

Alvarez is just beginning to scratch the surface

Up periscope. So far down in the depths had the Alvarez High football program sunk, it needed all the help it could get just to reach the surface.

"We're not starting from scratch, we're starting from below scratch," is how Alvarez football coach Bobby Rawles described his first season as coach last year.

How right he was. The Eagles suffered through the first winless season in the 11-year history of the program in 2006. They were shut out three times and never scored more than one touchdown in any of the seven other games as their T-CAL losing streak stretched to 12 in a row.

One year later, however, the Eagles look like they're getting closer to surfacing.

"We didn't realize the work we had to do," Rawles said. "It was the culture of the entire school that needed changing. Hardly any of the teams had been successful."

But that may be about to change, as proven by the Alvarez boys basketball team.

The Eagle basketball team had a winning record last year and reached the playoffs under first-year coach Mark Haddan after having a 1-52 league mark the previous five years combined.

"I've talked with coach Haddan," Rawles said. "We've modified a few things now that we have gotten to know the kids. But we're demanding a lot from them. We



THE SALINAS CALIFORNIAN/RICARDO DOLZ

Alvarez quarterback Matt Baker sets to throw during a practice in August.

opened our weight room two hours every day and demanded that our kids be there." It didn't hurt to have a little direct help from the basketball team, either.

Matt Baker, 6 feet, 4 inches, a key figure in the basketball team's resurgence, is expected to play quarterback while Eric Rodriguez, named to the all-defen-

Eagles schedule

Sept. 1: North County 16, Alvarez 0
 Sept. 8: Carmel, 2 p.m.
 Sept. 15: Live Oak, 2 p.m.
 Sept. 21: At Santa Cruz, 7:30 p.m.
 Sept. 29: Hollister, 2 p.m.
 Oct. 5: At Gilroy, 7:30 p.m.
 Oct. 13: Salinas, 2 p.m.
 Oct. 19: North Salinas at Salinas Sports Complex, 7:30 p.m.
 Oct. 26: Bye
 Nov. 3: Alisal, 2 p.m.
 Nov. 9: Palma at Salinas Sports Complex, 7:30 p.m.

sive team in basketball, will open at free safety and receiver.

The extra help will come in handy for a team that began last season with about 42 players and finished with 23.

"We've combed the campus for all kinds of kids — basketball, soccer you name it," Rawles said. "Alvarez is not a school where you can monopolize athletes."

With any luck, Alvarez could have as many as 50 players this year. They began summer workouts with 41.

Last year only nine turned up for the first practice.

"Numbers don't guarantee wins, but they guarantee better competition at practice," Rawles said.

Esau Merino and Jacob Jones are likely to open at running back. Merino didn't play last year, while Jones rushed 35 times for 91 yards. He also scored the final touchdown of the season for

Alvarez on a 94-yard kick return against North Salinas.

Several returning linemen return, led by Edgar Sandoval, a team captain and, according to Rawles, the Eagles' strongest player.

At times the defense could be an all-junior class.

"The juniors are athletic and exciting," Rawles said. "The seniors are a take-charge and committed group."

Alvarez doesn't intend to go down quietly this time.

"We're going to have a flex defense that will attack and make things confusing," Rawles said. "We're going to still run the fly, but we'll probably add the 'pistol' offense from Nevada-Reno."

The "pistol" offense might be new to the Salinas area.

It was devised by University of Nevada, Reno, coach Chris Ault and puts the quarterback in shotgun formation, but closer to the center than usual. The running back then lines up two to three yards behind the quarterback.

Alvarez, meanwhile, is going through a struggling stage similar to what the other three Salinas public high schools have had to endure at one time or another.

Those three have turned or are close to turning the corner, and the Eagles may be about to do the same.

"We don't sit and preach wins and losses," Rawles said. "But we don't avoid that topic, either."



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