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Goal: 'Big Step'

Colbert Faces Ex-Team Today

MATTHEW STOSS, Daily News-Record

HARRISONBURG - Five years ago, Bob Colbert ended his highly successful run as Bridgewater College's offensive coordinator to become the head coach at Saint Vincent College and resurrect the football program, which had been disbanded in 1962.

After a startup year in 2006, the Bearcats have spent the past four seasons getting kicked around Division III. Their record from 2007 to 2010 was 4-36. From 2007-09, they were outscored, on average, 40-14.

But in 2010, Saint Vincent showed progress, going 3-7 and losing by an average score of 23-22 (it still had 23 turnovers, tying for second-to-last in the nine-team Presidents' Athletic Conference). This season - which starts at 1 p.m. today against Bridgewater at Jopson Field - Colbert expects that progress to continue.

"I'll be disappointed if we don't take a real big step in the development of the program this year," Colbert said this week. "We lost seven games - and all losing coaches say this, I understand that - but five of them were by a touchdown or less and with the ball in our hand at the end of the game, and we've never been that competitive. We didn't lose games because we were young; we lost them like everyone else does - because of turnovers."

This season, Saint Vincent is stocked with veterans, led by senior quarterback Aaron Smetanka. The 6-foot-4, 210-pound transfer from Division I-AA Robert Morris took over the starting job midway through last season and completed 61.8 percent of 228 passes for 1,966 yards and 17 touchdowns. He was intercepted 10 times and finished second in the PAC in passing.

"If this team just knew how to win, they would do pretty well," said Bridgewater coach Michael Clark, who, along with Colbert, helped turn the Eagles from a doormat to a Division III national power in the early 2000s. "And I think by the end of the year, you saw that in terms of them just managing things better in the fourth quarter. But I think [Colbert's] got a competitive football team, and I'm sure he looks at it as it's five years, but now it's in a position to turn a corner."

The Bearcats started to do just that at the end of 2010. They went 2-2 in their last four games, beating Grove City (Pa.) 42-17 and Westminster (Pa.) 21-14. The two games Saint Vincent lost in that stretch were, not surprisingly, by a touchdown or less. What also isn't a surprise is that in the losses, the Bearcats had a combined six turnovers, fumbling seven times and losing four.

Still, there was momentum, and the question is whether that continues in 2011.

Colbert said a component to making that happen is eliminating big plays. In last year's 19-14 loss to Bridgewater, a 53-yard touchdown run by Darrin McKenzie and an 80-yard kickoff return by Tyler Beiler made the difference.

"Eliminate one play in a game or make one play in a game, and ... we're a totally different team at the end of the year," Colbert said.

NOTES: Senior Jacob Hutchinson will start at quarterback today for Bridgewater, but Clark said backup junior Carlos Gonzalez also should play. ... Clark said reserve senior tailback Anthony Carter, a transfer from Mount Union who had a great preseason practice, is suspended for the first two games for academic reasons. The suspension is from Bridgewater, not the NCAA.

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