. After that, it’s a lot of inexperienced guys.”

Junior Matt Sutton, who transferred to St. Ambrose last spring, is a top candidate at left tackle, while junior Matt Mueller and junior Joe Gaffey, returning from an injury, will compete for the right tackle spot. Freshman Nick Hauge and sophomore Marty Talbot will battle at left guard, and junior Jordan Hanrahan is expected to start at right guard.

Defensive Line

The strength of the defense should be up front, led by senior nose tackle Vince Fillipp. Fillipp finished with 58 total tackles, including 7.5 tackles for loss and two sacks in earning first team all-conference honors in 2007.

He will be flanked by senior defensive ends Mike Walter and Jake Jakaitis. Walter earned second team all-conference recognition after recording 59 total tackles and recovering four fumbles. Jakaitis tied for the team lead with five sacks in 2007.

“Our starting three down linemen have a chance to be as good a group as we’ve ever had here,” said Magistrelli.

Juniors Jason Bradford, Joey Carioti and Mike LeMay will also rotate up front.

Linebackers

Senior Hank Belshouse is the lone returning starter at linebacker. The outside linebacker earned all-conference honorable mention after finishing third on the Bees with 67 total tackles a year ago. He had eight tackles for loss, two sacks and two interceptions.

Replacements are needed for Dan Eble, Kevin Linn and Jesse Weygand at the other linebacker spots. The three 2007 all-conference performers combined for 196 tackles last season.”

“We lose our top three inside backers from a year ago,” said Magistrelli. “It’s a spot where we’ll be very inexperienced, but I think we’re very talented. Guys that will play inside for us are juniors PJ Conroy, Bryant Beal and Jim Skupien, and sophomores Tyler Boyle and Cody Lafler.

“We do return Hank Belshouse at outside linebacker but obviously we lose Dan Eble. Playing out there will be senior Jeremy Johnson and sophomores Jarrod Reichelt and Steve Herbert. Beal will also see time outside.

“Again, they are very talented but young and inexperienced. Once they get that experience, they’ll be an outstanding group. That’s kind of the theme of the whole team.”

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Defensive Backs

The defensive backfield also returns only one starter in junior safety Zack Hughes. Hughes was in on 42 tackles and picked off four passes in 2007. Senior Kris Griswold is expected to start at the other safety, and Zach McCalester will serve as the backup safety, but both starting cornerbacks will be determined in the preseason.

“We lose our two starting corners in Corey Overton and Justin Thompson,” said Magistrelli. “Those two were three-year starters who have taken all the reps for some time. There are a handful of guys who will compete at corner, including juniors Colin Green and Colin Suiter and freshmen Justin Wahrman and Adam O’Neil.”

Special Teams

After converting 8-of-13 field goals, including nailing a 44-yarder, senior Gavin Tigges will return as the kicker. He will be pressed by freshman Scott Langel. Langel and sophomore David Wiemers will compete for punting duties. Junior wide receiver Nick Smither, freshman running back Tim Brown and freshman wide receiver Billy Rembold will handle the returns.

Schedule

The young Bees will be tested early. St. Ambrose opens the 2008 season at the University of South Dakota on August 30. The Fighting Bees' home opener is September 13 against the University of Wisconsin-Platteville at Brady Street Stadium in Davenport. Homecoming will be October 4 when the Bees host St. Francis, Ill. to open MSFA Midwest League play.

“Our schedule is tough,” said Magistrelli. “We open with the University of South Dakota, a team that is moving to I-AA. Obviously it is a tremendous opportunity for our program here at St. Ambrose to have the chance to line up against a program like the University of South Dakota in the DakotaDome. It will be a great experience for our players, our coaches, and everyone involved with the program.

“After an off week, we play UW-Platteville, who we lost to a year ago. We know how tough they can be and have to be ready to go for that one. Two weeks later, we go out to Saint Francis, Ind. – if not the top team, one of the top teams in the country at our level. It’s definitely a strong schedule off the bat.

“From there, we go into conference play. Within our conference, you have to be ready to go each and every week because it is an extremely competitive league.

“A big key for us will be to see how quickly we get some of these young kids to jell and figure things out to the point where we can line up against anybody. And I have confidence we’ll do that.”

St. Ambrose University Football – 2008 Schedule

Date	Opponent	Location	Time
Aug. 30	at University of South Dakota	Vermillion, S.D.	7 p.m.
Sept. 13	Univ. of Wisconsin-Platteville	Home	1 p.m.
Sept. 20	Waldorf College	Home	2 p.m.
Sept. 27	at University of Saint Francis, Ind.	Fort Wayne, Ind.	11 a.m.
Oct. 4	University of St. Francis, Ill.*	Home	1 p.m.
Oct. 11	at William Penn University*	Oskaloosa, Iowa	1 p.m.
Oct. 18	McKendree University*	Home	1 p.m.
Oct. 25	at Olivet Nazarene University*	Bourbonnais, Ill.	1:30 p.m.
Nov. 1	Iowa Wesleyan College*	Home	1 p.m.
Nov. 8	at Quincy University*	Quincy, Ill.	12 p.m.
Nov. 15	at Trinity International University*	Deerfield, Ill.	1 p.m.

* MSFA Midwest League contest