

Spring Practice Review: University of Akron

Written by {ga=mikeperry}

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University of Akron head coach Rob Ianello, entering his second season at the helm of the Zips, likes how his rebuilding process is unfolding. After landing a deep, talented 23-player recruiting class that featured a number of top prospects, Ianello and his staff are working to see positive results and build on some of the small on-field accomplishments they saw during Akron's 1-11 2010 campaign.

Ianello was pleased with his team's 2011 Spring Practice, 15 practice sessions that culminated with the Zips' annual Spring Game, and now will begin preparing for training camp that will be held prior to the 2011 season.

"I'm encouraged by our team. (We had) 15 good workouts and we had a really good off-season, coupled with a good spring practice," Ianello said. "We had a good go at it Saturday (at the Spring Game). We're fortunate enough to have such a great indoor facility, so we went inside because of the weather. I thought it was a great environment with the band and the fans and all that."

The offense won the Spring Game 82-36, using a scoring system that is generally weighted towards the offense. Ianello and his staff saw a number of encouraging things...things that have been missing from Akron Football for a number of seasons.

"We didn't have a turnover in the game, in 77 plays not one ball on the ground," he said. "I think that really bodes well for our offense. The defense was a little handicapped by the rules and how we played it, but I like this spring how our defense has played. They were running to the

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football and doing the things that Coach Cosgrove wants them to do.

"We didn't have any injuries and we're moving forward with two weeks until finals, so we feel like we came out of spring and accomplished quite a number of things that we wanted to do, that we set out to do. We're certainly a lot farther along as a football program at this time than we were at any time last season, and there's no question we're a much-improved team."

Actually, it would have been difficult for the Zips to be much worse than they were last season. In winning just one game Akron was last in the Mid-American Conference in total offense at 268.5 yards per game and finished 12th in offensive scoring, putting up just 15.6 points per contest. The Zips were 12th in points allowed (35.1 per game), 12th in passing offense (155.1 yards per game), tied for ninth in rushing offense (113.4), eighth in rushing defense (164.1), 10th in sacks allowed (33) and had the fewest total first downs in the conference (176).

Much of the offensive woes could be placed on the offensive line. However, with a good bit of experience and one of the top offensive line recruits in the nation headed to the Rubber City the Zips' offensive line should be much-improved.

Zac Kasperek (6-foot-5, 295 pounds), Micah Leo (6-7, 285), Adam Bice (6-4, 297) and Mitch Straight (6-5, 295) should all hold starting positions on the offensive line to open the season. The final spot will be up for grabs, but do not be surprised if freshman John Clay, a 6-3, 340-pound center that was ranked the No. 23 center recruit in the nation by ESPN.com, sees some snaps and works his way into the starting line-up. Vinnie Rizzo, a 6-3, 275-pound JUCO transfer from Nassau Community College, enrolled at Akron early and was on-hand for Spring Practice...which could give him an advantage over the other incoming freshmen linemen.

Ianello moved linemen around during Spring Practice, so he expects the unit to be deep and versatile.

"We've got a couple of veterans in there who have played a lot of football here in Zac (Kasperek) and Mitch (Straight)," he said. "They've both redshirted and are older guys. They've both done a good job of taking a leadership role. Adam Bice is a younger guy that was not in spring practice with us last year. He just got here in the fall, so now he's got a year under his belt in this system."

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"What I want to get down to in the fall is a little bit more continuity. We got some depth during the spring with a couple of guys playing multiple positions. Now, with Michael Leo coming back from injury, and four freshmen we'll be able to have more depth on the offensive line going into training camp than we had at any time since I've been here."

Last season was probably one Akron junior quarterback Patrick Nicely would rather forget. He struggled to get the offense on track and put up disappointing numbers, completing just 166 of 336 passes for 1,753 touchdowns and 10 touchdowns against 17 interceptions. Those 17 interceptions tied him with Central Michigan's Ryan Radcliffe for the most in the MAC, and Radcliffe threw 130 more passes than Nicely (466).

Though Nicely is the favorite to retain his starting job, he will be pressed by junior college transfer Clayton Moore (6-1, 210) and freshman Zach D'Orazio during camp at the end of summer.

After the trio combined to complete 23 of 33 passes for 352 yards in the Spring Game nothing has been decided.

"I think we've got a good evaluation of all three of them, but the evaluation is going to be ever-growing," Ianello said of his quarterback trio. "Patrick will still run out of the huddle first with our first offense when we come in for training camp, but we're still going to have a competition and probably won't name a starter until we're prepared to do that based upon the performance of the guys in training camp.

"We're pleased with Patrick's development. He's certainly shown more comfort in the offense and did a nice job this spring. I was pleased with Clayton Moore's progress in his first exposure to the offense because it is different than anything that he has run before. And Zack Darazio...he's a real pleasure to be around. He's just got something about him about moving the team and making plays.

"The good news is that we are better at the quarterback position than we ever were at any time last season. We have more depth and more guys that have shown that they can do what we

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ask them to do so we're really pleased with that position. But that competition will continue to go for awhile."

There is also a trio of running backs vying for the starting nod, and all three should see significant playing time during the season.

Redshirt freshman Jawon Chisolm was the leading rusher in the Spring Game, picking up 124 yards on 14 carries and finding the end zone twice. Freshman Marvin Staten, from Staten Island, carried 14 times for 50 yards while sophomore Broderick Alexander carried eight times for 24 yards and a touchdown.

"We like our backs," Ianello said. "I know we don't have any that have carried in a game, but we like them and I think they're going to do exactly what we want them to do here.

Ianello thinks each running back brings something different to the table.

"Broderick's got the experience, Chisolm is very talented and Marvin did a nice job for someone that just showed up here," he said. "So we're going to battle it out a little bit here. Certainly Jawon had a nice Spring Game, he carried the ball 14 times for 124 yards which is a heck of a yards per carry. He's a very, very talented young man, but I like all three of them.

"All three have a different skill set and we're going to just keep them working. Broderick, I still don't think was 100 percent at spring practice coming off an Achilles injury from last June. We're very hopeful that once we get him through a whole summer of work with our strength coach and a year removed from that injury that he'll be closer to the form we saw him last year in the spring, before he got injured."