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Veteran defense.

All-new offensive line.

That describes the way the season began for Leipsic and its head coach, Joe Kirkendall.

Ten weeks later, his 8-2 team (7-2 in the Blanchard Valley Conference) has used stellar defensive play and an improving offensive line to earn a home playoff game against St. John's (6-4, 5-3 Midwest Athletic Conference) tonight with a 7:30 p.m. kickoff.

"We knew defense would be our strength with seven returning starters and they have played like it. We've also not rested on our laurels but have continued to improve; we give up less than 10 points a game and half of those were when our junior varsity team was in, so we've played according to what we expected," Kirkendall began. "The offensive line was all new but they have gotten progressively better. Even though they were new at the start, they were physically ready to step in because of the work we've done in the weight room. All they needed was experience, getting cohesion playing together and the necessary techniques. Those guys have worked hard to get to this point and we've done well because of their continuing efforts." Kirkendall figures that everyone is familiar with offensive players such as efficient and effective quarterback Zac Kuhlman and his favorite target outside, Devin Mangas.

However, it's some of the understated players that have been keys for the Vikings, such as Austin Brown at strong safety and Brady Schnipke as an all-purpose player.

"Brady is the only guy we have that never leaves the field; we have a number that do rotate in on both dies but he's the only full-time one. He does a little bit of everything on both sides," the coach continued. "He is a tight end and tailback for us offensively; we've used him more in the backfield the last two weeks. He is also our middle linebacker — we're much more effective defensively when he's the physical anchor in the middle — but has also played end when we've needed him because of early-season injuries.

"Austin maybe does get the publicity but he was the BVC Player of the Year this year, so that is how much respect he has earned from the league's coaches."

Despite his team's continuing success, Kirkendall knows that tonight's contest may well come down to the mental part.

"We have played St. John's a few times over the years and have yet to beat them. We had chances last year but it didn't happen," he added. "It's become a rivalry for us because we haven't gotten over the hump against them and until we do that, it's not really a rivalry for them. "The names and faces may change for St. John's but the tradition doesn't. You know they are going to run that 'I' and use a lot of sweeps, powers and options. They are going to play tough, physical defense out of that 4-3 and hit you hard. Again, it's as much mental for us as physical."