

HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL

Notebook: Holt off to best start in at least two decades; Parkway South coach resigns

- By David Kvidahl | STLhighschoolsports.com



Holt's sideline celebrates, Friday, Sept. 13, 2019, at Holt High School in Wentzville, Mo. Michael Gulledge, Special to STLhighschoolsports.com
Michael R. Gulledge

WENTZVILLE — Ethan Place looked around the locker room and was impressed by what he saw.

Or, better yet, by what he didn't see Saturday afternoon.

The Holt football team trailed rival Troy 28-13 at halftime of its own homecoming game. The Indians hadn't played their best football and trailed by two touchdowns. Yet they remained calm, focused and confident at the break.

“Getting hit in the mouth, as they say, early, we went into halftime down and there was no panic,” said Place, Holt's coach.

The Indians outscored the Trojans 28-3 in the second half and rallied for a 41-31 victory. The win pushed Holt to 6-0 for the first time in as long as anyone can remember. The previous high-water mark for the program in the last two decades was a 5-0 start in 2003. That team went on to finish 10-3 and gave the Indians their only state semifinal appearance in school history.

Place, who graduated from Holt in 2001, said he can't remember a better start in the 1990s.

“It's tremendous, it's a great honor,” said senior linebacker Clayton Reed. “The last few years we haven't had a good record. Being 6-0 means a lot to me.”

That this team has found its way to rarefied air is a testament to its toughness. The backbone of Holt's roster is sophomores, many of whom have stepped into prominent roles on the offense — including both quarterbacks.

Cooper Brown and Payton Hoker competed for the starting job all offseason. Brown had an edge after being named the starter as a freshman but four games in he suffered a season-ending knee injury. The 6-foot-2 and 180-pound Brown returned from injury in the offseason and won the job again before another injury in the preseason jamboree. Though it wasn't season ending, Brown was down and out.

Hoker took the reins and the Indians didn't miss a beat.

“We didn't know how long he'd be out. Payton stepped in and did a great job,” Place said.

In the past, Holt has hung its hat on a rushing attack. The now-graduated Cole Mueller was the most prolific running back in the area the past three

years as he rushed for 6,390 yards. But the Indians have some different strengths this season and have tailored the offense to be more pass oriented. In his first four games, Hoker completed 38 of 59 passes for 818 yards, nine touchdowns and was intercepted once.

Brown returned from injury after four weeks and shared snaps with Hoker for one game then resumed starter duties the last two. He's completed 45 of 63 passes for 753 yards, eight touchdowns and has been intercepted twice.

“My mindset (coming back) was just get the win for the guys and continue on the hot streak,” Brown said.

Place couldn't say enough about how Brown and Hoker handled their competition in the offseason, at practice and in games. Both of them want to help the team win and have shown themselves willing to do what it takes to make that happen.

“That was the toughest situation I've ever had in coaching and the kids have handled it great,” Place said. “It shows a lot to their character, how they were raised and how they approach the game.”

It certainly doesn't hurt to have some talented playmakers to pitch the ball. Sophomore receiver Jackson Smith has caught 41 passes for 762 yards and seven touchdowns. He's also averaged nearly 25 yards on 11 kickoff returns.

“It feels great to get everything together,” Smith said. “We're winning some games and showing what we're made of.”

Sophomore receiver Colin Bunner has caught 28 passes for 536 yards and scored six touchdowns.

“Our talent and strength is on the outside in our receiving corp and our quarterback position,” Place said. “They've developed quite a bit of chemistry throughout the year and with that they know you have multiple weapons that can score.”

In Place's five seasons, Holt has averaged 34 or more points the last three years after not breaking 20 the first two. The Indians have been able to score enough to win games, they just weren't able to consistently stop their opponent. Holt allowed 35 or more points per game the previous four seasons.

This year they've allowed an average of 19 per game.

“When you look at defenses are you getting multiple hats to the ball and are they there in a bad mood?” Place said. “They were doing that on Saturday in the second half.”

Place, a quarterback in his time at Holt, heaped the praise on defensive coordinator Darryl Daleen. A former college coach who grew up in the area, Daleen has made strides in reshaping the defense in just his second season on the job.

“We're glad to have him here for as long as we can,” Place said.

Holt will get to see just how far it has come when it hosts Fort Zumwalt West at 7 p.m. Friday. The Indians are currently sitting atop the Class 6 District 2 standings with 44.17 points. Fort Zumwalt West (4-2) is second at 34.83 and Blue Springs (4-2) is third with 32.67.

When the regular season ends, the district field will be seeded with the top point scorer receiving the No. 1 seed and home field advantage throughout

the tournament. Head-to-head matchups figure prominently as a team with fewer district points can leap frog the team directly in front of it if it beat that team on the field. Whoever comes out ahead Friday night will have a leg up when the playoffs begin.

Fort Zumwalt West has won four in a row over Holt and six of the last seven. Fresh off a loss to rival Francis Howell on Saturday, the Jaguars will be itching to get back on track.

“Our coaches have been doing a great job getting us ready mentally and physically for this game,” senior center Cale Bunner said. “We have to come out and be ready to play.”

Place doesn't know what Friday night holds but he's excited to find out. The underclassmen have more than held their own on the varsity and the seniors have performed at a high level all season. It'll be a good test to see just how far the Indians have come.

“It's a chance for us to see where we measure in our district,” he said. “It's a great program and great tradition there. We're excited to play them at home.”