

THE INDEX-JOURNAL

Sports

Emerald Seeks Positives After Up-And-Down Season

By KEVIN FIORENZO/Index-Journal sports writer
Published: Monday, November 24, 2008 12:28 AM EST



Emerald's Dee Parks (5) looks for rushing room while teammate Reggie Haskins (1) looks to block against Pendleton earlier this season at Frank Hill Stadium. (Staff file photo by R. Shawn Lewis)

After back-to-back postseason misses, Emerald High School's football team made the playoffs in 2008, but it's difficult to feel good about that step forward when the opposing team scored more than 70 points the Vikings' lone playoff game since 2005.

But that's the dilemma Emerald has this offseason as it tries to find the positive of the progress made this year by earning a winning record in Region 1-AA, but falling 74-37 to Southside in the first round of the Class AA state playoffs. Even with the experience of playing the Tigers earlier in the season, when the Vikings fell 59-34, and with several players back who were injured from that game, Emerald still fell flat in its season finale.

Vikings coach Mike Clowney is trying to not to focus on that one lopsided defeat. "Our group did a good job as far as fighting to put ourselves in position to get into the playoffs," Clowney said. "Last year, we didn't pull that off.

We hope we went a little bit further, but a lot of times that comes down to matchups and stuff like that. "I think we definitely took a step forward."

What that step forward amounts to next season isn't clear. Emerald loses 25 seniors from this year's team, including Zane Newton, who became a do-it-all force on offense, defense and special teams, as well as All-Lakelands running back Dee Parks, who rushed for 824 yards and nine touchdowns.

"We're going to have a lot of turnover," Clowney said. "We've talked to our young guys about them getting in and being involved. "The rules changed with the high school league to where we can actually get more guys out working (during the offseason)."

With injuries decimating Emerald's roster, particularly on defense, the Vikings' season began similarly to how it ended with it being outscored 143-80. Senior defensive lineman Taylor Johnson and linebacker Rashad Robinson had season-ending injuries before the first regular

season game, and Newton, who missed much of last season with a broken collarbone, was kept from playing quarterback this season because of a shoulder injury. Several other players also missed games early in the season. "It hurt, especially when you look defensively, we were going to be a little bit young," Clowney said. "More than anything, it prevented us from getting that continuity early. Once we were able to get everyone healthy, get that continuity on the field mainly with our defensive front guys, we were able to play a whole lot better."

Emerald's fortunes began to turn in Week 4 when it faced a Ware Shoals team playing without injured defensive lineman Bo Brown and wingback Ladarius Hawthorne. The Vikings upset the Hornets 22-16. Emerald dropped its next two games to Boiling Springs and Pendleton, but closed out the region schedule with wins against Crescent, Liberty and Walhalla to make the postseason for the first time since 2005, when the Vikings reached the Upper State finals under the direction of one-year coach Mac Bryan. "We've come in, I guess, the past two years and wound up being 3-7," Clowney said. "This year, you know, sometimes you really can't measure yourself by record because if you go back and look at some of the people we've played, we've played some really good people."

Emerald's clear standout all season was Parks, who became the Vikings' primary weapon, though his numbers were limited somewhat as Clowney and offensive coordinator Sentell Peake tried to open up the passing game. "It wound up as the season shut down that Dee wound up being the clear-cut best person we had offensively, but I think we utilized other guys enough to keep people from really kind of piling up on him," Clowney said.

One of those instances was during the season-ending loss to Southside when the Vikings were already in a significant hole, but Clowney opted to continue utilizing the passing game instead of Parks shaving time off the clock running the ball. "I think it's one of those things where everybody realizes we could've ran the ball and kind of sat on it and kept the score down, but you're in a playoff game and you want to give yourself a chance to win," Clowney said. "It's one of those things where you try to give yourself a chance to win, things may get out of hand."