

No end (zone) in sight

Flag football season has officially kicked off with sport continuing to grow

BEN LITTLE

THERE wasn't a cloud in the sky Saturday as Football Manitoba kicked off another flag football season at Princess Auto Stadium. Games stretched horizontally across the Blue Bombers field, as players aged eight to 18 filed in for their games.

More Manitobans than ever before are playing flag football as the game's rapid growth continues to build momentum. Eight years ago, roughly 800 kids were registered to play. This year, nearly 2,400 have signed up.

Bill Johnson, executive director of Football Manitoba, said low equipment costs and relaxed time commitments make flag football an attractive sport for newcomers.

"There's not a lot of barriers to participation," said Johnson. "People show up. You have a couple flags, you have a football, you have a game. Small patch of grass, and off you go."

Manitoba has a reputation for success across Canada's flag football community, from the club level to the elite. Team Manitoba won gold at last

year's Elite Flag Nationals in the men's 18-year-old division, while winning bronze at the men's under-18 level and both men's and women's under-16 levels.

Johnson said the success of Winnipeg's local teams deserves some credit for the game's growth.

"The success the (Winnipeg Blue Bombers) have had recently, the success the (Manitoba Bisons) have had recently, I think that gets people excited about football," said Johnson.

All teams were provided blue or gold flag football jerseys by the Blue Bombers for this weekend's kickoff. The Bombers also spearheaded a high school flag football league for girls which, in its second season, grew from 19 teams to 30.

"The highest level of growth has actually been on the girls' side," said Johnson. "This is a co-ed league, and we have all-girls teams competing in that no problem."

Twelve-year-old Ainsley MacLean plays on an all-girls team with several girls from her school. Despite losing their first game of the weekend, MacLean is confident her team will



JOHN WOODS / FREE PRESS

Weston Wizards' Judah runs the ball as Football Manitoba's Blue Bombers Futures Spring Flag League kicked off Saturday at Princess Auto Stadium.



JOHN WOODS / FREE PRESS

Weston Wizards' Emmett makes a 'tackle' at the flag football season kickoff.

bounce back.

"It was really good. We tried our hardest," she said, "but we didn't win, but we're going to do better next time."

In her second year of flag football, she said the game has been a great way to meet people and get active.

"I get to do things with my friends," she said. "It's fun because sometimes we lose, and sometimes we win, and we know that we're not always the best, but we can be sometimes."

Flag football is growing on a global scale as well, being named as an event for the 2028 Olympics in Los Angeles.

Johnson said Football Manitoba just hosted a training camp for the Flag National Team Pathway, which helps identify athletes across Canada for the 2028 Olympic team.

"(Flag football national team) athletes are here in Winnipeg, we have some coaches who are part of that Olympic pathway here in Winnipeg," said Johnson. "The flag community in Winnipeg is a vibrant one."

Still three years away from its Olympic debut, flag football's thriving community shows no signs of slowing.

"All of a sudden, there's a chance to go somewhere," said Johnson. "People



BEN LITTLE / FREE PRESS

Executive director of Football Manitoba Bill Johnson says the highest level of growth in flag football has been on the girls' side of the sport.

are competitive and want to compete — they want that chance. And now, now they have it.

"I think we have a real opportunity to have a couple (Manitoba) athletes at

the Olympics."

Manitoba will look to defend its national medals next month, when the Elite Flag Nationals come to Kingston, Ont., May 16 to 18.

Stampeders' Dickenson holds No. 1 pick in CFL draft

Calgary head coach has four picks in first 20

DAVE Dickenson will have plenty of options in the CFL draft tonight.

The Calgary head coach and general manager holds four of the first 20 picks, including two in the first round (Nos. 1, 8). The Stampeders currently have a league-high 10 selections after posting a 5-12-1 record last season to miss the playoffs for the first time since 2004.

Dickenson was unavailable for comment Monday. But longtime CFL coach/GM Jim Barker has a definite idea who Calgary should take first overall: receiver Keelan White of Montana, Dickenson's alma mater.

"To me, he's by far the best player in the draft," said Barker. "I think Keelan White makes so much sense."

"He's a little like (veteran Stampeders receiver Reggie Begelton) in that he knows how to get open, he's tough, he'll catch everything over the middle. They could use a guy like that who's Canadian."

The six-foot-two, 184-pound White, of North Vancouver, B.C., had 57 catches for 628 yards and four touchdowns last season. A college walk-on in 2019, White finished with 161 receptions for 1,862 yards and 14 touchdowns at Montana.

And White would fill a need for Calgary with the off-season retirement of Cole Tucker. Also, third-year receiver Clark Barnes missed nine games due to injury as a rookie but appeared in 16 contests last season.

Hamilton, Ottawa, Saskatchewan, Montreal, Winnipeg and Toronto will follow Calgary before the Stampeders conclude the opening round at No. 8. The B.C. Lions and Edmonton Elks are scheduled to make their first picks in the second rounds.

A total of 72 players will be taken over eight rounds.

Dickenson will also open the CFL global draft this morning. Each team will make two selections.

Barker is a five-time Grey Cup champion over his CFL tenure as an assistant coach, head coach and GM and was the league's coach of the year in 2010 with Toronto. He's now a foot-

ball panellist with TSN.

Dickenson could use all four picks or trade one or some to land a veteran CFL player. And that could include the first overall selection if the price is right.

At least Dickenson has some clarity following last week's NFL draft.

Stanford receiver Elic Ayomanor, of Medicine Hat, Alta., and Indiana quarterback Kurtis Rourke, of Oakville, Ont., were both selected (fourth round, Tennessee; seventh round, San Francisco, respectively). LSU defensive lineman Paris Shand, of Toronto, and Montana defensive lineman Hayden Harris both signed free-agent deals with the Buffalo Bills afterwards.

Ayomanor, Rourke and Shand held down the top three spots in the CFL scouting bureau's final top-20 draft prospects list released Monday while Harris, who grew up in Mill Creek, Wash., but qualifies as Canadian through his mother, was No. 9. All are now expected to be futures picks today given their respective NFL prospects.

Barker said there's plenty of depth along the defensive line in the draft.

"I think there's more defensive linemen this year that have a chance to make teams than there has been in a long time," he said. "Two of them — Shand and Harris — both signed free-agent contracts so you lose two but there's a lot of other defensive linemen, interior and edge guys, that can play."

Included among the defensive line prospects is Darien Newell of Queen's. The six-foot-three, 309-pound Brampton, Ont., native could follow in the footsteps of former Golden Gael Derek Wiggan to Calgary.

Wiggan retired after spending last season with the Montreal Alouettes but played his first eight CFL campaigns with the Stampeders.

Wyoming linebacker Connor Shay has also been mentioned as a first-round top prospect. He has accepted rookie-camp offers from the Green Bay Packers and New York Jets but hasn't signed an NFL deal.

Shay is an American who qualifies



ZACHARY PETERS / BISONS SPORTS

Bisons quarterback Jackson Tachinski (right) evades a tackle at Princess Auto Stadium. The Winnipegger is in the mix for the quarterback position in the draft.

for the CFL draft because of a Canadian father. The six-foot-two, 227-pound linebacker had 76 tackles (45 solo, 7.5 for a loss), 1.5 sacks and an interception in 12 starts last season.

Shay has been compared to Alex Singleton, another American who played in the CFL (2016-18) as a Canadian with Calgary and was a two-time league all-star and its '17 top defensive player. Singleton is currently with the NFL's Denver Broncos.

Another highly regarded linebacker is Windsor's Devin Veresuk, who'll attend the Indianapolis Colts rookie camp. The six-foot-three, 230-pound Windsor, Ont., native recorded 160 tackles (14 for loss), nine sacks, an

interception and two forced fumbles for the Lancers.

Barker could also see Western safety Jackson Findlay going in the first round. The six-foot-three, 203-pound North Vancouver native, was a '23 first-team All-Canadian and '24 Presidents' Trophy finalist.

Findlay comes by his football prowess honestly as his great-grandfather, grandfather, uncle and father all played in the CFL. Findlay was one of U Sports' top-eight academic All-Canadians last year and plans to become a pediatric oncologist when he's done playing.

"He's a big safety who, to me, fits for Winnipeg because (American)

Brandon Alexander retired," Barker said. "There aren't too many Canadian safeties that you can say when William Stanback (veteran Ottawa running back) comes rolling through the B gap, he's going to come up and have no gain because Findlay will hit him."

Laurier's Taylor Elgersma, the '24 Hec Crighton Trophy winner who attended the Senior Bowl in January, headlines the draft's quarterback group. Also included are Laval's Arnaud Desjardins, Montreal's Jonathan Senecal, McMaster's Keagan Hall and Manitoba's Jackson Tachinski, who also worked out this off-season as a receiver.