

Mattio: It Will Be a Challenge

By PETER TESTA

It's a good thing Marian football Coach Dave Mattio isn't the worrisome type.

Preparing for the upcoming season without four all-area performers (three of them on the first team) and another who received all-Illini Eight recognition would make many coaches miserable. But not Mattio, who has the added responsibility of being Marian's athletic director.

"They were the best class we've ever had," Mattio said of last year's senior-dominated lineup that posted a 7-2 regular season record, and earned the Spartans a share of the I-8 championship along with eventual state 4A champion Joliet Catholic and Jolie Central. Some off-the-field maneuvering made the Spartans the only one of the tri-champions out of the playoffs.

LINEBACKER Shawn Janus, offensive tackle Tony Mithcell and defensive tackle Andy De Rosa were Marian's all-area representatives, with fullback Joe Zarlengo (a special mention selection) and all-conference defensive back Mark Fargan leading 15 other seniors of Marian's 22 starters to the finest campaign in the Spartan's 16-year history.

What are the chances for a repeat performance?

"I'm very optimistic," said the soft-spoken but imposing coach who still has much to work with despite the obvious losses to graduation.

Alluding to one of the main reasons for Marian's success last year, Mattio said, "A year ago I could relax while players like Janus were mature and experienced enough to prepare themselves for games. This year will be a greater challenge to my abilities as a coach."

Mattio will be working with a 39-man squad, half of whom are seniors. "Our present seniors were 8-1 as freshmen, while our present juniors were 8-0 as freshman, so the talent is there," said Mattio. "We're confronted with inexperience throughout our offense and defense, but our linemen were able to gain some playing time by working out against the varsity."

LINE play is a staple of Mattio's football philosophy, and the new Spartan interior players will be expected to do one thing above anything else. "We're looking for hitters. We have a

tradition at Marian of being a physical team and we plan to continue that."

The Spartans will be making changes in their play from recent years due to the unusually large number of new players. Marian rarely threw the ball during the past two seasons, relying on a ball control offense and a stout defense to record many low-scoring victories.

A new-look offense is expected to be the strong point of the Marian team. "There will be more passing, and we'll be opening up more than we have in the past," Mattio said. "Our backfield will be small but tough, with the potential to break some long-gainers."

With 10 of the starting 11 defensive squad lost to graduation, the stop unit will need time to become an accomplished platoon. "The defense will be our albatross," declared Mattio. "We'll look to the seniors first defensively, but if they don't do the job we'll make some changes."

MATTIO and line coach Bob Bergstrom, along with offensive coordinator Gary Finnin have been taking full advantage of their allotted practice time with two-a-day workouts beginning as early as 7 a.m.

More than usual, preseason practice sessions are critical to the Marian staff's evaluation of its talent. "Many of our positions are still unsettled at this point. I can't really say what our first team will look like," stated Mattio.

With the defection of Argo from the Illinio-8 to SICA West, the Spartans will be playing their first year under a new conference schedule. In previous years, Marian played the stronger I-8 teams at the tail end of its state and was able to build up the important late season contests. Now, Joliet Catholic, Lockport and Jolie Central will be played in mid-season.

Always tough Hillcrest will open Marian's season a week from Saturday at Country Club Hills, with a game at Shepard the following Saturday. The I-8 opener will also be the first home game, with Joliet East providing the opposition September 24.

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