

Vandals defense growing up

Idaho's defense is older and hopefully wiser than past teams

By Sandra Kelly, Daily News Staff Writer

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Idaho defensive coordinator Mark Criner knows a thing or two about football.

He played at Boise State and he's been coaching since 1990. He's had success everywhere he's been, and he's looking forward to finally bringing success to Idaho.

Criner's also realistic. He came to Idaho knowing it was a rebuilding project, and as he enters his third year with head coach Robb Akey, Criner's defense is almost - but not quite - where they want it to be.

"Size wise and weight wise, we're probably another year from where you want," he said. "All your speed and weight and better numbers. We are a year away from that, but we aren't going to slow things down. We've got to push forward. ... Are we closer to where we want to be? Heck yeah. And I think we have some athletic guys when we're all fully healthy - knock on some wood on injuries - that we oughtta be a better, more consistent defense."

That's good news to Vandal fans who saw their team decimated by injuries early and struggle all year to stay mentally in the game.

For example, last year Shiloh Keo and Tre-Shawn Robinson went out with season-ending injuries. Paul Senescall was out a couple games and JoJo Dickson missed games with a shoulder injury, only to name a few. Things were so tough that at one point Dickson started in three different linebacker spots.

"It's hard to play good, consistent football when you're learning three different positions and you're still only a true sophomore," Criner said. "(Now) we have more numbers, especially in the secondary, which makes things nicer. For instance, if you play, and I don't care who you are, if you're a freshman linebacker and a star or a sophomore and a good player, it's hard to play out in space (in college). We need our personnel to spread out and that's what we're going to be able to do more."

Last year the Vandals only had two seniors make it through the entire year. They only had a few juniors and the remainder of the team was made up of freshman and sophomores. Criner said that's not a lot of leadership.

This year there more juniors ready to take the mantel of leadership on their shoulders. The few seniors who are on the team have been through a lot, and they want to leave the program better than they found it.

"I think we are faster as individuals, but also, they are playing faster because they understand, they communicate better," Criner said. "It's easier to communicate with each other when you know what you're looking at. The older your players get, the easier it is to teach the young players. So our younger players are coming through the forest for us because our older plays can teach them."

That should translate into execution.

In past years the Vandals' defense would play hard for a half or three quarters, but they had a mental breakdown at some point during the game, and the results were deadly as teams racked up 14, 17 or more points, putting the game out of reach.

Criner said if his defense can play the entire game, it will give the offense a chance to run their schemes and put points on the board.

"I can't stress this enough - a better offense makes a better defense," he said. "You have to work hand in hand."

The Vandals have their first chance to put it all together on Saturday at 5 p.m. (PST) against the Aggies.

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