

Blackhawks open playoffs against rival Kansas



Staff photo/Tony Boone - Defensive lineman Jeff McQuinn and the Iowa Blackhawks begin pursuit of their second APFL title when they meet Kansas tonight at 7 at the Mid-America Center.

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Here we go again.

For the last six years, Iowa's finish in the American Professional Football League has come down to a playoff game against Kansas.

In the first four, the Koyotes ended the season for the Blackhawks. A year ago, Iowa finally turned the tables on the six-time league champions to win its first indoor title.

The two teams meet again tonight at 7 at the Mid-America Center in the APFL semifinals with the winner advancing to next week's championship game against Mid-Missouri or Springfield (Mo).

The Blackhawks (8-1) are the top seed in the playoffs and have beaten Kansas twice already this season. But that doesn't mean they'll be overlooking their longtime rivals, who bring a 5-5 record to the MAC this evening.

"The rivalry is still there," Iowa's veteran quarterback Chuck Wright said. "For guys like myself who have been here since the beginning, we've had some heated battles with those guys. Once the lights come on, there are no lost feelings. We want to beat them pretty bad."

The feeling is certainly mutual from the Koyote perspective. For the first time in the league's short history, Kansas has

played its regular season with another team holding the APFL trophy.

It hasn't been an easy summer for the Koyotes either. After winning 62 of its 70 games prior to this season, Kansas slipped to .500 in a more competitive APFL. The Koyotes even had to beat newcomer Junction City in a play-in game last weekend in Topeka, Kan., just to make the semifinals.

The addition of three-time Central Plains Football League champion Mid-Missouri, the second seed in the playoffs, has made the indoor league stronger. And the team from Springfield has made marked improvement.

Blackhawk defensive end Jeff McQuinn said those factors have contributed to the Koyotes fall to the No. 4 seed. Kansas is still Kansas to him.

"Everybody's gotten that much better," he said. "They still have solid athletes."

The Koyotes are also playing with added purpose. Coach Jim Green, who has guided the team to three league championships in four years, stepped down following last week's win for health reasons. Interim coach Jeff Summers will run the show for Kansas tonight.

The two teams played at the MAC only two weeks ago. Iowa overcame a sluggish first half offensively to win the matchup 52-36. The Blackhawks also claimed a 47-20 win in Topeka in the first meeting this season.

Iowa coach Mike Wolff said facing the Koyotes again in the semifinals doesn't bother him. His team has had plenty of time to watch film on Kansas and come up with a game plan for tonight.

And Wolff has complete confidence in his players.

"Our guys have taken care of business all year," he said. "I don't think we'll let off the pedal now."

The Blackhawks will be "as close to 100 percent" as they can be for tonight's game, Wolff added. Injured playmakers Mike Stuart and Derek Townsend have both been activated, and defensive lineman Albert Rodriguez is back after missing the last game of the regular season.

Their returns will be welcomed. McQuinn said Iowa can use everyone as it tries to keep Kansas from reaching the APFL championship game for the first time.

"I hope that's the case," he said. "There's no greater feeling than beating Kansas."