

DC FREDDIE BANKS

BY PAUL BURNS

# READY TO WIN



*“You Don’t Come To Montana State And Say You Want To Keep It The Same; You Come Here And... Try To Take It Over The Top.”*

It remains to be seen, of course, whether or not Freddie Banks has stepped into a near-perfect situation, but it appears that way on paper, and even Banks isn’t going to argue about his good fortune. Banks is the new defensive coordinator at Montana State, and without playing a game, he anticipates the horses that served the Bobcats well in 2019 will be at the top of their game this fall. “They did a good job of recruiting here,” Banks says of the former Bobcat coaching staff headed by Jeff Choate. “I wouldn’t describe it as being a bare cupboard at all. We’re stepping into a place that’s ready to win.”

Banks stepped into the shoes filled not long ago by Bobcat legend Kane Ioane, who played and coached at MSU before moving on to Boise State in January. Banks has a long list of past college campuses where he played and coached, most recently at Nevada, where he was in charge of the defensive backs. But Bozeman is more than just another stop: it’s his first chance to be the guy on defense—the

person who is the ultimate decider on personnel and schemes—and his expectations are lofty. “You don’t come to Montana State and say you want to keep it the same; you come here and you want to improve, try to take it over the top.”

Taking the job at MSU under new head coach Brent Vigen follows Banks’ trajectory of always moving up. Following his prep days in South Holland, Ill., Banks started his playing days at little Mercyhurst College before transferring to North Dakota State, where Vigen was the offensive coordinator. From there it’s been one small town, one small school after another until the 33-year-old finally got a chance at Nevada of the Mountain West Conference in 2020. The truth is, “You have to start somewhere. I’ve been preparing for this for 11 years. Watch us and you’ll see us play well,” he says.

Each job change, whether at tiny Moorhead State across the Red River from NDSU or down in Louisiana at Nicholls State, has meant a promotion—which has



meant more responsibility. "When you're working at a company, usually a promotion is within that company. In the coaching world, to get a promotion you have to move somewhere. That's just part of the profession." At each stop, Banks picked the brains and copied the methods of the rest of the staff. "I've stolen bits and pieces from a lot of people and made them my own," he says.

To the average fan in the stands, Banks' imprint on the Bobcats will only show on the scoreboard. Are the Bobcats giving up fewer yards, which should mean fewer points than they did under Ioane? That's Banks' expectation, but he'll be doing most of it with Ioane's players. "They built a real good roster and handed it over to us," he explains. Any changes to the defensive schemes will be subtle. "We like to zero-in and only do

a couple of things; having things simple so they can play fast."

On first appearance, Banks seems like a pretty relaxed fellow, but if starting safety Ty Okada had to pick the scariest Bobcat, coach or player, it would be Banks. "He brings a lot of great energy to each practice. If someone needs a fire lit under him, he does it, but he can also be that guy that's just even keel. He brings what's needed; he brings a lot of knowledge. But he's scary when he's mad," the veteran says with a laugh. Banks doesn't disagree with that assessment too much. "I'm a good teacher, but I'm also really demanding," he explains. "When guys know what they're supposed to be doing and choose not to, we're not very happy about it; you've got to get them corrected."

There's some talk around the Big Sky Conference that the Bobcats

have the best defensive line and linebackers this season. The ends are anchored by Amandre Williams and Daniel Hardy, with Chase Benson clogging the middle. The linebacking corps features Troy Andersen and Callahan O'Reilly. "They're as talented as anyone in the league," Banks points out. "The front seven will be our strength." They all have experience and all were part of the defense that limited opposing teams to just 22.1 points per game in 2019, the last time MSU took the field.

There are some questions about the defensive secondary, but if the front group is able to put pressure on quarterbacks, the backfield group won't be exposed. In theory. "We're young, but you haven't seen them when the lights come on, so you don't know what you're going to get. There are a lot of guys who haven't played a lot of snaps." The guys who have played a lot are Okada and cornerback Tyrel Thomas. Joining them is promising Oregon State transfer Jeffrey Manning, who has two years of eligibility remaining. The defensive secondary, those guys behind the front seven, is where Banks' expertise is expected to shine, having played back there once himself. He was a starter on the 2010 NDSU team that came into Bozeman and crushed the Bobcats 42-17 as Banks' defense and then-player Vigen's offense both proved unbeatable. In that game, Banks collected two solo tackles and assisted on four others.

Banks wouldn't be surprised if there might be some talented, unsung players who may not have received the attention they deserved from the previous staff. "It's a fresh start and a clean slate," he says. Banks says he uses his sociology degree from NDSU every day in his job as a football coach and as a mentor to young men. In fact, he says, if he wasn't coaching

he'd like to be a counselor. Both jobs are similar and he likes to help young people. "That's kind of my passion," he says. "It's something where I have an impact on young people." He would use many of the same tools he uses on the football field: As a counselor, it's sometimes called tough love; as a football coach it can be called being a hardass, which is probably what Okada had in mind when he said Banks was scary.

"It's hard to coach 18-to-22 year olds and not get after them sometimes," Banks says. "I would say you wouldn't come out there every day and see me pissed off, but there'll be some days for sure when we've got to get some things corrected or we're not playing. That's where it usually comes to with some guys: you've seen them do it before



and now they're not disciplined and there's the issue right there." So Banks would tackle the issue the same, whether on a football team or in the counselor's office: head-on. Now, Banks is

surrounded by these Bobcats who want to impress him. If Banks is happy, the Bobcats are also probably happy—and that should mean Banks is in a near-perfect situation.

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