

KICKOFF 2010



When five function as one

By Brian Hunsicker

Coe breaks its offensive huddle, and center Logan Weber doesn't have long to think about the blocking calls he's going to make. The opposing defense won't provide any clues in the six or so steps it takes to get to the line of scrimmage. Since the defense can move as much as it wants before the snap, Weber may not know exactly who he'll block until the play starts. Throw in the possibility of stunts, blitzes and defensive line twists, and Weber may not know exactly who he's blocking until the play is well underway.

In moments like these, it helps to know what the guys next to you – in Weber's case, guards Sam Wright and Charlie Goetzinger – can do and can't do.

"I know how they play ... I know what they are capable of," Weber said. Goetzinger, at 226 pounds, is quick enough to get in position to make each block, he added; Wright, at 304 pounds, isn't as quick. Knowing the strengths and weaknesses of both helps Weber anticipate what might happen on a given play.

Weber – an all-IIAC performer in 2009 – Wright and Goetzinger make up the interior of a Coe line

that returns all five starters, a luxury that few teams enjoy and many others are envious of. Among teams in the D3football.com Top 25, only the Kohawks, Delaware Valley and St. Thomas are in such a position.



Carington Daniel, Charlie Goetzinger, Logan Weber, Sam Wright, Jacob Deaton and Joel Brockmeyer combined to start every game for Coe on the offensive line in 2009, and all return for 2010.

Coe athletics photo

The benefits are both obvious and hidden.

A group of five returning starters share a key intangible: in-game experience. Size and skill, important as they are, can't prepare a lineman for the myriad of gimmicks a defense can present; nor can they help a lineman make suggestions for in-game adjustments.

And, as Weber said, experience with your teammates can be just as important. Familiarity with linemates makes for a better unit; communication is better understood, abilities – good and bad – are known and

accounted for.

"That's huge on the offensive line. You bond with those guys, you know how they play," DelVal tackle Mike Long, a D3football.com preseason All-American, said. "I think playing together gives you a big jump, to have that experience. And to have it across the board is huge."

The less obvious benefit: A coaching staff is allowed greater freedom to implement new and more complex tactics. Without the worry of a newcomer falling behind on the learning curve, coaches can get creative.

"It's a lot easier [to use more complex schemes] with guys that know what they're doing," Aggies coach Jim Clements said. "It's easier to tweak things and adjust or add some new things. You get more freedom and flexibility."

St. Thomas coach Glenn Caruso and Kohawks coach Steve Staker agreed; and Weber and Long both said they'd welcome and have no problem accepting tweaks to the game plan.

"Bring it on," Weber said. "In almost two years, I've got most of the stuff down already."

There is a balance to be struck, however; coaches aren't merely responsible for the starting five. The backups must be prepared to step in, all while younger reserves are being groomed to start one day.

At St. Thomas, that process starts in recruiting, where Caruso only goes after players that he believes can handle the mental workload – "sharp guys," as he calls them. When those players get into the program, they first learn the big picture of the offense: what it does and what it tries to accomplish. Then the focus narrows to the plays themselves, and there is little time to dawdle.



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"We push the envelope when it comes to installation," Caruso said. But even he admits that this process is only possible because he's been with the Tommies for three years; in his first year, such a method would not have been possible.

For some teams, returning five experienced, though not necessarily starting, linemen can be the antidote to waiting for such a rare situation to happen to them. At Endicott, coach J.B. Wells rotates his offensive linemen with a frequency as great as other position groups.

"If we rotate running backs and receivers," Wells said, "why can't we rotate the offensive line?"

"Say you had five seniors that played together the whole time. If I have that, great. But who's pushing them? What if one of them gets hurt?"

In 2009, Wells had clear starters along the interior offensive line; his guard-center-guard combination

remained intact throughout the season. But at tackle, the Gulls found themselves with four players of a similar ability; Wells rotated all four on a varying basis. And even this year, Wells isn't sure what his offensive line will look like, even with an all-conference player returning.

And that's the key to Wells' rotation: Play the best kids. If no one clearly establishes himself as the starter, use multiple people. Take the five best pass blockers and use them in a two-minute package; take the five best road graders and insert them into a goal-line and short-yardage package. If the younger players can see the reward – legitimate playing time – it's likely to lead to increased competition, he said.

The rotation improves the team as well, he said, with fresher legs in the fourth quarter and less of a chance for the defense to exploit one player's weakness.

Wells' offensive philosophy makes such a rotation possible. As a zone offense, the blocking techniques of a center aren't vastly different than that of a tackle. Wells admits that his rotations would be far less effective in a Wing-T offense, where guards need considerable lateral quickness and the ability to block in space.

But a different philosophy, instilled by Wells' coach in college, longtime Trinity coach Don Miller, makes the rotation a no-brainer.

"You don't want your best kids standing next to you," Wells said.