

Delay of Game

Football team eager for spring season after fall postponement

Wednesday, December 2, 2020

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(FILE PHOTO)

When the announcement was made that UNH would be able to play a spring football season – softening the blow of the COVID-19 related postponement of the fall schedule – sophomore quarterback Max Brosmer’s second thought was how excited he was that the Wildcats would be able to take the field after all this year.

Even that excitement wasn’t enough to extinguish the Georgia native’s initial response, though.

“My first reaction was thinking about how cold it’s going to be,” Brosmer says of the early March start. “I’ll definitely be playing in the coldest game I’ve ever played in my life. But once I got through that part, I was really excited that we had an opportunity to play. I think we’re going to show everybody what UNH football is about right now.”

“The minute the spring season was announced our kids were dialed in and our administration did an unbelievable job getting us ready to practice by setting up a bunch of safety protocols.”

That opportunity seemed like something of a long shot after all fall sports were postponed as part of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic that turned college experiences around the country upside down. Almost immediately following the postponement there was talk of moving the season to spring, but it wasn’t official until the Colonial Athletic Association (CAA) unveiled its spring schedule Oct. 27.

UNH will begin its season at home vs. Albany on March 6. Concerns about bundling up aside, it’s certainly more than welcome news for the Wildcats.

“I feel like the whole team is excited. We’re looking forward to getting back at it for real,” senior defensive end Brian Carter says. “We’re locked in and ready.”

The CAA made some significant changes in response to the pandemic to make a spring season possible. The league broke into two divisions – north and south – to limit travel for road games and eliminate the need for flights. [The schedule](#) was reduced to six games, leaving UNH with three contests at home and three on the road, only one of which will require travel outside of New England (to Pennsylvania to face Villanova on March 27, a six-plus hour bus ride away).

“I thought the NCAA and the CAA really invested some good thought into how to have a season in the spring,” UNH coach Sean McDonnell says. “And more importantly our league did a great job in figuring out how to schedule the games and take care of travel to create the safest way to play football in the spring.”

Though preseason preparation looked different this year, the makeup of a normal football calendar lent itself to less chaotic shuffling than might have been expected. In a typical year, UNH plays a full schedule in the fall and uses “spring ball” to train and begin looking ahead to its future slate of opponents. This year, they simply flipped the two.

“There are always a lot of moving parts, but there were twice as many this semester.”

“During the first few weeks of school where we didn’t have a game or have to travel anywhere, it felt kind of weird. But we got used to the new schedule,” says junior offensive lineman Patrick Flynn. “I think everyone is just excited to get back to playing football against another team. It gives us something to work for.”

Limits on the number of people allowed in indoor spaces forced the team to lift weights in groups of nine. On the field, all players were required to wear masks anytime they weren't wearing a helmet, and the helmets themselves were fitted with plastic shields that covered the entire face. Everyone was expected to stand a socially distanced six feet apart during team drills.

Like all UNH students, players were tested for COVID-19 twice a week and weren't permitted access to the field house without a negative test. So while the activities the players were completing weren't necessarily different, the need for more disciplined time management was.

"There were probably 20 small windows throughout the day where we had to do something when there are usually five big windows," says junior defensive tackle Niko Kvietkus. "There are always a lot of moving parts, but there were twice as many this semester. But I thought we did a phenomenal job of controlling what was in our control."

To that end, with nearly 100 players taking part in team activities throughout the fall semester, there was only one recorded positive COVID test.

"The minute the spring season was announced our kids were dialed in and our administration did an unbelievable job getting us ready to practice by setting up a bunch of safety protocols," says McDonnell, who praised UNH for creating its own testing lab. "I am just extremely proud of the guys. They all bought in."

"Coach Mac did a great job of instilling in us to take it day-by-day. His big thing was 'Let's get to October,'" Kvietkus says. "He felt once we got to October doing all the right things, that would lay out the rest of the course for us."

The changes in protocol impacted post-practice activities, as well. Players were broken into four groups, with only one allowed inside the locker room at a time (the other groups rotated between core work, stretching and rolling stations)

"Everyone was essentially a freshman, because with all the changes everyone was trying to get through it together," Flynn says. "I feel like we're as tight as we've ever been as a team."

That brotherhood didn't develop overnight. Some of the early sessions were heated, with tensions occasionally boiling over as players dealt not only with an altered practice routine but with an unusual return to school and the weight of a global pandemic. But working through that tension and spending so much time together has helped build camaraderie.

"I would say we're more together as a team now than we've been since I've been here," Carter says.

Adds Brosmer: "We've had a lot of time together, and like any time you have a brother or a sibling, you have arguments and disagreements. But that brings you together as a team. It's always a good thing to see each other's differences and see each other's similarities and all come together as a unified group. That's definitely made us stronger."

The quest now is carrying that bond to the field. But the players look back at the way they've adapted and are confident they can translate that experience into success.

"I'm expecting greatness from this group," Carter says.

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