

Blue-Gold matchup will give fans, coaches a good show



The Blue-Gold Game, which takes place at Heinz Field this Saturday at 2 p.m., wraps up the 2011 session of spring drills for the Panthers.

by Pat Bostick

The 2011 Blue-Gold Game, which kicks off at 2 p.m. at Heinz Field on Saturday, promises to be an exciting one. The Panthers have accomplished a lot over the past 14 practices under new Head Football Coach Todd Graham, and the spring game is a chance to gauge the progress they've made.

"We're going to make it as game-like as we can. I want it to be a game situation," Graham said. "I want to see how these players respond and create some adversity between the two teams."

The coaching staff is dividing the two teams to create matchups at key positions and see the way in which each battle plays out.

"The blue team will consist of most of our starters on offense," Graham said after Pitt's final padded practice on Tuesday. "And then it will be the first defense."

Points will be awarded in the same manner they would be in a normal game. A team will get six for a touchdown, one for an extra point and three for a field goal.

"(The scoring system) will make it very competitive," Graham said.

Coach Graham said he also

has plans to incorporate special teams throughout the spring game, saying the first team kick-off unit will be in action at least twice and the punting team will see between 6-8 punts before splitting into a different format.

That means Pitt fans will get their first glimpse of speed-demon Buddy Jackson on kick-off returns, new starting place-kicker and kickoff man Kevin Harper, and punter Matt Yoklic. Special teams will help make April's spring game feel like a Big East contest in October.

This game-like setup will also bring a new excitement to the Blue-Gold Game. It will create a more competitive atmosphere, adding some extra incentive for the players to perform. However, despite this new setup and environment, the focus of the Blue-Gold Game isn't necessarily who wins. Rather, it is about simulating a game day atmosphere and seeing how the players respond to it. Offensively, the coaches will utilize the play clock and will be looking to create a fast tempo.

"We'll go at the pace that we are used to, which is pretty brisk," Graham said. "We hope to get about 60 offensive snaps with each group."

That's 120 plays, or one ev-

ery 15 seconds or so. Hold on to your chair and brace yourself, because the game is going to be moving fast. This fast-paced tempo will also put a premium on coach-to-player communication. Coaches in the press box will have to be efficient in their communication to the coaches and players who are signaling on the sideline, and those play-callers and signalers will have to do the same when communicating to the quarterback on the field.

As far as personnel, the offensive coaches want to see quarterbacks Tino Sunseri, Mark Myers and Anthony Gonzalez operate under these conditions. They want to see clean center-quarterback exchanges, especially with new starting center Chris Jacobson. The coaches also want crisp exchanges from the quarterbacks to Ray Graham and Desmond Brown, and distribution of the ball to the likes of Street, Saddler and Shanahan in the passing attack.

"The whole key is going to be that it starts with the quarterback," Graham said. "We need someone that can manage the game, distribute the football and is very disciplined about what we're doing. I think we have a guy that can do that, and more than just one. I'm very pleased."

Defensively, it's going to be about matching that pace and tempo. The offense's operation time is going to be lightning-quick, so the defense has to be even quicker. It has to get lined up, get the signals and calls from the defensive coaches, and recognize the offense's formation and tendencies. Once they accomplish these things, it's going to be about attacking, sound tackling, coverage and impacting the quarterback. The Pitt defensive line is the deepest unit on the defense, and their presence will surely be felt on Saturday. Pitt fans should get used to hearing the names Caragein, Alecxi, Hargrove, Murphy, Donald, Mosley-Smith and Clemmings.

The Blue-Gold game marks the 15th and final practice of Pitt's spring camp. For the coaches, it is truly a great opportunity to evaluate the team's progress over spring camp and see how it responds on a stage larger than the indoor practice facility on the South Side.

Pat Bostick played quarterback for Pitt from 2007-10. Each week, he breaks down Pitt football and the changes that are being made in each area.