Football:

Rebuilt roster meets new stadium

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Head coach Lance Leipold and his staff have always tried to implement what they call a "culture of competition."

If the Kansas football team succeeds in 2025, it will be as a direct result of that culture. Gone is nearly everyone who had a firm grip on a starting spot in 2024. Many of those players had held those places for years at a time as they helped rebuild the Jayhawks.

In are dozens of new transfers from all sorts of programs — SEC, Big 12, FCS, Division II — who share a common hunger for new opportunities. The hope for KU is that this influx of new talent will also motivate the returning players from last season, particularly at spots like linebacker where promising young talents have been waiting in the wings.

"Our guys know that there are positions up for grabs," Leipold said in the spring. "Everybody's working. The next big question is when some of those are decided, how do we react if we're not the guy, how do we have the same competitive work ethic to either continue to compete for the job or accept the role but not be satisfied with it?"

Besides the comprehensive turnover in player personnel, the offseason brought big changes around the Anderson Family Football Complex. Following a disappointing 5-7 campaign that concluded memorable careers like those of Devin Neal, Cobee Bryant and Mello Dotson on a somewhat sour note, KU saw more significant staff changes than in any previous year under Leipold.



Mike Gunnoe/Special to the Journal-World

KANSAS FOOTBALL HOLDS ITS FIRST PRACTICE in the new David Booth Kansas Memorial Stadium on Aug. 1 in Lawrence.

Offensive coordinator Jeff Grimes left for the same role at Wisconsin after a single year with the Jayhawks; he was replaced by quarterbacks coach Jim Zebrowski. Defensive coordinator Brian Borland, previously Leipold's sole DC between stints at Buffalo and KU, retired; cornerbacks coach D.K. McDonald, a former NFL assistant who had been at KU for one season, was promoted in his place.

Analyst Brandon Shelby took up the role of defensive backs coach, and former analyst Matt Lubick returned to KU after one season at Nebraska to serve as KU's co-offensive coordinator and tight ends coach.

The most visible change of all is to David Booth Kansas Memorial Stadium, to which the Jayhawks will return on Aug. 23 for the season opener against Fresno State. The Booth has undergone comprehensive renovations to its north and west ends as part of phase one of KU's Gateway project, and last year the Jayhawks had to split their home games between Children's Mercy Park in Kansas City, Kansas, and GEHA Field at Arrowhead Stadium in Kansas City, Missouri, while it was under construction.

They'll be spending plenty of time at the new-look Booth as they host seven home games over the course of a longer-than-usual season, given that it starts with a "week zero" game before most teams even begin the year. Road trips will take KU to new places like Orlando, Florida, and Tucson, Arizona, concrete demonstrations of the Big 12's cross-country expansion, but before the Jayhawks even get there, they will renew the Border Showdown rivalry by traveling to face Missouri in their nonconference finale on Sept. 6.

It's an interesting season for KU and the wide-open Big 12 that will demonstrate just how effective KU's roster construction has been under Leipold. His last few rosters were characterized by continuity; outside of several key players like quarterback Jalon Daniels and running back Daniel Hishaw Jr., this one is decidedly not.

›FOOTBALL, 4C

2025 FOOTBALL SCHEDULE

Aug. 23 — vs Fresno State, 5:30 p.m.
Aug. 29 — vs. Wagner, 6:30 p.m.
Sept. 6 — at Missouri, 2:30 p.m., Columbia, Mo.
Sept. 20 — vs. West Virginia, TBA
Sept. 27 — vs. Cincinnati, TBA
Oct. 4 — at UCF, TBA, Orlando, Fla.
Oct. 11 — at Texas Tech, TBA, Lubbock, Texas
Oct. 25 — vs. Kansas State, TBA
Nov. 1 — vs. Oklahoma State, TBA
Nov. 8 — at Arizona, TBA, Tucson, Ariz.
Nov. 22 — at Iowa State, TBA, Ames, Iowa
Nov. 28 — vs. Utah, 11 a.m.

Soccer

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"One thing that I think is unique about our program and differentiates us a bit is the amount of ownership we give our players on how they spend their summer," Lie said. "We kind of buck convention in not bringing them back early ... and the reason we do that is to provide them the opportunity to grow and get experiences that help them in the future."

That could be in the realms of academics or career development, or for some players it could mean additional opportunities to grow on the field. Dawe and Moore, for example, had the chance to train with and play for KC Current II (including in the 7-on-7 The Soccer Tournament).

"Our basis in making this decision is that we trust the group, we trust their professionalism," Lie said. "We think that they're aligned with the goals of the program, that they'll show up on day one recharged, fit and ready to go."

Dawe, who also went to an under-20 U.S. national team camp, will be one of the most important Jayhawks in 2025. She seized the starting job in goal as a redshirt freshman and ranked among the best in the Big 12 with 0.86 goals against average.

KU lost a couple notable players in the midfield to graduation, but "skeleton key" Langfelder is back after starting every game as a freshman, along with other contributors like Gregorski, Lauren Wood, Emika Kawagishi and Emily Tobin.

The greater uncertainty for the Jayhawks is along the back line, even though two of the captains are there: Caroline Castans, a strong defensive presence and also a threat up the wing, had an outstanding season and was another first-team all-conference pick, and Brooke Otto returns after missing the conclusion of her junior season due to injury.



Mike Gunnoe/Special to the Journal-World

KANSAS GOALKEEPER SOPHIE DAWE punches the ball away against Texas Tech during the Big 12 tournament at CPKC Stadium on Nov. 6, in Kansas City, Mo.

Olivia Page is also back. However, Mackenzie Boeve graduated and Assa Kante transferred to Georgia. KU's coaching staff placed an emphasis on recruiting center backs in the spring portal.

"It was a different experience for us," Lie said, "where in the past, when we first started, it felt like we had to build depth, build quality, at most if (not) all positions, whereas in this transfer portal we were pretty laser-focused on the back line and boosting our depth and our ability to compete at center back specifically."

Fiona Skwierawski, who joins KU after three years at Minnesota (a team that reached the third round of the NCAA Tournament), also has experience starting at outside back. Maya Mathis, who comes from UConn, was hampered by injury in each of her first two collegiate seasons, Lie said.

"We made a pretty short list, and we feel really thankful that we were able to get two players at that position in our top tier where there weren't that many options available," Lie said.

The Jayhawks won't have to depend nearly as heavily on freshmen in 2025 as they did in Lie's first campaign, but Lie has previously expressed optimism about certain skills forward Faith Johnston and midfielder Marit McLaughlin provide that KU previously lacked. They both enrolled early and will be joined by the rest of their class this fall.

KU opens its season at home on Thursday against Missouri State, a team that dominated its conference last season. The Jayhawks have five nonconference home matches this year, including against "maybe the best program in the country" in Florida State on Aug. 28.

"I'm still disappointed in our program's performance at home last year," Lie said, "and it's been a point of emphasis that we have to perform better and strengthen our home-field advantage."

As it was last year, the slate is constructed in such a way that KU could potentially position itself for an at-large bid in the NCAA Tournament — which was ultimately rendered irrelevant in 2024 by the Big 12 title.

"That's something that I spoke about year one, and I don't know if people remember, I said it day one and I said it in preseason, that I don't know how realistic this is or isn't, but when it came down to the end of the season, had we not won that Big 12 championship game I think we would have been right on the bubble," Lie said. "And I think it was good for our team to experience that because then they understand how important every game is during the season."

Big 12 play begins on Sept. 18 at Oklahoma State. When the regular season concludes, the Big 12 tournament is no longer taking place at CPKC Stadium and will instead be held at the campuses of TCU and Baylor.

