

UK looking to good things for 1988 football season

By Mike Enby
AP Sports Writer
LEXINGTON (AP) — Kentucky football coach Jerry Claiborne doesn't enjoy being in the position of underdog in the South-eastern Conference race.



"I'd like to have a whole lot of good football players and everybody picking us at the top of the league," he said. "But that hasn't happened."

Claiborne remembered back to 1984 when the Cats weren't among the favorites, but went on to post a 9-3 record, including a 3-3 mark in the SEC, and defeat Wisconsin in the Hall of Fame Bowl.

"It's a question of our players, our coaches and our fans accepting the challenge and to try to go out and make things happen," he said.

The Wildcats are predicted to finish in the bottom half of the SEC standings this season.

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Claiborne rates Kentucky's top high school players among the best in

the country. But it's still a matter of numbers and time.

"Our outstanding players are as good as anybody else's," he said. "It might take them a little bit longer to mature, simply because of the experience they've gotten. Other teams in the South have gotten about a year's extra experience through spring practice."

He said he believes adding spring practice would add to the improvement of high school football in the state of Kentucky.

Claiborne said he would also like to get the Kentucky-Tennessee All-Star game back in the state.

"I think that would show people we are interested in football," he said.

1988 KENTUCKY FOOTBALL PROSPECTUS

When the University of Kentucky opens its 1988 football season on Sept. 3, against Central Michigan, several question marks will quickly surface surrounding in 1988 Wildcat team.

One question is can head Coach Jerry Claiborne find replacements for four, fifth-year offensive linemen that started all 11 games in 1987? Another question is can UK find a replacement for its familiar place behind center. Fehr played in 9 games during the 1987 season and got the starting nod on 4 occasions. He completed 74 of 163 passes for 973 yards and 6 TDs. Two areas which Fehr and QB coach Jerry Esiason feel he must improve is completion percentage (454) and interception thrown (8). A more pass-oriented offense, something UK flirted with in the spring, is just what Fehr would like to order. He did wonders at Hudson Valley Community College with the run-and-shoot prior to coming to Kentucky.

Emerging as serious candidates to challenge Fehr during the spring were senior Bill Allen (6-0, 201), junior Chuck Broughton (6-4, 28) and freshman Freddie Maggard (6-2, 20), Allen and Broughton both played in 4 games during the 1987 season, but completed just 1 pass between them. Maggard was redshirted. So aside from Fehr, no other quarterback has starting experience.

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UK looking to.....

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through the early portion of the schedule and buy some time for a very inexperienced offensive line.

And if Claiborne is successful relying on his defensive squad, then his Wildcats have a chance to better their 5-6 mark from a year ago.

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Running Back
In most seasons, the loss of a standout running back like Mark Higgs would be a tremendous blow. All Higgs did a year ago was set a new UK single season rushing record with 1,378 yards and finished 2nd on the career list. But, there is an exception to the rule in 1988.

The exceptions are the return of senior tailback Irv Joe Hunter (6-0, 218), sophomore Al Baker (5-11, 203) and the addition of junior college tailback Alfred Rawls (6-10, 201). Hunter played in just 10 games last season and was hampered by knee injury. However,

Hunter did rush for 503 yards on 100 carries (5.0 ypc) in 1987 and led UK in rushing a year earlier with 621 yards. If Hunter, who was named 2nd team Preseason All-SEC by the Birmingham Post-Herald, can stay healthy, he can almost carry the Wildcat offense by himself.

Baker, hampered by injuries as well throughout his career, did rush for 107 yards in 1987. He came on to have an outstanding spring and led all rushers in the Bank One Blue-White game with 89 yards on 17 carries. Rawls, a junior college transfer from Northeastern Oklahoma A & M, was impressive in the spring before an ankle injury forced him away from the field.

At fullback, juniors Andy Murray (6-1, 237) and Darren Billberry (6-2, 211) return to solidify that position. Murray played in 8 games last year before suffering a season-ending knee injury against Vanderbilt. He had rushed for 181 yards on just 28

carries (6.5 ypc) before the injury. Murray missed all of spring drills, but is expected back at 100 percent when UK opens its fall workouts.

Billberry played in all 11 games last season and started 5 contests. He finished the season with 37 yards rushing, but his strength in blocking. Against Vanderbilt, Billberry was credited with 18 knock-down blocks.

Two other candidates may also help in 1988, junior walk-on Mike Knox (5-10, 209) and juco transfer Rodney Shepard (6-1, 225). Receivers

Until the loss of Doc Smith, the Wildcats looked solid at both wide out positions and tight end. After all, Kottovsky would return 4 of its top 5 pass catchers from 1987. But that was then and this is now.

The Wildcats will look to 3 solid tight ends in Preseason All-SEC pick Charlie Darrington (6-3, 224), sophomore Mike Meese (6-5, 237) and senior Martin Pennington (6-1, 226). Darrington led UK and all SEC tight ends in

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