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Focus on Big 12 football (looking through spring-practice goggles)

BY BLAIR KERKHOFF | THE KANSAS CITY STAR

NORTH DIVISION

1

KANSAS

What's new: A stouter defense, Kansas hopes. The Jayhawks backpedaled too much in key games last season, surrendering 447 yards and 36 points per outing. The defensive front and secondary, led by safety Darrell Stuckey, appear to be solid. Reshaping the linebacking corps was a spring priority. The defense has to improve if Kansas is to win its first division championship. Rell Lewis should find time at running back following Jocques Crawford's suspension.

The QB: All Todd Reesing does is win. He's 20-6 as a starter, including 2-0 in bowl games, and he has perhaps the best set of targets in the Big 12 with Dezmon Briscoe, who has worked himself back into the coach's good graces after a suspension; Kerry Meier; and Johnathan Wilson. A big development in the spring was the emergence of Kale Pick (wonder if he should consider changing his last name to Touchdown) as the top reserve quarterback.

Quote: "You watch tape ... and one minute you're excited about something and the next you're banging the desk." — coach Mark Mangino on evaluating spring practice.

2 NEBRASKA

What's new: Zac Lee replaces Joe Ganz at quarterback, and as he gets comfortable in the offense, look for the Cornhuskers to rely more on the legs of running backs Roy Helu Jr. and Quentin Castille. Defensive tackle Ndamukong Suh could become one of the Big 12's top defenders, and the defensive line needs a healthy Barry Turner to produce. The Cornhuskers won six of their final seven games last season, including the Gator Bowl. A quicker start would be nice but it might be difficult with a new quarterback.

The QB: Lee, previously a little-used reserve and scout-team quarterback, enjoyed a strong spring. Gone are favorite targets Nate Swift and Todd Peterson, who combined for 125 receptions. But Chris Brooks looked good in the spring game.

Quote: "That's how teams win championships, with great chemistry. That's the thing we have to work on." — defensive tackle Ndamukong Suh.

3 MISSOURI

What's new: You'll need a program to recognize these Tigers. The old faces were so familiar: Chase Daniel, Jeremy Maclin, Chase Coffman, William Moore. They were all part of a great era. Now the team belongs to guys like **Blaine Gabbert (below)**, Danario Alexander and Jaron Baston. It's not as if Mizzou has no established stars. Linebacker Sean Weatherspoon and running back Derrick Washington are among the best in the Big 12.

The QB: Gabbert has the size and arm strength that Daniel would have loved to have had. But will Gabbert have Daniel's motor?

Quote: "There will be a little different flavor, in some respects, but we like our offense. I don't think the tempo will change much." — coach Gary Pinkel on any changes in offensive structure this season.

4 COLORADO

What's new: A healthier team, coach Dan Hawkins hopes. Because of season-ending injuries, the Buffaloes stumbled home in 2008 without their leading rusher, two starters in the secondary and with a reassembled offensive line. Because of the wounded, Colorado's final two-deep included 27 freshmen and sophomores. The Buffs need running back Darrell Scott to step up. He was a recruiting coup two years ago who reported out of shape last year and never caught up. And there's a new offensive coordinator. Erik Kiesau has replaced Mark Helfrich, who apparently is off to Oregon.

The QB: The injury bug continued in the spring game when quarterback Tyler Hansen broke his thumb. He was considered a co-starter with Cody Hawkins. Hansen underwent surgery on Saturday.

Quote: "I just think there is a little bit more savvy and a little bit more maturity." — coach Dan Hawkins, assessing this team after spring workouts.

5 KANSAS STATE

What's new: Bill Snyder becomes the Grover Cleveland of football coaches, the first coach to serve two non-consecutive terms in the Big 12. Twenty years ago, he took over what might have been the game's worst program. Today, the program is good, thanks mostly to his 17 years, but the level of competition is higher. Snyder put together a staff that mostly knows the territory. Co-defensive coordinator Vic Koenning (Clemson) is a former Wildcat, and the other defensive coordinator, Chris Cosh (Maryland) was on Snyder's staff when he retired.

The QB: Junior Carson Coffman is looking more and more like the guy. As Josh Freeman's top reserve, he completed 61 percent of his passes and threw a touchdown last year. Coffman's Ray-Pec High School teams won state titles his final two years.

Quote: "At times it can get ugly. But when we step away from it all, we are better than we were five practices ago — and I think exceedingly better than we were when we started." — coach Bill Snyder, in his final news conference before the spring game.

6 IOWA STATE

What's new: Say hello to Paul Rhoads, the league's only newcomer of a coach for 2009. It's tough duty in Ames, but at least predecessor Gene Chizik set the bar low: 2-10 overall, 0-8 in the Big 12 before scampering off to Auburn. That's where Rhoads worked last season as defensive coordinator. But his most appealing experience: Five years as an Iowa State assistant (1995-99). And the Missouri Western grad is a native of Ankeny, about 20 miles from Ames.

The QB: The Cyclones couldn't beat 'em, so they'll join most of the Big 12 in running the spread. Offensive coordinator Tom Herman brings his expertise from Rice, which ranked fifth nationally in passing offense and 10th in total offense. The new system works for Austen Arnaud, who passed for 2,792 yards and 15 touchdowns in his first year as a starter.

Quote: "We'll bring pride back to Cyclone nation." — coach Paul Rhoads.

SOUTH DIVISION

1 TEXAS

What's new: The top defense in the Big 12 last season vows to be better in 2009. The Longhorns were stingy when it came to yielding points and yards, leading the conference in both categories. But it ranked dead last in turnovers gained. That's why one of the big stories from the spring game was an Earl Thomas pick six thrown by Colt McCoy, who set an NCAA record for accuracy last season. Some questions remain on the offensive line and

tight end, but the Longhorns remain the Big 12 favorite.

The QB: As a sophomore, McCoy took a step back from his freshman year. As a junior, he took a giant leap forward, winning the Walter Camp Award. The idea as a senior is not to be the team's leading rusher, although running back may again be a committee deal this season.

Quote: "Turnovers are something we've needed and have talked about. We dropped enough interceptions last year, and it was a true emphasis in the spring." — coach Mack Brown.

2 OKLAHOMA

What's new: The offensive line. Four big-time starters moved on, and it's taken time to adjust. In the spring game, the line surrendered five sacks in the first half. Special teams weren't a strength last season, and the Sooners still have some work there. The defense should be improved with great depth up front and at linebacker.

The QB: Should be OK, given that the Heisman Trophy winner returns. Sam Bradford bids to become the trophy's second repeat winner. It's hard to imagine him improving on the record-setting numbers of last season, when he threw for 50 touchdowns. With a pair of 1,000-yard rushers in DeMarco Murray and Chris Brown lining up behind him, Bradford may not need to be as prolific.

Quote: "I feel really comfortable with those guys out there." — quarterback Sam Bradford on his new offensive mates.

3 OKLAHOMA STATE

What's new: Look who's back in the Big 12: Defensive coordinator Bill Young, who helped shape Kansas' defenses before heading off to Miami last season, replaces Tim Beckman, who became Toledo's head coach. Young's task is tough. Since 2002, the Cowboys haven't ranked higher than 74th nationally in yards allowed. But he got it done at Lawrence and has a pair of nice returning players in linebacker Andre Sexton and cornerback Perrish Cox for the foundation.

The QB: Zac Robinson (below) is the Big 12's most underrated quarterback. He's a total offensive machine, and with Oklahoma State returning most of its skill-position parts, like wide receiver Dez Bryant and running back Kendall Hunter, the offensive numbers should again be robust.

Quote: "I want people to have high expectations of us." — coordinator Bill Young on his defense.

4 TEXAS TECH

What's new: Losses are heavy. Not just the glamour guys like quarterback Graham Harrell and wide receiver Michael Crabtree, but the Red Raiders lost a pair of all-conference offensive lineman and terrific defensive backs in Darcel McBath and Daniel Charbonnet. Keep an eye on Detron Lewis, who could be the next big thing at wide receiver.

The QB: Taylor Potts is his name. Texas Tech's latest gunslinger comes in a better package than previous models. He's 6-5 and 220 pounds and has a stronger arm than record-setting predecessor Harrell. But Harrell had the experience and savvy, and it may take Potts a while to get up to game speed.

Quote: "He's talented as far as size and strong arm, but probably the biggest thing would be: He's a real coachable guy. The hardest thing for a backup to do is sit there and wait and wait for reps to come. It's easy to fall asleep at the wheel. He's done a good job of not doing that." — coach Mike Leach on Potts.

5 BAYLOR

What's new: Not just optimism but expectations. Remember, this is the South Division with layers of seemingly impenetrable obstacles, including Oklahoma and Texas. But with 17 returning starters, the Bears are expecting to

make headway and reach their first bowl game since 1994. One of the newcomers is a Penn State transfer, defensive tackle Phil Taylor.

The QB: Baylor's track team took a hit this spring when Robert Griffin passed up the sport to concentrate on spring football. A year ago, he wrapped up high school after the fall semester, enrolled at Baylor, slipped on track shorts, won the 400 hurdles at the Big 12 meet, then guided the football team to a four-victory season that included a triumph over Texas A&M. All that one year after he qualified for his driver's license. His sophomore season might be special.

Quote: "What he's doing is sacrificing an opportunity for this football team and the other players on this team. That's part of being a great leader." — Baylor coach Art Briles on Griffin locking in on football.

6 TEXAS A&M

What's new: Speed. The Aggies didn't have much of it in coach Mike Sherman's first season. A&M didn't run it well (88.5 rushing yards per game), play good pass defense or have much of a pass rush from the outside — all speed issues. Of its 28 signees, 20 play wide receiver, running back, defensive back and linebacker, and 40 times were a bottom-line measurement. Look for a big season from Von Miller, who plays what A&M calls the "jack" position. It's a hybrid linebacker/defensive end. Miller sets up where he thinks he has the best shot of pressuring the quarterback.

The QB: Gone is fourth-round pick Stephen McGee. But McGee was injured and didn't play much last season. Jerrod Johnson started 10 games as a sophomore and had his moments. Ryan Tannehill moved from wide receiver to quarterback but he missed spring ball after having shoulder surgery.

Quote: "We're going to work like heck to get speed on the field." — coach Mike Sherman.

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