

Sports

Northfield News



ARCHIVES
Relive both of Northfield's girls swimming and diving state titles. **2B**

Wednesday

B

June 10, 2020

HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL



Blake Mellgren will enter his senior year this fall as a key returner for Northfield offensively and defensively. His exact role, and those of his teammates, might take longer to sort out, however, due to any changes in summer and fall workouts. (Northfield News File Photo)

SULLIVAN'S PATH TO SIDELINES

Three decades later, Bubba Sullivan admits football wasn't the centerpiece of the initial plan.

After playing football, hockey and baseball at Northfield High School, and growing up with longtime Carleton football coach Bob Sullivan for a father, Bubba was looking to branch out from the gridiron. So, he went to St. John's to play college hockey.

After graduation, he intended to find a job coaching hockey and maybe serve as an assistant coach in football and baseball. The job market had other plans.

"When I started applying for jobs, the jobs I ended up interviewing for were all head football jobs," Sullivan said.

That led to Sullivan being named Northfield's head football coach in 1989 at the age of 23. He's entering his 32nd season in charge this fall.

"The first couple seasons were kind of rough, so it took a few seasons to say, 'Hey, I think I'm going to do this,'" Sullivan said. "Probably by the third or fourth year I knew that football was going to be it. Once we got the program turned around and in the right direction, I knew I was going to be a football coach for a long time."

The success evident from a Prep Bowl championship, four runner-up finishes and 10 state tournament appearances is part of the reason for Sullivan's longevity, but that doesn't tell the entire story.

"The biggest is the kids," he said. "The energy they bring and excitement that they bring each year, and the chance to build strong relationships with them and the chance to impact their lives beyond football, is the biggest thing. The kids are at a perfect age to help guide them, not just as athletes but as people, so that opportunity is the biggest reason for coming back."

"The one thing I didn't anticipate coming out of college is the camaraderie of the coaches," he continued. "There's something special about football coaches and coaching in general about a group of guys working together to mold kids and strive to win games and have a great program."

PROGRAM IN MOTION

Program snapshot: As Northfield football moves through transitional phase, questions loom about returning to the field

By MICHAEL HUGHES
mhughes@northfieldnews.com

Losing 22 seniors and coming off an injury-ravaged season that resulted in a 1-7 record, the Northfield football program was set to enter a key three-month stretch this summer, through fall camp and leading up to kickoff of the first game of the season the Friday night before Labor Day.

Now, every portion of that timeline is thrown into a bit of doubt. Summer workouts can still happen, but they won't resemble the work done in years past. When teams reconvene in the fall is still up for debate, and whether or not full practices and contact will be allowed is a mystery.

For a team in the midst of a transition like the Raiders, that means questions might go unanswered for a little longer than normal.

"We won't get as good a view at the receivers in quarterbacks like we would see if we had summer seven on seven," Northfield football coach Bubba Sullivan said.

Northfield will graduate Gavin Rataj, the team's primary quarterback a year ago, as well as Daniel Monaghan — Rataj's primary target at wide receiver last year. Rising senior Cole Stanchina might be an

answer at either vacancy after serving as the team's backup quarterback last year and No. 2 wide receiver.

Rising junior Spencer Klotz, meanwhile, quarterbacked the junior varsity team last year, while rising senior Porter Adams emerged as an option on the outside as the season progressed.

In the offensive backfield, the Raiders bring back rising seniors Blake Mellgren and Josh Johnson — two of the team's most-used options on the ground along with Rataj and graduated senior Simon Dickerson.

While questions about those position battles might stretch further into fall camp and closer to the first game, Sullivan said he's not too worried about solving the rest of his depth chart.

"I would say the rest of it will fall into place during two or three days and the weeks leading up to the first game and the second game," Sullivan said. "When I first started coaching we couldn't do anything in the summer other than lift and workout, and you came in on Aug. 14 or 15 and you put a team together. This will be a little more like that."

In terms of experience, this year's Raiders might have a leg up on last year's squad because of the sheer number of injuries suffered throughout last season. Last year's team possessed, on paper, more talent than it's record dictates with at least six players moving on to college football (Monaghan, MIT; Rataj, Bethel; Dickerson, St. Olaf; Luke Stanga, St. Olaf; Kevin Grundhoffer, Augsburg; Carter Schmidt, Concordia-Moorhead).

That group was hardly healthy, though, meaning juniors, sophomores and sometimes freshmen were slotted in on Friday nights.

"This year, one of our positives will be that a lot of guys played and have experience in varsity action," Sullivan said.

In terms of numbers, next year's senior class projects to be smaller



Bubba Sullivan will be entering his 32nd year in charge of the Northfield football program this fall. (Northfield News File Photo)

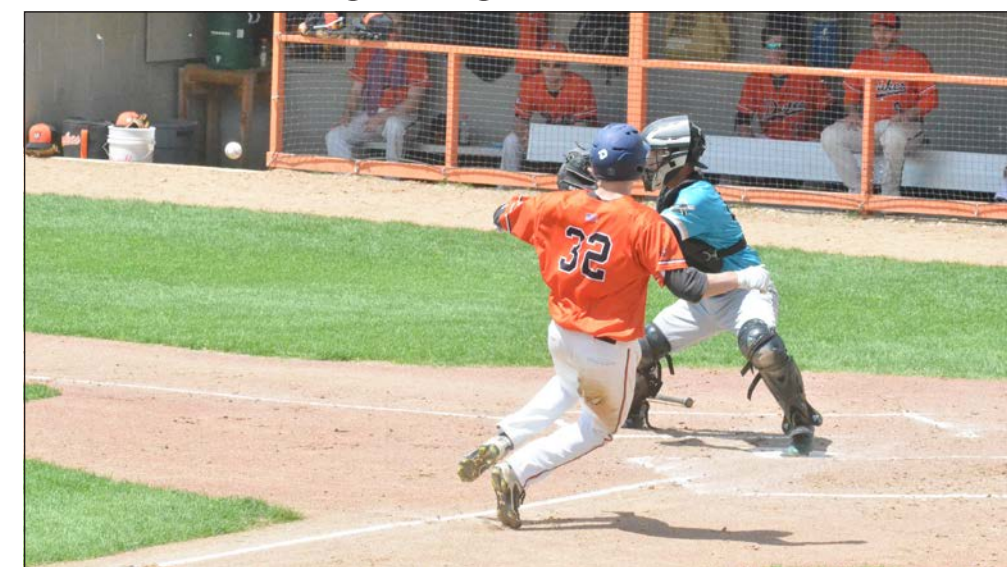
than last year's, although Sullivan said he's hopeful about a handful of kids returning to the program after taking a year or two away from football.

Next year's juniors, meanwhile, figures to feature around 25 players, while the sophomore class should be around the same if not a little higher. Both are about average, according to Sullivan.

"Like a lot of football teams we're probably down 10% numbers-wise from what we were 10 years ago," Sullivan said. "Overall I think our numbers are solid compared to teams we play."

AMATEUR BASEBALL

CCVL weighing best ways to start season, waiting for MBA guidance



The Dundas Dukes and Northfield Knights typically play each season on Memorial Day and the Fourth of July. The two teams missed their first traditional date, but a start to the season in time for the second game remains a possibility. (Northfield News File Photo)

By MICHAEL HUGHES
mhughes@northfieldnews.com

Within a league that houses Class B and Class C teams, a true Classic Cannon Valley League championship might be out of the picture at this point.

As the start of the 2020 amateur baseball season continues to be pushed back, the potential frameworks for a schedule grow increasingly smaller by each week that passes without teams on the field.

After Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz' press conference last Friday, in which baseball was determined to be a medium-risk sport when it comes to the spread of COVID-19, more doubt was placed into the possibility of baseball this summer.

"At the team and the league level, we're really waiting on direction from the Minnesota Baseball Association state board," CCVL Secretary-Treasurer and Section 1B Commissioner Dan

Swanson said. "They've really been working in closer contact with state government leaders."

Right now, baseball games are off the table for an undetermined amount of time, although practices have been permitted for the past couple weeks.

In terms of Class B teams, the CCVL sports the Dundas Dukes, Hampton Cardinals, Miesville Mudhens, Northfield Knights and Rochester Royals. The remaining Class C teams are the Cannon Falls Bears, Hastings Hawks, Lake City Serpents and Red Wing Aces.

When Swanson said he first started mapping out potential league schedules a month ago, he said the most likely date to start was June 3.

"Everybody was playing everybody twice, and it really had minimal impact to teams," Swanson said.

After the start of June came and passed, the focus turned to a July 1 start.

See BASEBALL on 3B