

# ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

## KICK-OFF 2016: Crean Lutheran hopes to keep rolling

By TIM BURT

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*(One of a series of articles previewing Irvine's football teams. Make sure and check out part one of the Irvine World News football preview Thursday).*

Crean Lutheran's football team made some big strides last year, advancing to the semifinal round of the CIF playoffs for the first time.

The Saints, under first year coach Matt Bowman, hope to continue rolling this year with six starters returning on offense and five starters back on defense.

Crean Lutheran was 9-4 overall last year and finished in a tie for first place in the Academy League. The Saints lost to Saddleback Valley Christian, 20-14, in the CIF-Southern Section East Valley Division semifinals.

This year, Crean Lutheran will not have a league affiliation. Sage Hill dropped its varsity football program so the Academy League was disbanded and each team that was in the league will compete as a freelance squad.

It means that every game takes on added importance for Crean Lutheran. Crean Lutheran, which hosts Calvary Chapel Thursday at 7 at Irvine Stadium, will be in Division 11 for the CIF playoffs.

"The seniors we had last year did a really good job of setting that expectation," said Bowman. "The expectation doesn't change just because you were juniors last year and now you're seniors. The class last year did a really good job of setting that tone for our class of seniors this year."

Bowman takes over for Brett Mertens, who accepted a coaching job at Montrose High in Montrose, Colo. Bowman, who has been an assistant since the program started eight years ago, is excited about being the head coach.

"It's a real blessing, I've loved this place ever since I got here and I've loved this program and these players and I'm looking forward to taking them to the next step," Bowman said. "It's a real honor to be asked to serve in this capacity as head coach."

"We've had a long term vision here to be sure, even when we were first starting out in the Academy League with a bunch of freshmen and one senior. Now, it's cool to see how far everything has grown. But we've still got the same long term outlook and we're not done."

Crean Lutheran's offense will be led by senior Gavin Folsom, who completed 121 of 221 passes for 1,856 yards and 21 touchdowns last year. He also rushed for 89 carries for 473 yards and three touchdowns.

Sophomore running back Jack Johnson, who rushed for 293 yards on 43 carries and scored six touchdowns, is also back. He had four receptions for 81 yards and a touchdown.

Defensively, end Robert Briones (48 tackles and three sacks) and senior middle linebacker Zach Macadam (45 tackles, three sacks, two interceptions), lead the way.

Crean Lutheran will need to replace three all CIF players: defensive end Daniel Albright, middle linebacker and running back, the late Garrett Cox and defensive tackle Andrew Ryan.

*A closer look at the Saints:*

## **OFFENSE**

*Backs:* Folsom (6-2, 175) will be the quarterback.

"He's a really great leader," Bowman said. "Last year, was his first time coming in as a starter and he really took that as a challenge and ran with it. I was really proud of how he developed as a player and a leader."

Junior Jack Elliot (5-10, 170) will be the back-up quarterback and has been impressive during the fall workouts, Bowman said.

Johnson (5-9, 165) and junior Anthony Cooper (6-0, 160) will be among the running backs.

"We definitely have a lot of talented runners but he (Johnson) is obviously going to be a guy we're going to rely on to shoulder a lot of the load," Bowman said.

*Receivers:* Junior Patrick McNerney (6-3, 200), junior Isaac Holbrook (5-8, 145), senior Aaron Fink (5-8, 150), Macadam (6-0, 180), Briones (6-2, 210) and junior Ryan O'Keefe (6-2, 160) are among a talented group of receivers for the Saints.

"The more guys we have in those spots, the harder it's going to be for teams to defend us," Bowman said.

*Line:* Senior Tanner Atkinson will move to left tackle. Atkinson (6-2, 250) scored 14 touchdowns as a running back last year but is being moved to offensive line because the Saints believe he can provide help there. Senior Ryan Lidd (6-2, 225) will be the other tackle.

Junior Ben Beavers (6-0, 200), an all-league guard last year, returns as a guard.

Senior Michael McNerney (6-2, 310) also returns at one of the guard positions. Senior Kyle Betz (6-2, 222) will be the center for Crean Lutheran.

“We’ve got four seniors on the offensive line,” Bowman said. “And that’s a really big plus for us. We’re really excited about that part of our team.”

## **DEFENSE**

*Line:* One of the ends, Briones is expected to be an “elite pass rusher” this year, according to Bowman.

Junior George DeBorde (6-4, 220) will also be playing for a starting spot as a defensive end, Bowman said.

Senior Dillon Rapp (6-2, 245) who hasn’t played football the past couple years, will be one of the tackles.

Atkinson will play one of the tackle spots along with Lidd and Michael McNerney.

*Linebackers:* Macadam will be the inside linebacker after playing outside linebacker last year.

The outside linebackers will be Cooper and Johnson, who will split time. Junior Dane Schumacher (6-0, 185) will likely start at the other linebacker spot.

*Backs:* Fink and Holbrook will the corner backs with Patrick McNerney and O’Keefe playing strong safety.

Folsom, the quarterback, can also be used in the secondary.

“As a coach, you usually feel hesitant putting our starting quarterback at safety,” Bowman said. “But he’s actually one of our best defensive players and our back-up quarterback, Jack Elliot has done a very good job this summer and this fall. I feel really good about our defense.”

## **SPECIAL TEAMS**

Junior Andy Richardson (5-11, 170) will handle the kicking duties while Schumacher will be the punter. Patrick McNerney could also do some punting too, Bowman said.

Holbrook, Patrick McNerney Fink Fink, and Johnson will handle kick-off returns while Fink and Holbrook will take care of punt returns, Bowman said.

**Contact the writer:** [tiburt@scng.com](mailto:tiburt@scng.com)