

Football Welcomes Back 11 Seniors

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EAU CLAIRE - The UW-Eau Claire football team and head coach Todd Hoffner enters the 2003 football season with 11 returning seniors, three sharing captain duties, in pursuit of a Wisconsin Intercollegiate Athletic Conference title.

The 2002 Blugolds finished second in the WIAC standings with an 8-2 overall mark and a 5-2 conference record.

Returning seniors to the 2003 team will include captains Austin Crow (Sr.-Woodbury, MN), Erik Ferguson (Sr.-Eyota, MN/Eyota-Denver), and Mike LaBarbera (Sr.-Eau Claire/Memorial). Crow, a four year starter and three year letter winner at outside linebacker, was a Second Team All-Conference selection last season despite playing most of the season with a cast on his right arm due to a broken bone in his wrist. Even with the injury, Crow finished second among league leaders in forced and recovered fumbles with two while finishing fourth in sacks with six. For the season, Crow compiled 56 tackles, eight for a loss, four passes defended, one interception and one blocked kicked. At the completion of the season he was named the Blugolds Outside Linebacker Player of the Year. In 2001, a healthy Crow garnered several honors, including Honorable Mention on the D3Football.com All-American Team and a Second Team selection to the Football Gazette All-West Region. Crow was also named to the WIAC All-Conference First Team in 2001.

Erik Ferguson enters his senior season for Eau Claire fresh off a 2002 season which saw him lead all Blugold receivers in touchdowns and average yards per catch. Ferguson hauled in five passes for touchdowns including a 30-yard, game-winning catch against NCAA Division III semifinalist St. John's (MN). The catch gave the Blugolds a 28-21 overtime victory over the Johnnies in the first game of the season. Ferguson made a habit of catching the long ball throughout the season as he averaged 15.4 yards per catch, including a 20-yard touchdown reception against UW-Oshkosh and a leaping 40-yard TD reception against UW-Whitewater.

Mike LaBarbera rounds out the captains for the 2003 season. A four year starter, LaBarbera received WIAC All-Conference Second Team honors in 2002 as both a defensive back and an all-purpose back. LaBarbera was moved from cornerback to strong safety in 2002 where he recorded 39 tackles with two passes defended and one interception. Also a dangerous return man, LaBarbera ranked second in the WIAC with a 24.8 yards per kickoff return average and seventh in yard per punt return with 7.4.

Also returning to the 2003 squad as seniors are special teamers Nick Diciaula (Sr.-Brookfield/Central) and Matt Brink (Sr.-Madison/Memorial). Diciaula enters the 2003 season after earning All-Conference Second Team honors as a place kicker in 2002. Diciaula hit 22-of-23 point-after-touchdown attempts and six-of-nine field goal attempts, including a perfect six-of-six from 20-29 yards. Diciaula's season was perhaps highlighted by a game-winning 27-yard field goal which gave the Blugolds a tough 12-10 victory over conference opponent UW-Oshkosh. Diciaula was honored with the Blugolds Specialist of the Year award at the completion of the 2002 season.

Matt Brink returns as a fourth year starter at punter for the Blugolds and will also work to get into the wide receiver rotation as either a starter or a substitute. In 2002, Brink pinned the opponents inside the 20-yard line on 19 of his 60 punts. The Blugold punter averaged 34 yards per punt, including a booming 70-yard punt.

Brett Etzel (Sr.-Oconomowoc) looks to play center for the 2003 Blugolds. Etzel is a four-year starter as a long snapper. Also looking for time on the offensive line will be Eric Johnson (Sr.-Madison/Edgewood), who will most likely see time at guard. John Lozano (Sr.-Forest Lake, MN) rounds out the offensive seniors on the 2003 Blugold team. Lozano, a transfer from UM-Crookston, will look for time at fullback.

Phil Aurich (Sr.-Woodbury, MN/Concordia Academy) rejoins the Blugolds on defense after sitting out the 2002 season. Aurich saw action in 2001 in two Blugold games, recording two tac