

LATEST HEADLINES

High School football tour: Day 16: Monterey



Chris Keim is a returning starter on the offensive and defensive line for Monterey. (John Devine — Monterey Herald)



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EDITOR'S NOTE: Herald sports writer John Devine is spending most of this month visiting Monterey County schools to get a sneak peek of their football teams. This and other previews will be available at www.montereyherald.com.

MONTEREY – For four years, the mission has been about building a culture, holding each other accountable on and off the football field and playing for the person next to you. It remains a staple at Monterey High.

As successful as Monterey was in reaching the postseason in head coach Alex Besaw's first three seasons — playing for a section title in 2022 – it's been far from perfect.

Based on the off-season turnout and eagerness of a youthful group to leave their stamp, a shift in attitude is taking place as the Treadadores look for a bounce-back season.





Sophomore Logan Vanderberg-Grace tosses a pass in the flat during a recent Monterey practice. (John Devine -- Monterey Herald)

"As far as my visions, every year has been a positive step forward toward building a football culture where kids are committed to the process," Besaw said. "This year has been a giant leap for us, partly from the rising seniors. Our off-season carried over into the fall."

Despite being ravaged by injuries, including the loss of its quarterback for the second consecutive year, Monterey was one win away from making its fourth straight playoff appearance.

"Injuries are going to happen," Besaw said. "The thing I have learned at Monterey, as opposed to other programs, is depth is something we'll always struggle with. It can be difficult to navigate with 26 kids. But that creates opportunities for other kids to play."

Besaw, who hopes to suit up 35 players for Thursday's opener against Christopher, started last season with 37 players before injuries turned the sidelines into a MASH unit by midseason. At one point, the Toreadores had eight new starters on defense.

No injury crippled the offense more than the loss of quarterback Bronson Gulley four games into the season. Before his injury, Monterey jumped out to a 3-0 start. In the 6-foot-6 Gulley's absence, it closed the year 1-6.



Nate Mendoza (middle) will solidify the Toreadores linebacker crew. (John Devine -- Monterey Herald)

"There's only so much we could do in putting a scheme together," Besaw said. "I did everything I could to put our kids in the best position to be successful. It's hard to overhaul the offense for a guy that isn't meant for the offense to begin with."

As gusty as the Toreadores played with a patched-up lineup, they stumbled down the stretch, dropping their last four Pacific Coast Athletic League Gabilan Division games to miss the playoffs.

"Last year we had kids that hadn't played a down of varsity football," Besaw said. "That experience is invaluable. Now they are juniors. We have a close-knit group of seniors who, from what it appears, are 100 percent bought into the standards we've implemented. That's where the difference has been. The seniors are acting like seniors."

It wasn't as if Monterey wasn't competitive in the second half of the season, as it knocked off playoff-bound North Salinas, while suffering a one-point loss to Carmel.

Still, Besaw cast the blame on himself, calling it a learning experience when dealt a hand that left his offense in a state of disarray. Drawing plays in the sand wasn't working.

"Because of how handcuffed we were, I felt I was trying to win by doing more through X's and O's," Besaw said. "That's not good coaching. To sum it up, I overcoached it."

Those hard-learned lessons should benefit the staff and returning players this season, starting with the return of a healthy Gulley at quarterback, who is being pushed in practice by sophomore Logan Vanderberg-Grace.

A multi-sport athlete with a high IQ, Gulley had six touchdown passes in Monterey's first three games before breaking his right wrist in Week 4 and missing the remainder of the season.

While Gulley missed the rest of the football season, he showed no ill effects of the injury during basketball season, improving his athleticism in the process, while becoming one of the area's top discus throwers in track and field.

In a quarterback-friendly offense, Gulley has the vision and size to see the entire field, looking past his first and second reads if necessary.

"Our offense is very quarterback-centered," Besaw said. "He's been in the weight room and has gotten stronger. He's gotten more consistent with his throws. We still need more reps, as does Logan."

Gulley does have a couple of game-changers to fling the ball to in Gysai Foster, as well as the return of 6-foot-2 Israel Johnson, who improved his route running, showcasing a chiseled frame to outmuscle defensive backs.



Monterey's Chris Keim. (John Devine -- Monterey Herald)

So has tailback Zander Morse, who is expected to see his touches increase in the backfield, having been effective in limited touches last year.

As much as Besaw likes to air it out, there's an understanding of the importance of being able to run the ball, with Monterey having had a 1,000-plus yard rusher the past three years.

"Balance for me is getting five different guys on the field touches," Besaw said. "He (Morse) is a nice blend of being able to move in space or run through people. He's probably the strongest kid in our program from the



Monterey's Bronson Gulley. (John Devine -- Monterey Herald)

In limited touches last year, Morse averaged 11 yards each time he touched the ball, rushing for 58 yards on just three carries in one game.

For the Toreadores quarterbacks to pick apart defenses, they need time in the pocket. For Morse to grind the ball, he needs holes to run through.

What Monterey perhaps has for the first time in Besaw's five seasons, is depth on the offensive line with experience, starting with Chris Keim.

"The amount of effort this group puts in is incredible," Keim said. "What I



Monterey's Gysai Foster. (John Devine -- Monterey Herald)

Brought up last year as a sophomore, the 230-pound Keim is a tone setter on both sides of the ball, starting as a tackle on offense and defensive tackle on defense

"He never came off the field," Besaw said. "A big emphasis for us is improvement at the line of scrimmage, being violent up front. Chris does a great job of setting the tone. We fully trust him."

Because Monterey lacks the size of some of its Gabilan Division rivals, Besaw counters with an attack where he's relying on intelligence instead of



Monterey's Richard Anyanwu. (John Devine -- Monterey Herald)

"We try and add elements and misdirection where we don't have to overpower someone," Besaw said. "If we put the ball in space, we have players that will make plays."

While keeping his quarterback healthy has been a concern over the past three years, Besaw's two starting defensive ends are his quarterbacks in Gulley and Vanderberg-Grace, who is 6-4.

Before he became a quarterback, Gulley was a defensive end/tight end during his freshman season.

"He kind of morphed into the quarterback position," Besaw said. "We needed

Injuries were also a part of Monterey's defensive struggles in the Gabilan Division, where it allowed 40-plus points in three games.

"We were so out of alignment at times on defense," Besaw said. "We are making it very simple this year and playing to our kids' strengths. They won't have to do much. We want them on their toes, getting down and playing fast."

One of eight sophomores brought up last year, linebacker Nate Mendoza will anchor the linebacking corps, having jumped into the weight room in the off-season. He'll also be used as a lead blocker in short-yardage situations.

Johnson's athleticism will enable him to play man-coverage as a defensive back, having picked off two passes last season, while recovering a fumble.

"Health is one of the top keys for us," Keim said. "We're not the biggest team in this league. Most guys are going to play both ways. To be good in this league, you have to be conditioned, coachable and work through it. This group believes in each other."

Part of the culture change since Besaw's arrival was instilling discipline and cutting down on mistakes, erasing Monterey's reputation for being penalty-prone.

"I don't see it as a stigma anymore," Besaw said. "We're not seeing the penalties we shouldn't be getting. It comes with understanding the situation and having the mental focus to play the game the right way."

The biggest change in the direction that Besaw has taken the program is turning it into a player-led program, in terms of accountability.

"The lessons we're getting across in the true shaping of the culture are by the actions they take," Besaw said. "The players are the ones dictating the outcome and holding each other accountable."

Monterey football schedule

Aug. 27: Christopher, 7:30 p.m.

Sept 4: at Seaside, 7:30 p.m.

Sept 11: Overfelt, 7:30 p.m.

Oct. 1: Bye:

Oct. 9: Salinas, 7:30 p.m.

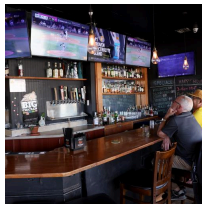
Oct. 16: at Hollister, 7:30 p.m.

Oct. 23: Soquel, 7:30 p.m.

Oct. 31: at North Salinas, 11 a.m.

Nov. 6: Alisal, 7:30 p.m.

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Salinas Valley Sports Hall of Fame

Wednesday, August 19



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Monday, August 17



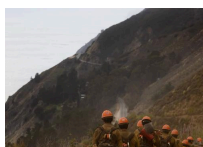
210 fall athletes to watch over 70 days

Sunday, August 16



Life in Marina's Timber Fire Camp

Saturday, August 22

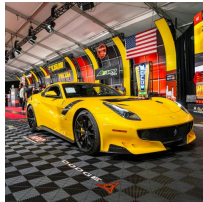


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