

Nelson ready to carry the load for UMass
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AMHERST - Tony Nelson had no illusions about his role with the University of Massachusetts football team last season.

Steve Baylark was the Minutemen's primary ball carrier and one of the most productive backs in Division I-AA history. He rushed for 1,960 yards and 15 touchdowns.

Nelson, who did have 47 carries for 235 yards and three touchdowns, tried to use his time on the bench as a freshman to learn by watching.

Next week, Baylark will likely be in an NFL camp either as a draftee or a free agent.

Nelson, who lives in Germantown, Md., will continue trying to use the lessons he learned from Baylark to help fill his sizable void as spring football practice continues.

"Last year I was in a learning role. I'm looking forward to this year a lot," Nelson said. "It was definitely helpful. As Steve was doing so well, he was teaching me at the same time. I was learning from him. Hopefully it carries over."

Even though Nelson spent most of his time watching on Saturdays, he saw plenty of action in practice. While Nelson played sparingly in the postseason, UMass coach Don Brown said the extra weeks were still valuable.

"I don't think anyone enjoys watching, but in the long run for his development, watching Steve certainly won't hurt him," Brown said. "We had 15 games so he practiced for 16 weeks. I think all those things are valuable."

Nelson said he recognizes that people have different expectations of him now.

"It's definitely a lot different. I've got to lead the team now and show them I'm more serious," said Nelson, who is listed at 5-foot-10, 210 pounds and appears to have added muscle over the winter. "I've been around a little while. The system is in my head, so I'm ready to do what I can do. I can see the potential of what I can do. I've been ready for this since I've been here."

Brown said he isn't sure yet how the carries will be distributed in the fall, but barring injury, Nelson and senior Matt Lawrence both should figure prominently in the team's rushing attack.

"He and Tony are sharing a lot of the upper-level work. You don't live playing one tailback in this league. You need to have two guys who are ready to go and we feel we have two very capable guys," said Brown, who has liked the intensity that both backs have brought to spring practice.

"There's a sense of urgency with those guys," Brown added. "They're both very good friends, but they're competing extremely hard. I think they both realize that both of them need to play well for us to be successful. I think both of those guys are capable of running our inside and outside zone plays that Steve ran very well."

Brown said their skills complement each other.

"Both of those guys have an understanding of our scheme. Matt's a little faster and more of a slasher, while Tony has more of the characteristics that Steve Baylark had," Brown said, referring to his powerful, hard-to-tackle style.

If Nelson plays well, Brown could use Lawrence at fullback, where he contributed last year, as well as tailback.

And senior E.J. Barthel, who played primarily at fullback last year, could see some carries as a tailback or in one-back sets.

SIDELINED - Offensive lineman Matt Austin (undisclosed injury) and tight end Brad Listorti (back), who will both be seniors in the fall, are sitting out spring practice.

Austin had surgery, while Listorti is being held out mostly as a precaution. Both are expected to be at full strength as the start of practice in August.

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