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Dawn of the season

Citrus doesn't waste daylight on the first day of football practice, taking the field before the sun rises.

By DAWN REISS
Published August 1, 2006

INVERNESS - Citrus football coach Rik Haines' loud voice bellows through the dark, muggy air.

Despite it being nearly six in the morning, football players mill around the practice field.

"You've got one minute to get out here," Haines yells towards the locker room.

By his standards, it's late. Haines arrived around 4:30 a.m. It's his time to brood, to think, to ponder and plan.

Teams always have a theme. Pride. Victory. Destiny. For Citrus, it's "finish" - as in finishing each play, each down and every unfulfilled playoff expectation. Like the rest of his coaching staff, Haines wears a white T-shirt with the slogan imprinted on the back.

Fully caffeinated on a Starbucks replacement, Haines sounds an air horn, signalling the start of practice, the first of the season.

"Grab some grass," he barks.

His players line up in perfect rows and blend into the inky sky. Right over left they stretch their legs, arms.

With two new hearing aids twitching in each ear, Haines fiddles with them as he commands his players to "drop their tails and wiggle around."

Another blast screeches from the air horn. It's 6:15 a.m. Players and coaches have gathered for drills. But not quickly enough.

"We should have three reps in by now, let's gooo," Haines yells.

Hips into the ground, elbows up, they warm up. They walk with high knees and scissor their kicking legs in the air.

Air horn blast.

"I've got 6:20," Haines says.

They split off into smaller groups of players and coaches. Haines takes three quarterbacks - sophomore Cameron West, juniors Nick Andrian, Bradley Paul and senior Dwann Ross, a basketball player he recruited to be the 'Canes starting wideout.

Away from the practice field, the foursome begins passing drills in the stadium. Paired off, one throws and drops to the ground to an on knees, push-up stance as the other catch the ball.

They run in a circular rotation, passing and receiving in twosomes.

Haines has never had practice at Citrus this early before. Though the 'Canes have gone to the playoffs two consecutive years and had a district title last year, Haines knows they can produce a lot more. He decided this was the best way to get two-a-days in. It's cooler in the morning hours and there are fewer distractions. Plus it teaches discipline, and for teachers like him who have in-service during the day, it's the best option.

The air horn sounds.

"I've got 30," Haines says. "I've got 6:30."

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Other coaches might worry about their quarterbacks catching footballs as much as the 'Canes do. Haines says he doesn't.

"My snappers throw the ball harder than most," Haines explains. "So they could jam their fingers just as easily catching that."

The air horn cuts the ever lightening sky.

"Rotate," Haines screeches.

Looking over at the practice field, he watches the defensive drills for a moment.

"Slow the pace down and let them tackle," he yells at the assistants.

Turning back, Haines watches his group throw.

"Remember we want to hurry everything but the throw," he tells Andrian.

"One play at a time, every time," Haines says to the group.

Another air horn. The other groups rotate. Haines' group continues to throw.

Ross receives a pass, but the catch isn't close to his body, the ball is left unprotected.

Putting his left arm in the air, Haines points to it.

"Hey," he says flexing his bicep. "God didn't make that armpit to stink, he made it to put a football in it."

Air horn.

"Let's go, it's 6:50," Haines says. He looks at the 9-year-old ball boy.

"When the horn goes off again, give this to Coach Ed Kilpatrick," Haines says motioning to the playbook as the confused boy looks on.

"Give it to the guy that looks like Hulk Hogan," he instructs further.

Now understanding, the boy takes the book.

More drills, another horn.

"On the run," Haines yells at the team. Players scamper across the field like the swarming gnats that have become more persistent with the rising sun.

It's 7:05.

The team gathers in one large group. More defensive drills.

"Get excited," barks defensive coordinator Butch Miller. "I know you don't have pads on but let's have some fun."

Players line up as a single returner rushes past the pack on kickoff return.

"Get an angle," Haines says to returner. "Get out and run."

Another horn. It's 7:35.

They practice pass rushing. Someone goes offsides.

"Is that a smart play," Haines rhetorically asks. "We're only about smart plays."

The horn sounds its final salute. 7:45 a.m. It's time for breakdown.

The players gather in a circle, pairing off they begin stretching as Haines begins to talk. One player is on the ground, on his hands and knees. His teammate stands over him, pushing down on his neck, while the other tries to push it back up.

"Keep your head up," Haines says. "Because only worms and dog poop are on the ground and we aren't either."

Haines tells his players to limit their soda drinking, anything else that is high in sugar.

"And make sure you eat," he says. "A lot, because we'll have weigh ins."

It's nearly 8 a.m. With a rousing hand clap and Citrus cheer session, they finish. The first practice is over, but they'll be back later that afternoon for some more.



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