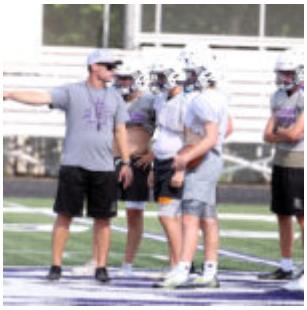
First week of practice breeds optimism for LHS fall programs



Louisburg head football coach Drew Harding speaks to his players in the huddle during a practice this week. Harding is in his first year as head coach after serving as an assistant for several years.

It’s only four days into practice, but all four Louisburg High School fall coaches have liked what they have seen so far out of their teams.

Numbers have been steady as each program has high expectations for the upcoming 2022 season.

There are also plenty of new faces this year as the Wildcats will feature two first year coaches in Bobby Bovaird (boys soccer) and Drew Harding (football). Leanna Willer (volleyball) is in her second season, while cross country coach John Reece is entering his 20th season.

On the gridiron, the Wildcat football team is returning several starters from last year’s team that lost to St. James Academy in the first round of the playoffs.

Louisburg currently has 70 players out for football this season, including 15 seniors that will help lead the way.



Senior Mason Dobbins (left) and junior Declan Battle go up for the ball during practice this week.

“Practice has been going well so far,” Harding said. “We have a lot of competition for spots and competition brings out the best in everybody. We are very excited for the upcoming season. We have a large senior class and a junior class that has gained lots of experience from last year so we are excited to see what we can do.”

Having a new head coach can bring a learning curve, but the Wildcats worked hard over the summer. Along with their annual team camp, they had several scrimmages, 7-on-7 competitions and skill sessions.

“The team did a good job picking up on our installs on both sides of the ball so we were able to get a lot of really good reps that will hopefully help us in this upcoming season,” Harding said.



Seniors Ayden Deterding (left) and Cade Gassman go through a drill in practice this week.

As for the boys soccer team, the Wildcats will try and reach the state final four for the second time in three years after falling to Bishop Miege in the regional championship match a season ago.

Louisburg returns another experienced group as it enters the season with 15 seniors after earning the No. 1 seed in the playoffs a year ago. Numbers are once again high for the program as 40 players are out this year.

“Nine of them (seniors) saw some pretty solid varsity playing time last year, and five of them got playing time in the state tournament two years ago when we finished in 3rd place,” Bovaird said. “Practice has been running very smoothly. We’re getting a great look at the players during our tryouts this week, and we’re seeing lots of leaders emerge every day.”



First-year head coach Bobby Bovaird speaks to his team during the final day of tryouts.

The Wildcats also had a busy summer with camps and team workouts. It was a good way for Bovaird to get to know his players as a first-year head coach.

“Almost everyone was able to participate,” Bovaird said. “They were getting together for informal kick-arounds, they were either lifting weights with the school’s summer program or they were lifting together on their own, and I’m loving the buy-in that they’ve shown. We’re looking at the potential to have another outstanding season this year. Of course, conditioning is a factor and we’re working on improving that during practice.

“This year, we’ve got the motto ‘United,’ which comes from the fact that many soccer clubs use that word with their club names – Manchester United, New Mexico United, etc. I chose that motto because we have kids with all sorts of experience, from those who play year-round club soccer to kids who only play in the fall. They’ve grown up playing all over the place, whether it’s a club up in the city, Louisburg Rec, or

somewhere in another district or community. But we're here right now, and we have to come together to be united as a soccer family if we want to achieve our goals. This group of seniors has had a taste of state success, and they've had a taste of falling short of the team's goals. I think they have the hunger to buy into what the coaching staff is striving to provide for them and they are willing to make a commitment to get to the top this year."



The Louisburg girls cross country team is currently ranked in the preseason top 5 in Class 4A by Kansas MileSplit.

As for cross country, Reece has liked what he has seen from his runners so far after a successful season a year ago in which both teams qualified for state.

He currently has 25 runners out this season, while 18 are out on the middle school level. The girls team is already being thought of as one of the top squads in the state as they are ranked in the top five in Class 4A by Kansas MileSplit.



The Louisburg boys cross country team will look to earn another trip to the state meet this season.

“We are down a little in numbers but return many state qualifiers,” Reece said. “Practices are going well and we are enjoying this stint of cooler weather. We are again focusing on the end of the season and are setting a goal to return both teams to state again. It is going to be an exciting year.”

Volleyball also has strong numbers out as they had 36 athletes out for tryouts for the first three days and have settled at 30 for the rest of the season between the three levels.



Coach Leanna Willer speaks to her team at practice Thursday following a 3-day tryout.

Despite losing four starters from last season's team that fell one game short of reaching the state tournament, Willer is excited to see what this group can do.

"We've had a great first few days and are seeing really awesome things from our girls that have us excited about what we'll be able to do at all three levels this year," Willer said. "We see a lot of potential at all ages and we are hungry for the opportunities to keep improving and make some noise in the league."

The squad had a busy summer with its team camp in early June, followed by summer league action for two months and the varsity traveled to the University of Nebraska team camp in July. Add in the normal open gyms and weight sessions, Willer is pleased with how her players have improved.



Senior Claire Brown passes the ball during a drill Thursday.

“This was a very busy summer of all sorts of crazy twists and turns with the high school being under construction and schedules constantly changing,” Willer said. “Those that were able to dedicate time and effort consistently throughout the summer improved, not only in skill, but also in confidence. The coaches and athletes were typically here working four days a week with weights, conditioning, and open gyms.

“We love having these summer opportunities to get to know our team better and to start working on our team chemistry as much as possible. As a whole, we have grown a lot over the past couple months and we are looking forward to seeing what we can accomplish here in the next couple.”