Going out with a bang

Senior year: Matt Ramando ends his college sports career as part of beefed up D-line

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LAS CRUCES » It’s now or never for Matt Ramando.

The former Mayfield High School star was playing on the offensive line during spring practice last year, but grades kept him off the field for the 2014 season. Between NCAA transfer rules and academics, Ramando is down to his last year of eligibility for the New Mexico State football team.

“I’m trying to have as much fun as possible this year,” Ramando said. “It’s my last year, so I’m trying to learn everything and then apply. It’s a challenge, but I enjoy it.”

Ramando represents a body type that the Aggies did not have in abundance on the defensive line last year, or in the recent past for that matter.

Aggies head coach Doug Martin moved Ramando back to the defensive line, where he played in the 2013 season.

“Last year, because I was ineligible, I could feel myself going through the motions at the end of the year,” said Ramando, who transferred to NMSU from Michigan State in 2012. “Coach Martin and I talked and I feel like my passion is back. I feel better on this side of the ball.”

Ramando is listed at 6-foot-5, 310 pounds. He joins junior Josh Gibbs (6-foot-5, 255 pounds), freshman Kourtland Busby (6-foot-3, 235 pounds) and sophomore Drew James (6-2, 305) as interior linemen with size the Aggies did not have last year.

Whether or not the added size translates to stopping offenses from moving the ball on the ground remains to be seen.

Through the last two scrimmage sessions, the Aggies offense has met little resistance running the ball, which was a focus for the Aggies entering the spring.

“I don’t see them stepping up and stopping the run like we are capable of right now,” Martin said. “We have so much more talent now, and the freshmen have more size and strength than we did last year that we should be better. It’s a toughness issue right now.”

But it’s still just spring practice and Martin has hired two former Aggies players to coach the defensive line.

Second-year coach Kerry Locklin and first-year coach Oliver Soukup were each all-league Aggies players in two different eras of NMSU football.

“It’s fun talking football with (Locklin),” Soukup said. “I pick his brain constantly. He is a wealth of knowledge.”

Locklin, who is coaching interior defensive linemen, was an All-American and All Missouri Valley Conference tight end at NMSU from 1978-81.

Soukup was an All Big West defensive end from 1997-2000. He joined the staff this year after spending the last three years at Eastern New Mexico.

“It’s so good to be home,” Soukup said. “It’s getting back to your stomping grounds a little bit. I have a lot of good memories on this field.”

Soukup said the Aggies are still slanting the defensive line, but there are differences up front this year under first-year defensive coordinator Zane Vance.

“We are playing different coverages behind it with a different idea up front,” Soukup said. “We want to change the line of scrimmage. That is something that we are actively trying to do. Last year they had more movement and lighter bodies, but we have beefed up in the middle. When you have bigger bodies and you can get them moving, it’s a game changer because now he is changing the gap but getting those bigger bodies up the field becomes an issue. We are a one-gap front. ... The thing I have been conscious about with the defensive ends is that the gap is always moving.”

The Aggies have five players who have been rotating at defensive end this spring, including sophomore Kaeli Auelua, freshman Noah Brown, redshirt junior Stephen Meredith, freshman Stody Bradley and Preston Schollander, a converted tight end. Bradley and Auelua were each undersized interior linemen last year.

“We have been working on new techniques and just trying to be physical and aggressive up front,” said Meredith, who made 14 tackles in eight appear-
ances last year.

Meredith and Brown are athletic enough to drop back into the passing lanes when the Aggies blitz, but offenses won’t be in passing situations unless the Aggies improve against the run this year.

“Stopping the run is just a mind set,” Ramando said. “We have to get that inside our minds and then just go out and do it.”

**Martin challenges team**

Players have been in and out of practice the past three weeks with various injuries. The only serious injury thus far was defensive lineman Brandon Agomuo with a broken ankle.

“I don’t think it’s physical enough, I don’t think it’s hard hitting enough or fast enough on either side of the ball,” Martin said. “Spring practice is really easy in today’s college football and to have as many guys out, I think it’s a bad sign.”

One player who returned to practice on Wednesday was junior receiver Josh Bowen, who was cleared after being evaluated for migraine headaches. Bowen did not participate in contact drills on Wednesday, but with Teldrick Morgan (hip) out this spring, the receiving corps has not been at full strength.

**Rogers pulls ahead**

Sophomore quarterback Tyler Rogers appears firmly entrenched as the Aggies top player at the position.

Freshman Nick Jeanty is working with the second team and has shown flashes, but hesitates to get the ball out at times.

“Nick needs to anticipate things better too and get the ball out a little quicker,” Martin said.

**Spring game April 25**

The 2015 New Mexico State spring game will be held April 25 at 1 p.m., at Aggie Memorial Stadium. Admission is free.

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New Mexico State University defensive line coach Kerry Locklin works with his players on Wednesday at Aggie Memorial Stadium.