

SPRING GAME SET APRIL 14

LEBANON -- Cumberland University started spring football practice last week with more than 100 players on campus for drills, a record number under head coach Dewayne Alexander, who enters his seventh season with the Bulldogs in 2012.

Cumberland practices Tuesday and Thursday each week with shorts, shoulder pads and helmets, working around players' schedules with late afternoon and evening classes. Coaches teach, install offensive and defensive systems and work on fundamentals during these practices.

Friday and Saturday sessions involve full pad practices with team sessions and putting players in game situations and evaluating the players under those conditions.

"The big thing during the spring that we emphasize with our players and coaches is evaluation," Alexander said. "We are trying to evaluate all the players on our team. We had a lot of guys last year that played [junior varsity], were redshirt freshmen, or were injured and didn't play at all. Really they were not involved in the day-to-day process of getting ready for a ballgame.

"We had some real good players last year that we redshirted or did not play a lot, but they have shown a lot of progress in the weight room and really caught our eye last year just playing on scout teams. It is a chance for those guys this spring to get to learn our system on both sides of the ball, because last year they were basically reading a card or playing on the scout team," he said.

"Spring is the time to do these evaluations. You don't have an opponent and you are not playing a game, so it is a chance for you to go out and take a look at some things. It is a chance for us as coaches to evaluate all of our film of games from the previous season and a chance for us to look at things that we may want to add offensively or defensively. Then we will have a chance at the end of spring to evaluate that and decide what we want to carry with us into the fall."

The Bulldogs return most of the players on offense, including four starters on the offensive line as well as quarterback Reed Gurchiek and running back-return man James McClain, who

recorded 1,604 all-purpose yards and 12 touchdowns in 2011. CU's defense lost All-Conference linebackers Ben Miller and Stephon Ransom and All-MSU cornerback Chris Simpson

Alexander said the coaches want to finish the spring with a depth chart that serves two purposes.

"Hopefully, player-wise, we come out with a solid depth chart or something to go off of as far as what we feel like we are going to start fall camp with and guys that really catch our eye this spring that we feel like can help us. Then some areas and positions that we still have concern about, we know coming into fall camp that we have recruited to try and address some of those. There are some guys at certain positions because of depth or injury or things that happened like performance, and we need to give a guy a really strong look in fall camp. Right out of the gate, we need to make sure we get him some reps early on."

Cumberland has almost 110 players taking part in spring practice, an unusually high number for programs at the NAIA level. Between graduation and attrition, most programs have somewhere in the 85-90 range for spring drills.

"I think the JV program is key to [having more players]; also retention and just having better players and better quality student-athletes. The result of that is just showing here the last two years," he said. "Last year we had about 93 or 94 guys for spring and this year we have 110, so we are just seeing the results of what we started doing four and five years ago in the recruiting process to where now, we have a lot of returning guys and we are graduating some good players and not having a lot of turnover.

"So we lose our seniors, but behind those guys we have a good group coming every year. We lost a really good group of seniors the year before last, but last year we came in and had a solid group of seniors. This year we are going to have a large group of seniors with some good underclassmen in behind them. That is what good programs do; you do not want it to be up-and-down but you want it to be consistent."

Alexander also said the increased numbers have helped in recruiting and they are the effect of the increased attention to retention by the University and athletic department as a whole.

“Really we have been consistent the past four years. We have been really competitive and felt every week that we had a chance to win. [The increased number] is really helping the recruiting process too because we are not having to go out just for numbers, but we are now recruiting specifically for position and we can be very selective to find those guys that academically, athletically and character-wise fit what we are trying to do.

“That has been a key to our retention, as we have recruited solid athletically, but most importantly academically and character-wise because kids that have strong academics and character will stay in school, stay out of trouble, work at it, and stay with it. Getting JV games has been huge in getting these guys a chance to play, just to get out there and play in a game. They are not just reading a card and it is something they can get excited about.”

Alexander added that the offensive and defensive coordinators staying intact during his tenure has also been a big factor in the retention of players.]

“The good thing is that the staff is intact. This will be our defensive coordinator Coach [Donnie] Suber’s fifth year and offensively we will be doing the same thing. There is a lot of carry-over and a lot of our players are able to go out here and really know what we are doing.”

Cumberland’s Spring Game will take place April 14 at 10 a.m. at Lindsey Donnell Stadium-Kirk Field, with a host of activities taking place that day on campus.

“We are going to have all of our young men that have committed to play here at Cumberland and their families to come out and see our scrimmage that day. We want all of our returning players and their families – grandparents, aunts and uncles – and everybody to come out for the game. So really we will have all of our players and their families there and try to get the community out there. We’ll have a cookout afterwards this year with hamburgers, hotdogs, and just try to have a big get-together. We want to try to create a big family atmosphere, which is what we want here with our team and their parents.”