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It's back to work for Esks

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SECTION

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Earlier this week, Hugh Campbell conducted a staring contest with an imaginary depth chart on a table top.

"I don't, at this point, see the 'great player,'" said the head coach, in advance of his fifth Edmonton Eskimo training camp. "But we've done the best job of challenging in a whole lot of areas."

Some 80 players, including three juniors, will draw equipment and take medicals today at Concordia College, then go into daily workouts at 9:15 a.m. and 3:30 p.m., beginning Sunday.

This camp should be the most interesting since Campbell's first, in 1977, in that he has a few holes to fill.

The primary concerns are the vacancies created by the retirement of centre Bob Howes, the trade of defensive halfback Gregg Butler to Montreal Alouettes, and the likely retirement of offensive tackle Mike Wilson.

Also gone from the end of last year are running back Don Warrington (deceased), offensive lineman Dan Yochum (released), wide receiver Danny Buggs (released), middle linebacker Harry Walters and defensive half Maurice Burton (both released and signed by Saskatchewan Roughriders).

Campbell says "most of the competition will come from within," referring to the 43 veterans (including receiver Marco Cyncar and linebacker Bill Manchuk, acquired by trade) vying for 34 roster positions and four on the taxi-squad.

Perhaps the exception will be in the battle for the offensive tackle spot of two-time Schenley Award winner Mike Wilson. It will be won by either newcomer Joe Odum from Wichita or Kenneth Walter from Texas Tech "if one of those guys is good enough; if not, we're back to the way we were at the end of last season (with an all-Canadian line)."

Campbell hopes Wilson will return once his injured knee and ankle mend, but don't hold your breath.

Back-ups will enter camp with the inside track on other two vacant spots — Ted Milian at centre and Mike McLeod at defensive half.

"But it would be best if we could find somebody to replace Bob Howes and still have Ted Milian's versatility," said Campbell. "If we don't, we hope within a couple of days to find somebody (as a backup). If we don't, we'll start training Eric Upton or Leo Blanchard or Hector Pothier to snap as the backup.

"The real problem, in my mind, comes in the depth."

Butler's departure led to the influx of 10 imports and seven Canadians competing for the six defensive back openings.

"I tend to select what I call basketball players," said Campbell. "Guys who are quick rather than big hitters."

McLeod played safety when he did play last year, during Pete Lavorato's injury, but Campbell points out that McLeod was a cornerback at training camp, then a defensive half during the exhibition season.

"His main position has always been right halfback, and that's Gregg's spot."

Also in the secondary, previous back-up Emilio Fraietta will be considered as a starting safety if Lavorato hasn't rebounded from his 1980 injury.

"We've done our best recruiting in the defensive backfield, but the real pressure when it comes to cutting will be at receiver. We've got too many guys."

There are nine veterans among the 12 hopefuls going for five or maybe six jobs. Watch for slotback Brian Fryer to join Tom Scott, Brian Kelly and Waddell Smith as the starters, with a dogfight for the backup spots.

Quarterbacking is obvious. Warren Moon is No. 1, Tom Wilkinson is No. 2, Brian

Broomell goes on the taxi-squad and Brian Potter goes on the injury reserve list.

Campbell says he will stick with a one Canadian-one import running back system. That means Neil Lumsden and likely Jim Germany — or else Joe Steele, Leroy Jones or Marcus Jennings.

Defensively, Esks will go with the 30 defence as a base again this year, with Dave Fennell, David Boone and a beefed-up York Hentschel on the line. Ron Estay is the incumbent switch-hitter — one moment an outside linebacker, the next a down lineman.

Dan Kepley and Dale Potter return as inside linebackers, with Tom Towns on the outside. But if Charles Jackson sticks, he could play inside and move Potter outside.

The signing of Jackson, a four-year National Football League starter with Denver Broncos and Kansas City Chiefs (where he played out his option), was the most surprising.

Kicking and punting will again be done by Dave Cutler and Hank Ilesic respectively, although Ilesic will do some place kicking in practices.

While it shapes up as the most interesting Eskimo camp in years, it will also be the toughest for the coaches. They play their first exhibition game in Calgary on June 5 — just 12 days after their first workout.