

Cohen, Hewlett seek spots in 'M' secondary

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(F5C)

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staff writer

University of Michigan coach Bo Schembechler dismantled his team, piece by piece, evaluating and weighing the separate parts, explaining just what role each member would have to fill if the Wolverines were to repeat as Big Ten football champs.

"I think we'll be a pretty good offensive team," he said, reciting the names of four players who would see time at tailback. Fullback and tackle, too, were positions that were open to several players.

"This is the best quarterback situation we've had in years," Schembechler added.

Yes, all appeared to be well with the U-M offense at Saturday's press day. Then Schembechler turned his attention to...

DEFENSE: It's become a dirty word in the Big Ten in recent times. All-out passing attacks kept Michigan from playing the type of defense Schembechler loves: hard-nosed and physical.

Combine a league gone past-happy with three defensive backfield starters lost to graduation and one can understand why Schembechler had to concentrate his recruiting efforts on landing some fleet-footed, quick-reacting defensive backs instead of meaty defensive linemen and hard-hitting line-backers.



JIM JAGGLED

Possible starters defensive backs Jeff Cohen (left, from North Farmington) and Rich Hewlett, from Plymouth Salem, take in the goings on at U-M's annual picture day last Saturday.

people in sports

He got some good ones — "The strength of our freshman class is there," he said — but the defensive backs Michigan may be counting on are a pair of fifth-year players with little more game experience than their freshman rivals.

JEFF COHEN and **Rich Hewlett** are back for one last shot with the Wolverines. One last chance to win a starting role, to take Michigan to another Big Ten title and the Rose Bowl.

Redshirting saved a year of eligibility for both players. That is one reason they now have a solid chance at being on the field when Michigan opens its season.

But there are other reasons, such as talent and hard work. As Schembechler said, "We have as good as talent as we've ever had back there, we just don't have the experience."

What little game experience the Wolverines have is in Cohen and Hewlett.

"I'M HOPING to come in this year and do some starting," said Cohen, a North Farmington graduate. "I plan on coming right in and going for it."

Cohen is the only player on the Michigan team with experience at the wolf-back, or strong safety, position. But that experience was limited to two starts three years ago, when he was a sophomore.

What makes matters worse for the 5-foot-11, 195-pounder is that he missed much of spring practice with a broken hand. With the influx of promising new freshmen, Cohen knows he's going to have to fight for his position.

Still, he's the favorite. And fighting for the starter's role doesn't phase him.

"In a way, (the broken hand) has

made me more hungry," he said. "I know I've got to come out smoking."

HUNGER — a description well-suited for Hewlett. The 6-1, 195-pound Plymouth Salem alumnus surrendered his dreams of ever playing at U-M the position he was best at in high school.

Hewlett was a quarterback. He was the kind of quarterback Schembechler liked: strong runner, good arm, leadership qualities.

He started at quarterback three times for the Wolves. Ineffective, he was replaced first by John Wampler, then by Steve Smith.

At that point Hewlett faced a difficult choice in his collegiate career. Either keep working at quarterback and hope to unseat Smith, or try something else. He made his decision to try defensive back, and has never wavered.

"I wanted to play," he said directly. "The coaches gave me a choice. There was a combination of things involved. Bo was set with Smith, and I just wanted to play — ANYWHERE."

Hewlett added "It was something I wanted to do," insisting that "it hasn't been that bad."

SO FAR, the decision has worked well for him. Hewlett emerged from spring practice as the top candidate for the short-side cornerback position.

But, like Cohen, it's up to him to hold onto his position. For both, the biggest test may be how fast they can move their feet.

As Schembechler quipped to the press, "Yes, yes, yes, yes, that ball is going to be in the air (in the Big Ten this season). You'll all be excited and thrilled."

Schembechler's dismay over the Big

Ten's emergence as a passing conference was revealed again later: "We go outside the league now and I worry about teams that run on us. That's what we have to concentrate on now: stopping the run."

THAT MAKES both Cohen's and Hewlett's positions that much more difficult.

"It really gives you a greater challenge," Hewlett said. "You've got to be able to play the pass, and yet you have to be able to come up and play the run."

"When I first went over (to play defense), I had to be more run-conscious."

Now, teams are giving us more different sets, with lots of shifts and motion. Cohen, too, will have to be adept at handling both the pass and the run.

"You've got to have the speed to cover the deep middle as well as support the run," he said. "I still have to work on things, like my two-deep coverage. I'll have to make some adjustments on that."

How well both Cohen and Hewlett make those adjustments will not only have an impact on their college careers, but on Michigan's season as well.



Jeff Cohen (above) is in his fifth year at the University of Michigan. He is banking on his experience to help him land a starting spot in the Wolverines' defensive secondary.

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