



The Anniston Star

HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL 2024

INSIDE: Join us as we shine a spotlight on 16 seniors from The Star's coverage area



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Making our predictions

Find out where your favorite team stands heading into the 2024 season

BY MARK EDWARDS
Star Senior Editor

High school football is rolling into the local picture by the power and energy of a steam engine.

We'll have a wide range of teams in the area, with some that can go deep in the state playoffs to ones that are aiming to get off the deck after a rough 2023. But, at this point of the year, everybody is undefeated and full of optimism.

As usual, we've got a special section to help you readers preview the season.

In these pages, we've got a couple of concepts for you to enjoy. First, each team is represented by a team leader. We hear a lot from the coaches before, during and after the year, but this year, we tried to give a team leader the platform to talk about hopes and goals for this season, individually and for the team.

We hope you appreciate what they have to say.

Second, we're using this lead story to provide basic predictions for how each team should finish. It's very general, divided into four categories:

1, Make some noise: play-off-bound and will make a deep run;

2, Darkhorse: playoff-bound and are darkhorse to advance;

3, Underdogs: might need something unexpected to happen to make the playoffs;

4, Aiming to improve: the sea-

son will be a success if they can win some games.

Read our predictions and see what you think. You can send us your thoughts to medwards@annistonstar.com.

Make some noise

—**Oxford:** The Yellow Jackets have an ace quarterback in Louisville commit Mason Mims. Not only is he a quality passer, he's a solid team leader.

Sam Adams' group is ranked sixth in the Class 6A preseason poll, and his team should advance far in the playoffs. Then again, the Yellow Jackets are accustomed to doing good things in the postseason.

—**Anniston:** Ranked ninth in the Class 4A preseason poll, the Bulldogs will be strong up front on the offensive and defensive lines. We've known Anniston to have great skill players, they have good linemen, too.

A year ago, the Bulldogs finished the regular-season strong with four wins in five games, but they got stuck traveling all the way to Brewton in the opening round of the Class 4A state playoffs. They fell 20-16 to T.R. Miller.

—**Piedmont:** The Bulldogs have long been a state power in Class 3A, but injuries made life tough for head coach Jonathon Miller and his team a year ago. They finished the regular

Please see PREDICTIONS | Page 5



ABOVE: Bill Wilson/The Anniston Star; BELOW: Bob Crisp/The Daily Home

Piedmont quarterback Cole Wilson, above, and Oxford quarterback Mason Mims, below, return to help bolster their team's offenses in 2024.

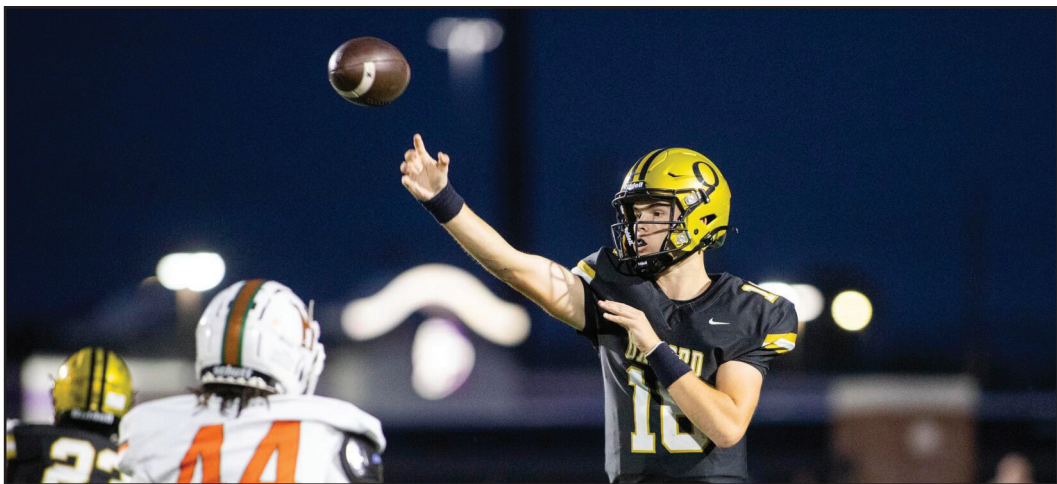


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Cover photos by Tucker Webb, Bill Wilson and Bob Crisp

PREDICTIONS

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season 4-6 but managed to win a first-round playoff game before falling in the second round.

Heading into Miller's second year as head coach, Piedmont is ranked seventh in the Class 3A preseason poll, and we're betting that the Bulldogs come back strong this year with another deep playoff run. Cole Wilson is back at quarterback, and he's got an exciting group of receivers to throw to.

—**Spring Garden:** Ranked ninth in the Class 1A preseason poll, the Panthers might be a tad underrated. They won five straight region titles before finishing second last year to a powerful Wadley squad.

This year's team has 12 seniors, and it's a quality group of 12th-graders. This school is accustomed to football success, and it's hard to imagine Spring Garden not winning a couple of playoff rounds — or more.

—**Jacksonville Christian:** The JCA kids are playing eight-man football these days, and they're really good at it. Last year, they averaged 47.1 points a game and went 8-0. There's enough talent returning to do it again.

Darkhorse

—**Pleasant Valley:** The Raiders started strong last year with four straight wins and made the playoffs for the first time since 2010. But, they struggled in the second half of the year and finished 5-6 with a first-round playoff loss.

Head coach Jonathan Nix and his team should take another step forward this year in Class 2A, Region 7. This region isn't a pushover by any stretch of the imagination, but there's a path to a better record.

—**Wellborn:** Jeff Smith led his Panthers to a region title last year, but a first-round playoff loss threw some water on the fun. They're playing in Class 3A, Region 6, which isn't going to be easy to win. Wellborn will make the playoffs, but the goal is always to win some games — not just make the field.

—**Alexandria:** The Valley Cubs went 1-9 last year, but that was an aberration. After moving from Class 5A to 4A, expect them to return to the playoffs. We'll have to see whether they can move past the first round.

—**Jacksonville:** A year ago, the Golden Eagles advanced to the Class 4A quarterfinals, but they lost star quarterback Jim Ogle from that squad. In addition, they're moving up to 5A.

We're picking Jacksonville to make the playoffs again, because the program that head coach Clint Smith has built has made us think you can't have the playoffs without his team involved.

Underdogs

—**White Plains:** The Wildcats struggled a lot last year in Blake Jennings' first season as head coach. But, give them credit as they showed a lot of fight down the stretch. An overtime loss to Munford was all that separated them from the playoffs.

We're not ready to predict they're going to make the playoffs this year, but if they keep showing that kind of intestinal fortitude, we won't be surprised if they make the postseason.

—**Ohatchee:** The Indians won three straight to start last season but wound up going 5-5 and missing the playoffs for the first time since 2015.

They should be better this year, but they're playing in Class 3A, Region 6, which is tough and has nine teams. They could be a better team and still not make the playoffs.

—**Weaver:** The Bearcats are receiving plenty of deserved praise for improving to 4-6 last year. Now, the next step is making the playoffs.

As with Ohatchee, they're in Class 3A,

Region 6, and while they should be better, that may not be enough to make the playoffs.

Aiming to improve

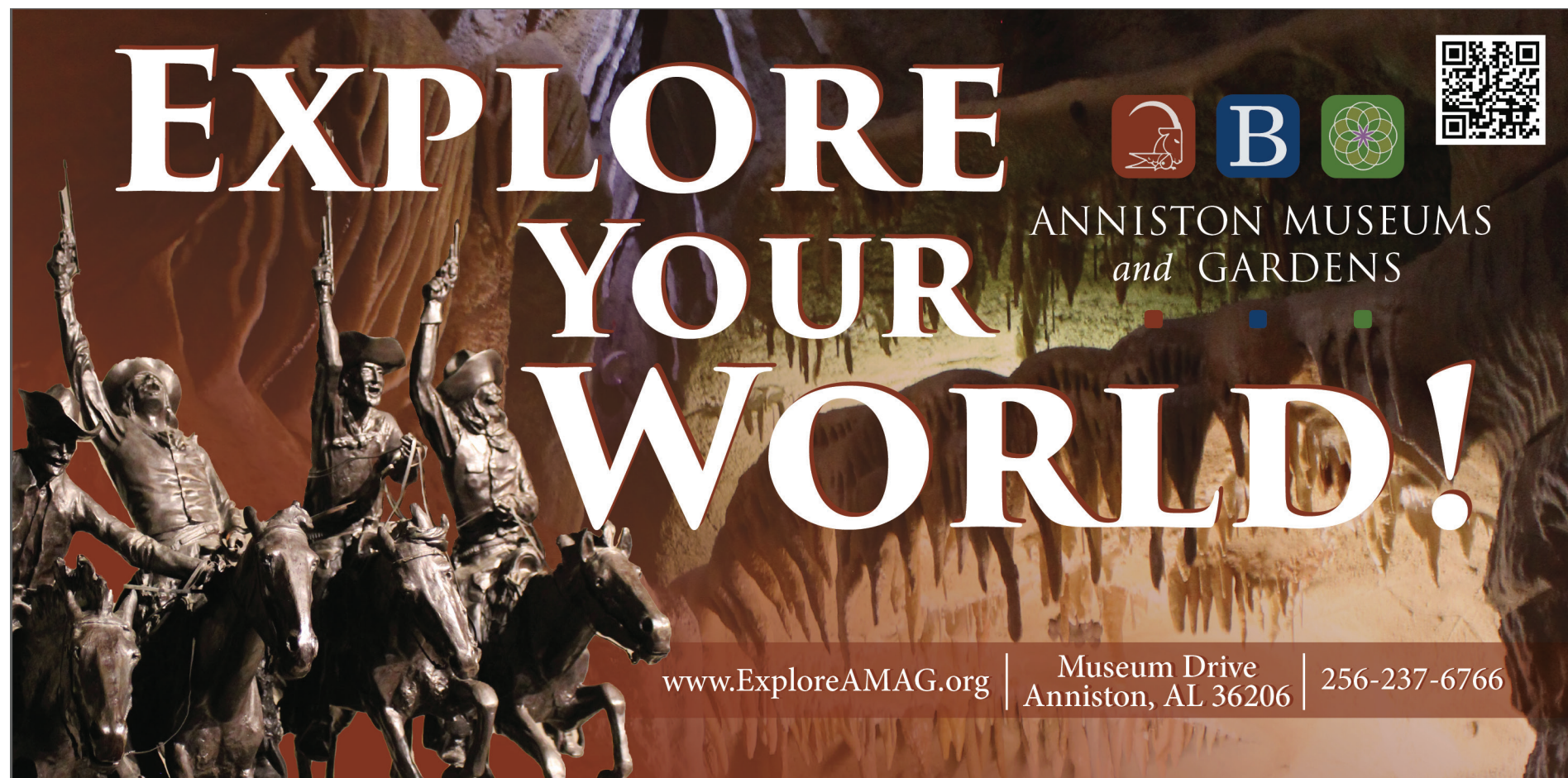
—**Donoho:** The Falcons didn't win a game last year, and they have a new coach in Bill Smith, who has plenty of experience rebuilding programs.

The big plus is that they're playing in Class 1A, Region 6, which has only six teams. A playoff spot is possible. So is a winning season. Even so, we believe Donoho will improve, but we're uncertain how much.

—**Saks:** The Wildcats won only one game last year, and while they'll be better, they're in that tough Class 3A, Region 6 field. It's hard to predict a playoff berth.

—**Cleburne County:** The Tigers made the playoffs last year for the first time since 2015, but they also lost six of their last seven games, including a 44-7 first-round loss to Jackson. They've lost 20 seniors from that team.

—**Ranburne:** Class 2A, Region 4 will be a tough road for Ranburne, which also has a strong non-region schedule. Stephen Bailey does a great job with this program, so we aren't counting out the Bulldogs from the playoffs, but we're not predicting a sure-fire appearance.



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ALABAMA SPORTS WRITER’S ASSOCIATION PRESEASON POLL

CLASS 7A

Team (first-place); 2023 W-L; Pts

- 1. Central-Phenix City (12); 13-0; 207
- 2. Thompson (7); 11-2; 192
- 3. Enterprise; 9-3; 128
- 4. Auburn; 9-3; 126
- 5. Hoover; 5-7; 95
- 6. Dothan; 8-3; 90
- 7. Mary Montgomery; 12-1; 77
- 8. Hewitt-Trussville; 9-4; 66
- 9. Vestavia Hills; 9-3; 39
- 10. Hillcrest-Tuscaloosa*; 12-1; 33
- Others receiving votes: Austin (8-3)
- 17, Carver-Montgomery* (7-4) 11, James Clemens (7-4) 2.
- *Played in 6A last season.

CLASS 6A

Team (first-place); 2023 W-L; Pts

- 1. Saraland (16); 14-1; 219
- 2. Parker (2); 12-2; 168
- 3. Clay-Chalkville (1); 14-0; 155
- 4. Gulf Shores**; 15-0; 118
- 5. Spain Park*; 7-3; 101
- 6. Oxford; 9-3; 80
- 7. Pike Road; 11-3; 74
- 8. Muscle Shoals; 11-1; 50
- 9. Gadsden City; 9-4; 36
- 10. Mountain Brook; 8-4; 31
- Others receiving votes: Hartselle (9-3)
- 16, Helena (9-3) 12, Fort Payne (7-5) 8, Theodore (7-4) 8, Homewood (6-5) 6, Benjamin Russell (10-3) 1.
- *Played in 7A last season.
- **Played in 5A last season.

CLASS 5A

Team (first-place); 2023 W-L; Pts

- 1. Ramsay (10); 12-3; 191
- 2. Moody (7); 10-3; 177
- 3. Guntersville; 11-2; 149
- 4. Catholic-Montgomery** (2); 15-0; 133
- 5. Clay-Central; 10-1; 129
- 6. Leeds; 9-3; 70
- 7. Briarwood*; 6-6; 53
- 8. Center Point*; 7-4; 39
- 9. Fairview; 9-2; 36
- 10. Demopolis; 10-3; 30
- Others receiving votes: Andalusia** (10-2) 29, Eufaula (10-4) 26, Vigor (7-3) 13, Scottsboro (8-3) 4, Headland (10-3) 3, Boaz (6-6) 1.
- *Played in 6A last season.
- **Played in 4A last season.

CLASS 4A

Team (first-place); 2023 W-L; Pts

- 1. Jackson (11); 11-1; 203
- 2. Cherokee County (6); 13-2; 183
- 3. Pleasant Grove* (1); 10-2; 152
- 4. Bibb County; 10-2; 108
- 5. Madison Academy**; 14-1; 95
- 6. Mobile Christian** (1); 15-0; 86



Bob Crisp/The Daily Home

After finishing last season with a 9-3 record, Sam Adams and the Oxford Yellow Jackets are ranked No. 6 in Class 6A.

- 7. Handley; 10-2; 71
- 8. Dora; 8-3; 46
- 9. Anniston; 6-4; 43
- 10. St. James*; 11-3; 34
- Others receiving votes: Deshler (8-4)
- 20, Brooks (8-5) 16, Oak Grove (6-5) 9, West Morgan (12-1) 6, Opp** (4-7) 4, Straughn (10-2) 2, Westminster-Huntsville (11-3) 2, American Christian (8-3) 1, North Jackson (4-7) 1, St. Michael (6-5) 1.
- *Played in 5A last season.
- **Played in 3A last season.

CLASS 3A

Team (first-place); 2023 W-L; Pts

- 1. Fyffe** (19); 14-1; 228
- 2. Trinity; 11-2; 131
- 3. T.R. Miller*; 8-4; 114
- 4. Gordo; 10-2; 109
- 5. Mars Hill Bible; 10-2; 85
- 6. Geraldine; 12-2; 76
- 7. Piedmont; 5-7; 75

CLASS 2A

Team (first-place); 2023 W-L; Pts

- 1. Pisgah (14); 12-2; 212
- 2. Coosa Christian* (4); 8-6; 148
- 3. Highland Home; 10-2; 140
- 4. Tuscaloosa Academy; 10-3; 133
- 5. Cottonwood; 10-2; 114
- 6. Clarke County; 7-6; 95
- 7. Decatur Heritage*; 9-2; 60

- 8. Sylvania; 10-3; 70
- 9. Houston Academy; 10-2; 55
- 10. Thomasville; 10-2; 54
- Others receiving votes: Southside-Selma (7-4) 18, Bayside Academy* (8-3) 14, Randolph County (10-2) 14, B.B. Comer** (13-1) 11, Ohatchee (5-5) 9, Lauderdale County (12-1) 7, Wellborn (7-4) 5, Collinsville** (8-3) 4, Westbrook Christian (5-5) 3, Locust Fork (12-1) 1.
- *Played in 4A last season.
- **Played in 2A last season.

- 8. Vincent; 6-5; 56
- 9. Reeltown (1); 13-1; 45
- 10. Sulligent; 9-3; 44
- Others receiving votes: Pleasant Valley (5-6) 30, Goshen (9-3) 3, Cedar Bluff* (5-6) 2, West End-Walnut Grove (5-6) 1.
- *Played in 1A last season.

CLASS 1A

Team (first-place); 2023 W-L; Pts

- 1. Elba (12); 13-1; 204
- 2. Leroy (7); 14-0; 181
- 3. Wadley; 11-2; 122
- 4. Sweet Water; 9-2; 121
- 5. Hackleburg; 11-2; 115
- 6. Brantley; 8-5; 102
- 7. Georgiana; 9-3; 58
- 8. Maplesville; 8-5; 56
- 9. Spring Garden; 8-3; 42
- 10. Pickens County; 10-4; 40
- Others receiving votes: Lynn (10-2) 30, Addison (8-3) 8, Florala (7-4) 4.

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ALEXANDRIA VALLEY CUBS

Senior spotlight on ... Alexandria's Cleat Forrest

BY JARED GRAVETTE

Star Assistant Sports Editor



Jared Gravette/The Anniston Star

Cleat Forrest plays defensive back and also serves as Alexandria's kicker.

Whether it's on the football field, the basketball court or the golf course, Alexandria's Cleat Forrest always gives it everything he's got.

Forrest, entering his sixth year as a member of Alexandria's football team, has been a household name in Calhoun County for quite some time thanks to his big leg.

He's put in countless hours perfecting his craft, and it shows on Friday nights inside Lou Scales Stadium. He's made a 48-yard field goal in a game, but his range extends far beyond that, as he's nailed a 63-yarder in practice.

College coaches have taken notice with Forrest receiving full scholarship offers from UAB and Murray State over the summer.

Alexandria, coached by Todd Ginn, struggled last season, finishing 1-9 and missing the playoffs for the first time since 2016. Forrest said last season left the Valley Cubs with "a bad taste in our mouth." They'll look to rebound in 2024.

Forrest took time recently to talk about his team and what it means to be an Alexandria Valley Cub.

Question: What does it mean to you to be able to go out on that field on Friday nights with that Alexandria jersey on?

Answer: That means everything to me. I've grown up there my whole life. My family is from there. I've got people like Coach Ginn — all the coaches there — that taught us the right way. The Alexandria way is what I love.

Q: The stands are always packed at Alexandria home games. What's it like having that kind of support?

A: It really meant a lot last year because we didn't have the best season, but our fans still showed up every single week. It doesn't matter how we're doing, they're going to support us, and that makes you feel good.

Q: What are the goals for this season?

A: To improve. You know we didn't have the season we wanted last year. That wasn't Alexandria football. We know we can do a lot better, and that's the main thing for us.

Q: You said that wasn't Alexandria football. What did you guys learn last year during that rough stretch?

A: We learned that we just weren't prepared last year. I mean, we were young, so one good thing that I take away is that we got a lot of experience. I hope we can use that this year.

Q: What do you feel like the strength of this year's team is?

A: How close we are. We're all like brothers, and I mean that too, it's not just cliché. We're all really close, and we're going to fight for each other.

Q: What's it like playing for Coach Ginn?

A: It's good. It's a good feeling playing for somebody that's been places like state championships, not only in football, in basketball. He knows how to win, and he knows how to make us win.

Q: Alexandria has a rich history in football. Is there a former player that you look up to?

A: It's hard to pick one. There's a lot. I'd say both Coach Ginns (Todd and Will) have been the biggest influence to me. They've coached me since I was little. I've known them my whole life, and they've had a great influence on me.

Q: Is there a game on the schedule that you guys are looking forward to the most?

A: I wouldn't say there's one single game that we're looking forward to. They're all important to us. I'd say that, right now, the one we're looking to is the first one. I think that's Jacksonville. That's who we're looking forward to, because that's the first game.

Q: You guys are dropping from 5A to 4A. Are you looking forward to playing some new teams this year?

A: Not just looking forward to playing some new teams, looking forward to playing some local teams. I feel like that's better for the community and I feel like that's better just overall, because we played some pretty far-away teams last year, and it's just hard to travel. That's going to bring more fans in, I feel like, playing these local teams. And some old rivalries are going to be brought back, too.

ANNISTON BULLDOGS

Senior spotlight on ... Anniston's Andrew Nelson

BY JARED GRAVETTE

Star Assistant Sports Editor

The Anniston Bulldogs are typically known for their skill players, but that didn't stop second-year head coach Rico Jackson from bringing three trench players to Calhoun County Media Day.

Senior defensive end Khamar Holder and senior center Andrew Nelson represented the Bulldogs at this year's event, but Jackson also brought along Sharontae Bailey, who he called "his sensational sophomore."

Nelson suffered an injury during the spring but will be ready to go for Week 1, according to Jackson. He'll be looking for redemption this season after Anniston fell to T.R. Miller 20-16 in the first round of the Class 4A state playoffs a year ago.

Nelson, who is an undersized offensive lineman, makes up for it with his work ethic. Jackson said he "hasn't missed a day" during the summer months and described him as "the ultimate worker."

Nelson took time recently to talk about what it means to wear that Anniston uniform, the Bulldogs' strengths and their goals headed into the 2024 season.

Question: What did it mean to you to have Coach Jackson select you to represent Anniston at Calhoun County Media Day?

Answer: I was so grateful, because I've always been an underdog in my own eyes, because I've been a smaller O-lineman all my life. Each year, I've been, like, a younger guy and smaller, so I was just grateful to him.

Q: What does it mean to you to wear that Anniston uniform?

A: It's surreal, like, just seeing all the players — I've always went to Anniston games, because that's where my dad has went, he's always went to Anniston, so I've always went to Anniston — just seeing them playing, and now I'm playing like them, it's just surreal.

Q: What's the goal for you guys this season?

A: Win region and state.

Q: What do you feel like the strength of this team is?

A: I think the strength is always our skill guys, but I think we have a great O-line and D-line coming in. Our skill guys have always been just fast and great."

Q: What's it like playing for Coach Jackson?

A: It feels great. I feel like he cares about us, not just in football, but on a personal level. Like when I hurt my knee, I was worried that he might make me come back in or do stuff just cause he's a football coach, but he didn't. He understood, and he's been checking on me the whole time. I feel like he cares about me personally.

Q: What's the difference between year one and year two with Coach Jackson?

A: I feel like all the guys are more unified and together. We've been grinding a lot more this year, and we already know what the expectations are with him.

Q: Y'all had a close loss in the first round of the playoffs last year. How much have y'all used that as motivation this offseason?

A: Me, personally, I've used it a lot, because I feel like I had a bad game that game. I kept messing up the snaps, because it was raining. I've just been keeping that in the front of my mind, just working, grinding, because I don't want that to ever happen again.

Q: Anniston has new turf at Lott-Mosby Memorial Stadium. Are you excited about that?

A: Yes sir. I love the look. I'm happy, like, used to, not necessarily with Coach Jackson but before that, we used to have to paint the field, the players did. I did not like painting the field. You'd get paint all over you.



Jared Gravette/The Anniston Star

Andrew Nelson plays center for the Anniston Bulldogs.

DONOHO FALCONS

Senior spotlight on ... Donoho's Kai Cleckler



Mark Edwards/The Anniston Star

Kai Cleckler plays quarterback for the Donoho Falcons.

BY MARK EDWARDS

Star Senior Editor

Local high school sports fans know the name of Donoho senior Kai Cleckler well.

He's a standout baseball player for the Falcons and has made all-Calhoun County as a freshman, sophomore and junior. Don't be surprised if he makes it four-for-four next spring.

As for football, it's been a little tougher road. He played his first season of football last fall and was too good of an athlete to leave on the sideline, despite his inexperience. Donoho went 0-9, but Cleckler showed improvement as the year went along.

This year, he's working under a new coach. Bill Smith has moved from Talladega High to Donoho, and his hiring offers hope to Cleckler and Donoho's five other seniors. Smith is entering his 16th season as a head coach with a 77-85 record.

Cleckler is back at quarterback, and he's looking forward to showing the improvement he's made since last season.

He recently took time to talk about his time as a Donoho football player and the effect Smith will have on the 2024 team.

Question: What does it mean to you to be a senior leader for your team?

Answer: It really hit me on the first day of spring practice when Coach (Smith) said, "Seniors, you got anything to say?" I looked around for our old seniors, and I was like, "Oh, that's us now." So, it really put it in the big picture for me right there. So, I was like, "I've got to step up now."

Last year, I had to step up, too, since it was my first year playing football. So I had to lead and be led at the same time, but it was a big learning curve for me and we've got the hang of it now.

Q: What do you feel like you

learned from that first year last season that can help you this year?

A: Decision-making is a big one. Not forcing throws, not trying to do too much. Just if the 3-yard out is there, throw it.

Q: What brought you out for football last year?

A: I was going to play my 10th-grade year because I transferred in winter of the ninth-grade year. Then I got hurt, had to get surgery and missed the whole season. So, I told the coach, "Mark my words right now: I'll be back better, bigger, better, stronger and faster for you."

Q: You've been a name that we've known about for a long time for baseball. Is there anything in baseball that you picked up that you can apply to football?

A: Baseball is a sport of failure. Football can be the same thing. If you're having a bad day and drop a pass, so what? Go out there and get the next one.

Q: Seems like you've got an excellent relationship with your coach even though he's only been here for four months. Why is that?

A: Just the energy he brings. He brings good energy to the locker room. Fun guy, good assistant coaches. Just having fun.

Q: You've got a group of six seniors, and it looks like you're pretty tight. How would you describe the friendship and bond that you guys have?

A: We hang out almost every weekend also, all six of us. It's a pretty good time.

Q: What would you like to do once school is over? Do you have plans?

A: Just try to work hard and see what (scholarship offers) I can get for all sports.

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JACKSONVILLE GOLDEN EAGLES

Senior spotlight on ... Jacksonville's Braden Ball

BY AUSTIN TACKETT

Star Staff Writer

Jacksonville's Braden Ball is headed into his senior year, and his fourth year suiting up for the Golden Eagles. After reaching the Class 4A state quarterfinals last season, they're moving up to 5A, Region 6.

Ball earned All-Calhoun County Class 4A-6A first team honors last year, and joining him on the offense are fellow first-team performers Ben Prigden (offensive line), Zae English (running back) and Jackson Bonner (fullback/tight end).

Ball is one of five returners on Jacksonville's offensive line, a big reason the Golden Eagles believe they can repeat the success they've had in the past. The majority of the returning starters are seniors, including Ball, Drake Lee, Jackson Wade and Gehrig Strain.

This year's offensive line will be tasked to block for a new quarterback, something that hasn't happened for the last four years, as Jim Ogle has graduated and is suiting up for Murray State, where his father, Jimmy Ogle, is co-offensive coordinator. Ball believes no matter who is taking the snaps for the Eagles, the guys up front will do what they have to do to allow their guy to make plays.

Ball has experience on both offense and defense, playing tackle on both sides of the ball.

Last year as a starter for the Golden Eagles, Ball and the rest of his team made a run in the 4A playoffs. Unfortunately, they fell to eventual 4A champion, Montgomery Catholic, in the quarterfinals.

Ball took a few minutes during the Calhoun County High School Football Media Day to discuss his team and the goals for the season.

Question: What are the expectations for the upcoming season?

Answer: I have really high expectations. All five of us up



Tucker Webb/The Daily Home

Braden Ball is one of five returning starters on Jacksonville's offensive line.

front are coming back. We have our running back coming back. We have some really good young guys stepping up and filling some spots. I've got high expectations.

Q: What does it mean for the team to have returning starters like yourself and the O-line, along with players like Zae English running the ball?

A: It's amazing. The bond is

there. We've been playing together since little league. It's just amazing to have all of those guys coming back.

Q: What can you say about the younger guys you mentioned who will be stepping up and filling spots?

A: The young guys that are stepping up are really good, really hard workers. I only have

great things to say about them. They participate in the weight room, participate in practice. I've got really high hopes for them. They're going to be solid.

Q: It'll be the first time in four years that a new quarterback will be taking snaps in Jacksonville. What can you say about Jackson Bonner and Matthew Salmon's progression over the summer?

Where do the expectations for them sit?

A: They both have improved tremendous amounts over the summer. I'm proud of Matt and Bonner for doing their thing back there. As an O-lineman up front we're going to try our hardest to protect them, and I know they'll make their plays.

Q: What are your thoughts on the move up to Class 5A?

A: It's different, playing different opponents. It's exciting, though. I think we're prepared for it, and I think we'll compete.

Q: What has head coach Clint Smith emphasized in the team over the off-season and summer?

A: One thing he's emphasized to us is, just because we lose players doesn't mean everything is over. We're still Jacksonville and we're going to keep that name going.

Q: How has the summer and off-season been to the team. What have the coaches and you guys been doing?

A: Coach (Brian) Owens, our strength and conditioning coach and defensive coordinator, has us out there working hard. He's getting us right.

Q: What do you have to say about the group of guys you have going into this season?

A: The group of guys we got are real close. The younger guys are super close, older guys are super close. I think we're an all-around great team.

Q: How does the team plan to bounce back after the quarterfinal exit in last year's Class 4A playoffs?

A: I just think what we can do best is keep the momentum going from last season and not let it affect us too much mentally, because we get to play another year of football.

JACKSONVILLE CHRISTIAN THUNDER

*Senior spotlight on ...***Jacksonville Christian's Jesse Gannaway****BY RIP DONOVAN**

Star Sports Correspondent

The eight-man football team commonly referred to as Jacksonville Christian was an offensive juggernaut in 2023.

Coach Tommy Miller's Thunder raced to an 8-0 regular season record, including a 48-32 win over Tuscaloosa Christian of Cottondale, before losing to Tuscaloosa Christian 56-48 in the first round of their conference's four-team playoff.

For nine games, the Thunder averaged 47.1 points per game. Senior running back Travis Barnhill rushed for 845 yards and 13 touchdowns on 108 carries and caught 31 passes for 608 yards and 11 touchdowns. Sophomore quarterback Noah Lee was 114 of 167 passing for 2,032 yards and 31 touchdowns with two interceptions. Lee also ran the ball 35 times for 162 yards and six touchdowns. Junior wide receiver Jesse Gannaway had 54 receptions for 1,065 yards and 16 touchdowns. Barnhill was also a leader on defense for the Thunder with 99 tackles, six for lost yards, and two interceptions from his linebacker position.

Gannaway transferred to Jacksonville Christian as a junior. He started as a receiver on offense and a cornerback on defense for the 2023 team. Gannaway has grown an inch and gained 15 pounds of muscle during the off-season. Before a recent practice, he discussed the 2023 and 2024 seasons.

Question: What were the best things about the 2023 season for your team?

Answer: I think going undefeated in the regular season. That was a really good accomplishment. I think all of us bonding with each other because last year was my first year and it didn't feel like I was a stranger to any of them. They treated me like one of



Rip Donovan/The Anniston Star

Jesse Gannaway plays wide receiver on offense and defensive back on defense for the Jacksonville Christian Thunder.

their own, like I had been growing up with them. We practiced like it was our last game and we played our games like they were our last games. I think we did everything to the fullest and to the best of our abilities.

Q: How many players graduated last year and where did they play?

A: We had two seniors last

year, Deon Dupree — he was our center and our head-up tackle — and Travis Barnhill, a running back and a linebacker.

Q: How hard will it be to replace them?

A: Preston Strawder, he's going to be a real good center. I think he'll take after Deon because Deon was a good mentor to him last year. Caleb Stallings, who was

our fullback last year, I think he'll step up a lot. It's going to be hard replacing them but I think we can do it, especially with the kids we have coming up, too. I think we're going to have a really good season.

Q: How much better do you think everybody who is coming back is this year?

A: Instead of sitting inside and playing video games all day, we were outside almost every day this summer either working, lifting weights or up here with the coaches working, getting better with our feet, quickness and just getting used to the heat so it doesn't come as a surprise to us for our first game.

Q: What do you see as the strengths of the team in the 2024 season?

A: I think our passing is going to be really good. A bunch of teams we play, I know they think that we only have a passing game. I guarantee it since Travis is gone. We have everything in my opinion.

We have a running game. I think running is going to be a really big factor for us this year, just going along with the passing. It's going to be really hard to stop us offensively. Then on the defensive side, even though we lost Deon and Travis, we're filling those spots. I think our secondary is going to be really tough to pass against. Even coming up to block us on runs, I think our DBs are going to be really hard to pass against and even to come up and try to stop us from making a tackle.

Q: Do you and your teammates have any pre-game rituals, something you always do before you leave the locker room?

A: I think one of our main things is we get in and pray. You don't know when your last game is going to be. We always

give thanks to the Man Above. Without Him, we wouldn't be here and be able to do anything we want to do. I think just giving praise, thanks and honor to Him really helps in our eyes. Eating as a team, whether that be here for home games or somewhere else for away games, I think that really bonds us together, especially for the games.

Q: Are there any superstitions?

A: Moses Averette, he's always wearing his dirty socks. Me, I'm not superstitious, but I like to have everything organized. Whatever I wore that past Friday, if we won, I want to wear that again. Even if we're away, I want to wear it.

Q: Is there a lot of distraction or potential distraction on social media?

A: There's always going to be outside talk no matter what you do. This upcoming season, I think there's a lot of outside talk with them thinking we can't fill the holes with Deon and Travis gone. Outside talk is always going to be there but I don't think it really gets to us that much.

Q: Can you tell when it's time to stop joking around and get serious by looking at Coach Miller?

A: He doesn't ever have to say anything to us unless we're just really goofing off. Most of the time, he'll give me a look or something like that. Knowing him for only a year, I feel like it's night and day with me and him. He gives me a look, and I'll just look at all the other players and I'll be like, "Better just chill out."

They'll know if I give them a look, especially Caleb and Noah, once I give them a look, they're done with goofing off. He doesn't even have to say anything most of the time. Either he'll give us a look or we're already set, our minds are right and we're ready.

2024 SCHEDULES

ALEXANDRIA

Aug. 30, vs. Jacksonville
Sept. 6, at White Plains*
Sept. 13, vs. Anniston*
Sept. 20, at Oneonta*
Sept. 27, at Sardis
Oct. 4, vs. Hokes Bluff*
Oct. 11, vs. Ashville*
Oct. 18, at Cherokee County*
Oct. 25, vs. Etowah*
Oct. 31, vs. Munford
*-Class 4A, Region 6

ANNISTON

Aug. 30, vs. Beauregard
Sept. 6, vs. Ashville*
Sept. 13, at Alexandria*
Sept. 20, vs. Hokes Bluff*
Sept. 27, at Pleasant Grove
Oct. 4, at Cherokee County*
Oct. 11, vs. Etowah*
Oct. 18, at Oneonta*
Oct. 25, at White Plains*
Nov. 1, vs. Jacksonville
*-Class 4A, Region 6

CLEBURNE COUNTY

Aug. 30, vs. Sardis
Sept. 6, at Handley*

Sept. 13, vs. Talladega*
Sept. 20, at B.T. Washington*
Sept. 27, at Wellborn
Oct. 4, vs. Tallassee*
Oct. 11, at St. James*
Oct. 18, vs. Munford*
Oct. 25, at Bullock County*
Nov. 1, vs. White Plains
*-Class 4A, Region 3

DONOHO

Aug. 23, at Gaylesville
Aug. 30, vs. Ragland
Sept. 6, vs. Pleasant Valley
Sept. 13, at Wadley*
Sept. 20, at Winterboro*
Sept. 27, vs. Ohatchee
Oct. 4, at Fayetteville*
Oct. 18, vs. Victory Christian*
Oct. 25, at Woodland*
Nov. 1, vs. Cedar Bluff
*-Class 1A, Region 6

JACKSONVILLE

Aug. 23, at Etowah
Aug. 30, at Alexandria
Sept. 6, at Moody*
Sept. 13, vs. Center Point*
Sept. 20, at Leeds*

Sept. 27, vs. Corner
Oct. 4, at Springville*
Oct. 11, vs. Lincoln*
Oct. 25, vs. St. Clair County*
Nov. 1, at Anniston
*-Class 5A, Region 6

JACKSONVILLE CHRISTIAN
(8-MAN FOOTBALL)

Aug. 16, vs. Meadowview Christian
Aug. 23, at Tuscaloosa Christian
Aug. 30, vs. Tabernacle
Sept. 6, vs. Trinity Christian Homeschool
Sept. 13, at Victory Christian (Miss.)
Sept. 20, vs. Russell Christian (Miss.)
Sept. 27, at Ezekiel Academy
Oct. 4, vs. Clay County Christain
Oct. 11, at Cornerstone Rainsville
Oct. 25, SECC Playoffs

OHATCHEE

Aug. 23, vs. New Hope
Aug. 30, vs. Locust Fork*
Sept. 6, at Piedmont*
Sept. 13, at J.B. Pennington*
Sept. 20, vs. Weaver*
Sept. 27, at Donoho
Oct. 4, at Westbrook Christian*
Oct. 11, vs. Wellborn*

Oct. 18, at Glencoe*
Oct. 25, vs. Saks*
*-Class 3A, Region 6

OXFORD

Aug. 23, at Central Carrollton (Ga.)
Aug. 30, vs. Moody
Sept. 6, at Shades Valley*
Sept. 13, vs. Pinson Valley*
Sept. 20, at Mountain Brook*
Sept. 27, at Helena
Oct. 4, vs. Pell City*
Oct. 18, vs. Clay-Chalkville*
Oct. 24, at Huffman*
Nov. 1, at Florence
*- Class 6A, Region 6

PIEDMONT

Aug. 23, at Cherokee County
Aug. 30, at Saks*
Sept. 6, vs. Ohatchee*
Sept. 20, at Westbrook Christian*
Sept. 27, vs. B.B. Comer
Oct. 4, vs. Locust Fork*
Oct. 11, vs. J.B. Pennington*
Oct. 18, at Weaver*
Oct. 25, vs. Wellborn*
Nov. 1, at Glencoe*
*-Class 3A, Region 6



Tucker Webb/The Daily Home

Anniston coach Rico Jackson.

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A black and white photograph of a football player in a helmet and uniform, with the number 49 visible on his jersey. He is holding a football in his right hand.

2024 SCHEDULES

PLEASANT VALLEY

Aug. 23, at West End Walnut Grove
Aug. 30, vs. Spring Garden
Sept. 6, at Donoho
Sept. 13, vs. Pisgah*
Sept. 20, at Sand Rock*
Sept. 27, at Woodland
Oct. 4, vs. Cedar Bluff*
Oct. 11, vs. Gaston*
Oct. 18, at North Sand Mountain*
Oct. 25, vs. Section*
*Class 2A, Region 7

RANBURN

Aug. 23, VS. Mt. Zion (Ga.)
Aug. 30, at Woodland
Sept. 6, at LaFayette*
Sept. 13, vs. Reeltown*
Sept. 20, vs. Central Coosa*
Sept. 27, vs. Randolph County
Oct. 4, at Horseshoe Bend*
Oct. 18, vs. Loachapoka*
Oct. 25, at Lanett*
Nov. 1, at Spring Garden
*Class 2A, Region 4

SAKS

Aug. 23, at Horseshoe Bend
Aug. 30, vs. Piedmont*
Sept. 6, at Westbrook Christian*
Sept. 13, at Weaver*
Sept. 20, vs. Wellborn*
Sept. 27, vs. Central Coosa
Oct. 4, at J.B. Pennington*
Oct. 11, vs. Glencoe*
Oct. 25, at Ohatchee*
Nov. 1, vs. Locust Fork*
*Class 3A, Region 6

SPRING GARDEN

Aug. 23, vs. Sand Rock
Aug. 30, at Pleasant Valley
Sept. 6, at Ragland*
Sept. 13, Woodville*
Sept. 20, at Valley Head*

Sept. 27, at Cedar Bluff
Oct. 4, vs. Appalachian*
Oct. 11, at Gaylesville*
Oct. 18, vs. Ider*
Nov. 1, vs. Ranburne
*Class 1A, Region 8

WEAVER

Aug. 23, at Oak Grove
Sept. 6, at Wellborn*
Sept. 13, vs. Saks*
Sept. 20, at Ohatchee*
Sept. 27, vs. Winterboro
Oct. 4, vs. Glencoe*
Oct. 11, at Locust Fork*
Oct. 18, vs. Piedmont*
Oct. 25, at Westbrook Christian*
Nov. 1, vs. J.B. Pennington*
*Class 3A, Region 6

WELLBORN

Aug. 22, at Munford
Aug. 30, at J.B. Pennington*
Sept. 6, vs. Weaver*
Sept. 13, vs. Glencoe*
Sept. 20, at Saks*
Sept. 27, vs. Cleburne County
Oct. 11, at Ohatchee*
Oct. 18, vs. Locust Fork*
Oct. 25, at Piedmont*
Nov. 1, vs. Westbrook Christian*
*Class 3A, Region 6

WHITE PLAINS

Aug. 22, at Talladega
Sept. 6, vs. Alexandria*
Sept. 13, at Hokes Bluff*
Sept. 20, vs. Cherokee County*
Sept. 27, vs. Horseshoe Bend
Oct. 4, at Ashville*
Oct. 11, vs. Oneonta*
Oct. 18, at Etowah*
Oct. 25, vs. Anniston*
Nov. 1, at Cleburne County
*Class 4A, Region 6



Tucker Webb/The Daily Home

Wellborn head coach Jeff Smith.

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Tucker Webb/The Daily Home

White Plains head coach Blake Jennings with Ty Roberts and Patrick Sams.

OHATCHEE INDIANS

Senior spotlight on ... Ohatchee's Jake Roberson

BY AUSTIN TACKETT

Star Staff Writer

Ohatchee's Jake Roberson is heading into his second year as a varsity starting quarterback. His squad is coming off a season with a hot start and a slow finish. The Indians are looking to bounce back with efficiency this season.

After earning All-Calhoun County Class 1A-3A second team last year, Roberson has high expectations for this season.

Playing under fifth-year Ohatchee head coach Chris Findley, Roberson is joined by fellow All-Calhoun County teammates, senior running back Nate Jones, senior receiver Colby Hester and sophomore athlete Gus Hunter.

After starting the season 4-1 while averaging 32.8 points a game, Ohatchee finished by going 1-4 while averaging only 15.6 points a game.

Roberson said the team is looking to regain the fight and energy they had on both sides of the ball for the first five games of last season.

He recently took time to field a few questions about the team and himself.

Question: What are your expectations for the upcoming season?

Answer: The expectations for this season is to be able to start and finish strong. Last year we started off really good, but then towards the end of the season we started to kind of lose that energy and fight. This year is to keep it up through the whole season and through the playoffs.

Q: How about personally? Are there any milestones you're looking to reach as a quarterback?

A: Like every quarterback in high school, I want to have over 1,000 passing yards. But, I also want to be more of a leader out on the field and make sure all of my guys are ready out on the field.



Submitted photo

Jake Roberson is entering his second season as Ohatchee's starting quarterback.

Q: How does it feel to take on that leadership role, knowing your teammates are counting on you to help get the ball in the end zone?

A: It feels good to know that my team and coaches believe in me and know that I can go out there on Friday nights and get them the ball, and make plays. Everyone also asks about the pressure, having your team and coaches counting on you, but honestly when you're out on the field you don't even think about stuff like that, you're just out there having fun.

Q: Ohatchee has been a run-heavy school for some time, but what have you and the team been

working on in the pass game to make Ohatchee a dual-threat offense?

A: Over the summer we've been really working on running routes and knowing how to run them in certain situations. We've also been working on our hands, being able to catch easy passes, and being able to catch the more difficult passes in traffic or that have bad placement.

Q: How has the connection between you and your receivers been improving over the off-season?

A: The connection between me and my receivers is amazing. I can trust that they are going to catch the ball when I throw it to

them. I also can trust they are going to be there on their routes. It's almost like we have thrown and caught with each other our whole lives.

Q: If you had to pick a receiver who would be the quarterback's best friend, who is that for you?

A: I wouldn't say there is just one receiver on our team that was my guy, because all of our receivers are really good. But, I would like to point out Colby Hester, because he's a guy that I know I can throw it up to and he'll come down with the ball. He could be double covered, or it could be a horrible pass, and he will always find a way to come down with it.

Q: What has Coach Findley instilled on this team for the upcoming season?

A: He's been preaching to us to keep the energy up through the season and to give 100 percent at all times. I think that because he has been saying this, that it will show great results in the season.

Q: Are there any games you have circled on your schedule that you want to win more than others?

A: I want to win every game of course, but some games I'm really excited about are the teams we haven't gotten to play before like New Hope, Locust Fork, J.B. Pennington and Donoho. I think it will be fun to be able to play some guys that we haven't played before.

Q: The team started hot last season going 4-1. What will it take for the team to get started like that again, and keep it going all season?

A: Keeping the energy up and having a good mindset going into the season. We have been working all off-season to better ourselves and build upon what we had last year. We just have to know that we have it in us to win and do really good this season, and now we are fixing to be able to show all of that hard work we put in.

Q: This will be your last year suiting up for Ohatchee High School. Does it feel different, bring any more pressure, or leave a chip on your shoulder for the upcoming season?

A: It feels a little different knowing this is my last season for Ohatchee, but I think it will make me better as a player knowing that this is it. I don't think it brings any more pressure, because I know that my team can perform. I wouldn't say it puts a chip on my shoulder, but it is going to push me to go 100 percent at all times this season and never give up.

OXFORD YELLOW JACKETS

Senior spotlight on ... Oxford's Mason Mims

BY AUSTIN TACKETT

Star Staff Writer

This is Oxford quarterback Mason Mims's senior year, and he has high goals.

After the Yellow Jackets lost to Parker in the second round of the Class 6A playoffs, he is aiming for a state championship.

Mims, a Louisville commit, is heading into his third year as a starter for Oxford. The website 247sports has Mims listed as a three-star recruit. That puts him No. 34 among quarterbacks in the 2025 recruiting class and 24th among players from Alabama.

As a sophomore, Mims led Oxford to a 5-6 record and a playoff berth, while completing 72 percent of his passes for 2,118 yards and 22 touchdowns.

As a junior, Mims and the Yellow Jackets had a breakout season. The team finished 9-3 as Mims completed 71 percent of his passes with 2,670 yards and 29 touchdowns. He threw only three interceptions. He made first-team All-Calhoun County for Class 4A-6A.

Five days after that second-round playoff loss, Louisville offered Mims a scholarship, and Nov. 24, 2023, he accepted.

At the Calhoun County High School Football Media Day, Mims took a few minutes to talk about the Yellow Jackets and his individual and team goals.

Question: What are your expectations for the upcoming season?

Answer: The expectation is a state title, simple as that. We haven't been back in about five years. That's the standard here, and I think the whole team knows that.

Q: How does the team plan to bounce back after a one-possession loss in the second round of the playoffs?

A: Parker was a great team. We just use that as fuel in the offseason. I expect to see them again soon, in the playoffs. We'll just have to use it as fuel and get back there again.

Q: What can you say about the group you have returning as starters this year?

A: It's definitely great to have. It makes my job a lot easier when I have guys I know that if I throw it up they're going to go get it, and I have guys that can give me three sec-



Austin Tackett/The Anniston Star

Oxford's Mason Mims is entering his third year as the Yellow Jackets' starting quarterback.

onds. It's just great to have that supporting cast around me.

Q: What is it like to have a top wide receiver like Nick Richardson? (Richardson posted 907 all-purpose yards and 13 touchdowns with Mims last season)

A: It's great to have. I've known him since I was in second grade, and he's one of my best friends, and I trust him. I can throw the ball for a 5-yard out route, and I know he can take it for 80. It makes my job so much easier.

Q: How has the off-season been for the team? How are things looking?

A: I think all around, we're all bought in on the same thing. I think we look good everywhere, for the most part. Obviously, there's still work to do because we still have a couple weeks until we play. All around, I think we're a really good team and we all have the same goals, so that makes it a lot

easier on us.

Q: What has head coach Sam Adams instilled on the team for the upcoming season?

A: He's going to give us a chance to compete. The whole coaching staff gives us a chance to win every game we play. They give us the best plays. It's hard to explain, but they do a great job.

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PIEDMONT BULLDOGS

Senior spotlight on ... Piedmont's Caleb Tidwell

BY AUSTIN TACKETT

Star Staff Writer

Piedmont senior linebacker Caleb Tidwell is coming off of a season that earned him All-Calhoun County Class 1A-3A second team honors, and he is hoping to improve on that.

He's also hoping to help the Bulldogs improve on last year's 5-7 record.

Even though it was an off year for the Piedmont football program, there was individual success all over the field with 10 players making all-county first team. Five more made the second team.

Piedmont, which will be in Class 3A, Region 6 this year, is used to dominating, having lost no more than three games in a single season since 2014. But, after a 4-6 regular season and a second-round exit in the playoffs, the team looks to climb back to the top of the mountain. From 2007-22, the Bulldogs posted at least 10 wins every year but one and captured five state titles, and they are aiming for that level of success with second-year head coach Jonathan Miller.

Tidwell said the Bulldogs' defense had some ups and downs throughout last season, but he and his team aim for more consistency and to find themselves as one of the best 3A defenses in the state again.

Question: What are your expectations for the upcoming season as a team?

Answer: The expectation is always to win no matter what. Next season, next game mentality, no matter where we play and who.

Q: Are there any games circled on your schedule?

A: Our previous head coach, Coach (Steve) Smith, went to Westbrook and that's always a good game.

Q: What does it mean for the team to have a player like receiver Rollie Pinto back after he missed a lot of last season with a knee injury?

A: He's really an asset to our team.

He's made a lot of really big plays for us the last couple of years. I know he'll make some more plays this upcoming season now that he's back.

Q: This is year two under Coach Miller. How has he been for the team? How do you think year two will go?

A: I think it's going to go great. He's getting more comfortable. This being his second year, he's learning all the ins and outs of our team and really getting to know us all.

Q: Who's the hardest player for you to guard in practice as a linebacker?

A: It's really that No. 2 receiver, especially when we're playing man. Big guys like me, and my other guys, it's hard to get around. It's really those faster players that are really, really hard to get to.

Q: How has the connection between quarterback Cole Wilson and receiver Ish Bethel grown during the offseason?

A: They've really grown up together all their life, so they have a really good chemistry. They're always with each other wanting to go practice on the field a little bit, so I really think they're going to do good this year.

Q: What can you tell me about Piedmont's defense as a leader on that side of the ball?

A: Our defense had a couple hiccups during last season, giving up a couple of big plays. But, I know this year we're making some changes to adjust to that. We're not going to let that happen this year.

Q: The last state championship for the school came in 2021, as well as an appearance in the finals in 2022. What will it take for Piedmont to get back to that level of success and dominance?

A: It was really a mindset. Last year we had a new coach, and it's not always going to go the same as it usually is. But this year now that we're getting used to him, I feel like it's always 'we have to win' and we have to have that winning mentality.



Austin Tackett/The Anniston Star

Caleb Tidwell plays linebacker for the Piedmont Bulldogs.



Bill Wilson/The Anniston Star

Jonathan Miller is entering his second season as Piedmont's head coach.

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PLEASANT VALLEY RAIDERS

*Senior spotlight on ...***Pleasant Valley's Noah Johnson****BY RIP DONOVAN**

Star Sports Correspondent

Pleasant Valley begins Jonathan Nix's 10th season as head football coach with some momentum.

The Raiders finished third in their region last year and ended a 13-season drought of playoff appearances. Pleasant Valley was 5-5 in the regular season and lost to Pisgah on the road in the opening round of the Class 2A playoffs.

The Raiders have never won a playoff game and haven't hosted a playoff contest since 1984 when current Jacksonville Christian principal and coach Tommy Miller led them to an area championship long before the AHSAA divided football into regions rather than areas.

Perhaps current senior Noah Johnson, a tight end and defensive end, was Pleasant Valley's good luck charm last year. Johnson played a year of peewee football but participated in only baseball and basketball in high school until the 2023 football season.

At the Quarterback Club of Calhoun County's high school media day July 26, Johnson took the time to share his thoughts about the importance of the 2023 season and his expectations for the 2024 season.

Question: What were the best things that happened for the football team last year?

Answer: We had six or seven seniors and they all were great leaders for us, and they showed us how to be leaders. I think that helped a lot. I think the buy-in in the weight room helped a lot, too. All of us were striving to get better every single day and that's helping us on the field, too.

Q: What stands out in your mind about the success Pleasant Valley had in the 2023 season?

A: We had a couple of guys get injured and I feel like the guys



Tucker Webb/The Daily Home

Noah Johnson plays tight end and defensive end for the Pleasant Valley Raiders.

who stepped up, who replaced the guys that got injured, they really helped us know that, "Hey, even though we don't have our starters we have people who can come and help us win." Grey Knight got hurt and Wesley Wheeler came in and he did a great job at learning from Grey and filling in his role. Braxton Salster got a concussion and then Jaden (Sparks) come in and he stepped up and Bryce Freeman. They ran quarterback and they did a great job at it, too.

Q: How much progress has

the team made over the last six months?

A: A ton. On average, every player has gone up 100 pounds on their top five lifts. We're all getting stronger, faster and that's going to help us on the field. I think the buy-in in the weight room is helping so much. People have gained 30 pounds in a couple of months and it's just going to help so much in football.

Q: What will be the strengths of the 2024 team?

A: I think the pursuit of perfection. I think all of us want it so bad

and we all want to win a playoff game, make it to the playoffs, and host in the playoffs. All of us want it so bad and we're willing to do anything to get there.

Q: How much will getting into the playoffs last year help you get to that next step of being at home in the playoffs and winning in the playoffs?

A: I think it shows us that we can do it. I feel like for the longest time at Pleasant Valley people were just content with losing. That's what you did at Pleasant Valley. Now that we're winning

and making the playoffs, I feel like now we know we can do it. We can go all the way and we can win those games.

Q: Does your team have any pre-game rituals?

A: Before every game, we turn the lights off and we all sit in our lockers and we pray. We pray for protection and pray that God will use us. Before every game, we do that. Calm before the storm I describe it as. I love doing it. I think it helps us a lot.

Q: Are there any superstitions?

A: For me, I put on my pants and my shoulder pads in the same order because I feel like if I do it any differently it will mess me up. I have the same prayer before the game. I feel like that helps a lot.

Q: What do you and your teammates do to celebrate a win after the game?

A: Last year, after every win we would play a song (always Play that Funky Music) and Coach (Darren) Hamby would get in the middle of the room and start break dancing. We'd all go crazy. We'd start singing along and dancing with him. Moments like that help you realize how great high school is and how great high school football is.

Q: How do you recognize that Coach Nix has stopped joking around and is serious about something?

A: You can see it in his face. You know right then when you see that face to cut it out, stop doing whatever you're doing, pay attention and focus. I feel like there's time for games and there's time to be serious and he lets you know what time that is.

You can definitely see it building up and I can tell before most people can. If people are still goofing off, I'm like, "Guys, he's getting mad. It's time to stop."



Bob Crisp/The Daily Home

Jonathan Nix is entering his 10th season as Pleasant Valley's head coach.



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SAKS WILDCATS

Senior spotlight on ... Saks' Jacori Avery

BY RIP DONOVAN

Star Sports Correspondent

Saks football coach Alphonso Freeney is beginning his second season as head coach of the Wildcats. Freeney's first season could hardly have been what he was hoping to achieve. A combination of defections, injuries and inexperience led to a 1-9 season.

The Wildcats were 0-8, and hadn't finished closer than 14 points in any loss, when they faced eventual Class 3A, Region 4 champion Wellborn for their ninth game of the season. Saks trailed just 30-27 at halftime. Then, a 24-7 advantage in the third quarter carried Wellborn to a 62-34 victory. Buoyed by their play against Wellborn in the first half, Freeney's team avoided a winless record with a 29-17 win over Talladega in its final game.

Jacori Avery, now a senior, was one of the Wildcats injured in 2023. Avery started at cornerback as a sophomore but was injured in practice ahead of the second game of the season last year and never recovered.

Freeney expects Avery "to be a big piece for us offensively and defensively" in 2024 as a defensive back and a wide receiver. At the media day on July 26, hosted by the Quarterback Club of Calhoun County, Avery discussed the 2023 season and his hopes for the 2024 season.

Question: What were the best things about the 2023 season?

Answer: Handling adversity, really. When Coach Freeney got here, we really didn't know what to expect. There were a lot of new standards he set that we weren't used to, a new playbook of course. The team, it felt like we weren't all together. It was more of an individual-type thing.

The whole team this year, we went through last year's season together, all the ups and downs, adversity. I feel like Coach Free-



Tucker Webb/The Daily Home

Jacori Avery is expected to play wide receiver and defensive back for the Saks Wildcats.

ney, this being his second year, and we've really got all starters back on both sides of the ball so we know what to expect and he knows what to expect from us this year.

Q: Which 2023 seniors will be the most difficult to replace and why?

A: Probably our linebacker Mykese Gaffney. He loved the game. He came down and made tackles. He had a lot of passion. He was our vocal guy last year. We

have a lot of skill players that play both sides of the ball. We've got a lot of depth at the skill positions. Losing a linebacker kind of hurt more than losing a receiver.

Q: How much progress has this team made since last season?

A: A lot, a lot of progress. Last year we had a lot of bad habits. That was the biggest problem. We always have athletes at Saks. Last year, it was a lot of bad habits we had as a team.

Throughout the summer,

we've stayed on top of all our bad habits and kept moving forward, thinking of our fundamentals, being coachable and working out. We've definitely gotten stronger and faster, too. We've been working every day.

Q: What do you think are going to be the strengths of the 2024 team?

A: Really, us having a lot of athletes that can make plays. We have a lot of people that can make plays. We don't have to just try to

force the ball to one guy. We can open up.

We can spread the field out and then we've got good running backs that came back (Nick Mixson, Juelz McClellan and Jahmaad Crook). Two are in the 11th grade and one is in the 10th but they all started last year. This year, everybody's got experience. Last year, we had no experience.

Q: Who will be your leaders on offense, not necessarily statistical leaders but who is going to see people do what they're supposed to do?

A: I'm very coachable, first off. I always know my assignments and know what to do. Our quarterback, Gage Brown, he's also another coachable person. That's why he's at quarterback. Our linemen, Mason Stevens and Quay Judkins, they always know what they're supposed to do.

Q: How can you tell when the cutting up needs to stop and the getting down to business needs to start with Coach Freeney?

A: Before practice starts, we're supposed to stand on a line. One time at the beginning of the summer we weren't all lined up right. He was just staring at us. We already knew we had to get it together right there before we had to get punished. With Coach Freeney, it's obvious. It's always obvious. ... He always lets us know what we did wrong so we can fix it.

Q: Do you feel the team is receptive to his discipline?

A: Of course. We see the progress. Last year we were in trouble every day. It was just bad. ... This year, we all listen. We get along. We listen to the coaches and everything is going smoothly. We've been winning 7-on-7s. Last year, we didn't win a single 7-on-7. We've been winning 7-on-7 games, competing at OTAs. We've been doing great so it's definitely working.

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WEAVER BEARCATS

Senior spotlight on ... Weaver's Kaden Gooden

BY MARK EDWARDS

Star Senior Editor



Mark Edwards/The Anniston Star

Weaver's Kaden Gooden is entering his sixth season on the varsity roster.

Weaver's Kaden Gooden hasn't gotten to enjoy a whole lot of winning the previous five seasons.

The Bearcats won seven games in that stretch, but life is looking up for them. As Gooden enters his senior season as one of the team's top leaders, Weaver is coming off a 4-6 season in its first year under head coach Ken Cofer. That's more wins than the previous four years combined.

The Bearcats played three other games in which they lost by seven points or less. There was a fourth loss by 13 points.

Cofer's offense posted 341 points, and only five other teams in school history scored more.

Gooden leads the way for the squad, as he enters his sixth year on the varsity. He plays quarterback and defensive back and likely has played about as many snaps in his high school career as most anybody in the area.

He's also an accomplished track star, finishing second in Class 3A this past spring in the 300-meter hurdles. He also qualified in the 100 and 200 meters.

He took time recently to talk about his senior year and the team's hopes and goals.

Question: What do you see as your role as a senior and one of the leaders of your team?

Answer: My role is to make sure everybody's doing what they're supposed to. Make sure nobody slacking off in the classroom or on the field. Make sure we strive to push people to be the greatest, not just on the field but off the field, as a person and in life.

Q: You've either been starting or playing a lot for Weaver since seventh grade. That's an awful lot of experience. How are you different from back then to now?

A: Being on varsity in seventh grade taught me a lot. It taught me how the athletes around our area are way different than they used to be. It's more than just football just running out there and hitting. It's just everything out there is different.

Q: Last year, you guys were more competitive than the past. Even though 4-6 isn't the ultimate goal, it was better than what Weaver has had before. What did that mean for you guys to win four games, and have four others that were really, really close.

A: That means a lot. We improved on a lot of stuff, but some of the mental stuff, we got to improve on, too. The four games that were close, we were supposed to win, but we didn't finish out. We didn't finish the rest of the game. That's why the outcome was like it was. Once we figure out how to finish and just finish it, then we'll be good.

Q: How do you think this team is better than you were a year ago?

A: The discipline. People are striving to make sure they want to win, they want to make it to the playoffs.

Q: This is Coach Cofer's second year. How has he made a difference for you?

A: Coach Cofer, he wants us to be a team. He actually wants the team to bond. He actually strives to make sure we have a good time with the team. He's like a father.

Q: What do your teammates mean to you, because it looks like you guys are pretty close?

A: We all hang out on the weekends, and then during the summer, we all hang out. We go play basketball or go to our coach's house at the lake house and go tubing and stuff.

Q: It's your senior year. Does it feel special that it's your senior year?

A: It's special, but it hasn't hit me yet. It will, but it hasn't yet because it feels like yesterday it was eighth and ninth grade. I was just starting varsity and stuff.

Q: What are your plans to do beyond high school with it? Have you thought about that?

A: Yes, sir. My plan is always going to college for football. And then what I want to do academically is sports medicine. I want to do something around that.

WELLBORN PANTHERS

Senior spotlight on ...

Wellborn's Trace 'Dozer' Hayes

BY MARK EDWARDS

Star Senior Editor

A year ago, Wellborn won its first region championship since 1995, and the Panthers have high hopes about winning another.

Jeff Smith is entering his 16th year as the Wellborn head football coach, and he's posted a 101-65 record with 12 play-off bids.

Heading into the 2024 season, Smith has an anchor for his offensive line in a senior center named Trace "Dozer" Hayes, and he's a bulldozer of a blocker. "Dozer" took time recently to talk about his team, his coach and what kind of leader he wants to be for Wellborn.

Question: First thing first: How do you get that nickname "Dozer"?

Answer: When I was a little kid, my parents say I never would go around things. I always went through them. And then back when I was 4 or 5, my uncle came up with the name "Dozer." Then it just stuck.

Q: Does anybody know your real name is Trace?

A: At school, I think there's one teacher that calls me Trace. I think she's retiring this year, but that's the only teacher that has called me Trace ever. Every other teacher in the school calls me "Dozer."

Q: What kind of senior leader would you like to be for your team?

A: I want to be a role model for everybody on the team. I want everybody to not be like me, but be close to me. I want to be the first one to be on the field. I want to be the first one to show everybody what's going on.

I just want to be out there, lead for everybody and just make it fun. Football, I love football. Some days at practice Coach Smith gets in an irritated mood. I don't want to say "irritated," but it gets there and we all got to look at the best of it. And that's what I'm there for.

I want to come in and make sure everybody has a good day for him and that we don't have a bad practice.

Q: Your family is from Wellborn, and it must be pretty exciting to start for Wel-

born and be a big part of the team. Can you describe what that means to you?

A: It means a lot to me. My cousin, Walker Hayes, he played. My other cousin, Mason Yates, played. My brother (Dalton Hayes), too. He played. I got pulled up (to varsity) my ninth-grade year because it was his senior year. I got to play with him a little bit. And it just means a lot to me, just just to live up to them.

Q: Did you always want to be a lineman?

A: Well, in pee-wee, my dream was to be a fullback. I finally made weight that year. You can't weigh over 100 pounds, and I weighed 99.9 pounds. I made it.

Then when I got in high school I tried to try fullback, and they were like, "No." I played guard. Then my ninth-grade year, I was the center. I used to center in Little League, and then Coach (Smith) was like, "We're looking for a center." I was like, "I can try out for it. I don't know how good I am for it, but I can do it." Then it just stuck. Now I'm the center.

Q: It seems like a position you take real pride in.

A: Oh, yes, sir. Center to me is the most important player because if you don't have the right snap, the play is over. I have to take a lot of pride in it, because if I don't ... it's going to mean something bad. It's the most important spot on the field.

Q: Coach Smith has talked often about how much he appreciates the relationships he has with you guys on the team. Can you talk about what it means to have the relationship with him that you guys have?

A: At practice, some days, yes, we got to get after it. But others, we can joke around. The best part of our relationship with him is he knows when we're in a silly mood and he knows we've got to straighten up. And we get that, and the whole team gets it.

Q: Have you thought about what you'd like to do after school is finished?

A: I'm going to be a plumber. I'm going to work for Major League Plumbing. My dad and my mom own Major League Plumbing.



Mark Edwards/The Anniston Star

Dozer Hayes plays center for the Wellborn Panthers.

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WHITE PLAINS WILDCATS

Senior spotlight on ... White Plains' Patrick Sams

BY JARED GRAVETTE

Star Assistant Sports Editor

White Plains' football team has made the playoffs once in school history, and that was 30 years ago in 1994.

But senior Patrick Sams, who plays running back and linebacker for the Wildcats, thinks that could change this year.

His team came close a year ago. White Plains would've gotten in if it would've beaten Munford, but the Wildcats fell in overtime 36-28.

Sams took time recently to talk about Year 2 under head coach Blake Jennings, his teammates and their quest to end the Wildcats' lengthy playoff drought.

Question: What did it mean to you that Coach Jennings picked you to represent White Plains at Calhoun County Media Day?

Answer: It meant a lot. You know, he picked me, and I think that made me feel like a leader. He recognizes how big of a leader I am. There's a lot of people he could've brought, you know, Ethan Turner, Cash Pritchett, Aiden Kilgore, Dalton Luker. There's a bunch of guys, man, Crew Martin, our quarterback, he could have brought him, too. It just means a lot that he brought me.

Q: What does it mean to you to wear that White Plains jersey?

A: It means a lot. Like Coach Jennings always says, you're not playing for the name on the back, you're playing for the name on the front. It means a lot that now I'm on this level. Since I was little, I always looked up to the high school level, always talked about that's going to be us one day, and now it's happened.

Q: What is your team's goal for this season?

A: Our goal, I think this year, really, is to make the playoffs. Really, our main goal, I think, is to host a playoff game. That is the main goal. I think with the new region, I think we're pretty evenly matched, and I think we have an opportunity to take it.

Q: It's been a long time since White Plains made the playoffs. What would it mean for you guys to accomplish that?

A: Senior year, that'd be a great way to

leave and make my mark. It would mean a lot. It hasn't happened in a long time. Last year, we came up short, but last year, that was year one with Coach Jennings here. That was year one, and now it's year two, and I think we've come a long way in the weight room. We've really put a lot of work in there, so I think now we're evenly matched in the weight room, so I think we have a chance to do it this year.

Q: What's been the biggest difference from year one to year two with Coach Jennings?

A: The weight room. Big difference. Whenever he came in here, that's the first thing he established. He said we're going to hit the weight room hard, and we really have, and our maxes have gone through the roof.

Q: What do you feel like the strength of this team is?

A: I think our defense is going to be really solid this year. ... Offensively, you know, we've got Crew. Last year, he was a freshman quarterback. Now, he's been to a bunch of camps, he's got a lot more experience, so a lot better throwing the ball really well. On the offensive side, you got P.J. Holloway at running back, you know as a sophomore, he's really good. I think we've got one of our best fronts this year on the offensive line. You know, we've got Ty Roberts. We've got Dalton Luker at tight end who is really going to put punishment on people.

Q: Is there a game that you guys have circled on the schedule?

A: I'm ready for Cherokee County. You know, that's a big game, that's a big opportunity. That would be a big upset, and that would put us on the map. For me, personally, I would say Cleburne County. I'm ready for that game. The last game of my career, so that's probably a game that I'd have circled.

Q: Is there a former player from White Plains that you look up to?

A: Yeah, Dylan Barksdale, last year. Me and him have always been on the same team ever since we were little. He's always been one year older than me. It's gonna be weird this year playing a season without Dylan. He was a great leader, great player and always picked people up.



Jared Gravette/The Anniston Star

Patrick Sams plays running back and linebacker for White Plains.



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CLEBURNE COUNTY TIGERS

Senior spotlight on ... Cleburne County's Austen Mayfield

BY JARED GRAVETTE

Star Assistant Sports Editor

Cleburne County's Austen Mayfield already knows what it's like to be a leader.

He served in that capacity last year on his way to a Class 1A-4A state wrestling championship in the 144-pound division.

Mayfield, who plays middle linebacker on defense and wide receiver on offense, will be thrust into that position on the football field this season as one of only two seniors on the Cleburne County roster.

Cleburne County made the playoffs last season for the first time since 2015, but the Tigers must replace 20 seniors from that team. This year's squad, which will be led by first-year head coach Vaughn Lee, will be young, which makes Mayfield's job all that much more important.

Mayfield took time recently to talk about team and individual goals, what it meant to make the playoffs last season, and what the Tigers need to do to get back there.

Question: What are the team's goals for this season?

Answer: Just get better every day. That's what we're going for is just push everybody to the limit.

Q: Do you have any individual goals?

A: I'm more concerned with the team, really. Football is my favorite sport, and I've always loved it. I've played it since I was a little kid. I just want to get better, get faster.

Q: What do you feel like the strengths of your team are?

A: We have a really good defense, but I feel like the whole team could be something special.

Q: You guys made the playoffs for the first time in a long time last season. What did that mean to you guys?

A: It was amazing, being able to go on the road. I wish we could have performed a little bit better in the playoffs, but it was amazing just getting there, really. I really want to go far.

Q: What do you guys need to do to get back there?

A: We've got to have mental toughness and extra effort. If you had a camera, you could see my shirt. That's what that (MTXE) means: mental toughness, extra effort. We've just got to have that every day, come out here and dominate.

Q: How does it feel to be considered one of the leaders of this team?

A: It feels amazing. It's a very good accomplishment for me. I've always wanted to be a leader. You know, I wrestle, so last year I was kind of in that leader position on the wrestling team. It feels better coming out here and being able to lead the football team. It's just a better environment.

Q: Do you feel any added responsibility knowing that you are a senior this year?

A: In certain ways, yes. I've got to perform, but I can't really overthink it and let the pressure come down on me. I've just got to play.

Q: Cleburne County has had some good history in football. Is there a player that you grew up watching that inspired you?

A: My cousin. Everybody knows about Tyrone (Prothro). Everybody knows about Rocky Hayes. That's just a couple. He wasn't a standout like that, but Jake Mayfield, he was just a hard-nosed fullback. He'd just run through your face.

Q: What's your favorite thing about playing for Coach Lee?

A: You know, he came back. He was here earlier, and my cousin coached with him, Jake, he coached with him in baseball. He had a really good run in baseball. He coached a couple of good football teams, and I like him as a person. Throughout the summer, he's grown on me. The whole coaching staff is good to me.

Q: What game are you looking forward to the most this season?

A: White Plains, definitely, because they beat us last year, and we can't let that happen again.



Jared Gravette/The Anniston Star

Austen Mayfield is one of only two seniors on Cleburne County's roster.

RANBURNE BULLDOGS

Senior spotlight on ... Ranburne's Brody Morgan

BY RIP DONOVAN

Star Sports Correspondent

Ranburne is a school and a community with a proud athletic history. When the Bulldogs moved into their new football locker room prior to the start of last season, current football head coach Stephen Bailey, entering his ninth season as head coach, put up three signs — one showing state championships, one showing region or area championships and one showing appearances in the state playoffs.

The Bulldogs reached the playoffs in 2021 but missed in 2022 and again last year. Senior running back and defensive end Brody Morgan and his teammates want to be a part of returning Ranburne to the playoffs on a regular basis and making deep runs.

"As a group, we want to make it to the playoffs and some more," Morgan said. "Last year, we fell kind of short. I just want to go farther because these past few years we really haven't been having the best kind of records."

Morgan spoke prior to practice on Aug. 5 about the realities of the 2023 season and the expectations for 2024.

Question: What were the best parts of the 2023 season for your team?

Answer: Our football team brings Jesus into a lot of things. I just find that really good about us all coming together and praising the guy upstairs.

Q: In your mind, which of the 13 players who graduated from the 2023 team will be the most difficult to replace?

A: It's by far going to be Kaide Garrett and probably Trey Ertzberger. Kaide Garrett was a quarterback and Trey Ertzberger (now at West Georgia) was offensive and defensive line.

Q: Who will fill those roles?

A: For quarterback, it's going to be Creed Young. He's really embraced the role. Creed's always been an outstanding player. As far as lineman, it will probably be Zaden Benefield.

Q: Since the end of last year, how much progress do you think this team has made and in what ways?

A: We've made a bunch of progress —

from the weight room to the field to having a common football knowledge. I feel like we've improved so much from where we started. Defense-wise, we're better at reading the ball and where it's moving, who we need to guide and who we need to key on. Especially during film, everybody on the team has really worked at it this season.

Q: For the 2024 team, what do you feel will be the strong points?

A: I feel like our biggest strong point is really going to be our defense. Our defense's whole entire goal that we came up with is, how can we stop that big play?

Q: Do you have any kind of pre-game rituals as a team you always go through in the locker room before a game?

A: Everybody is hyping each other up and we always have a prayer.

Q: How do you see the offense for this season?

A: We're going to be a pretty run-heavy football team this year. We're just a team that's going to run it down your throat.

Q: Who will be the leaders on the offense?

A: It's going to be Creed Young, Zaden Benefield and probably Curtis Daniel. He's also a running back. He's a bigger-built running back than I am. I'm a small, shifty runner.

Q: Do you have any superstitions?

A: If I'm doing something and it's winning then I'm going to keep on doing it. My cleats, if I'm having outstanding games then I probably won't ever wash them.

Q: Do you or your teammates pay a lot of attention to social media?

A: You can't let anything like that get to you. You just put it out (of your mind) and then just play the game. Don't worry about what other people think, just go out there and have fun.

Q: With Coach Bailey can you and your teammates tell when it's time to stop kidding and cutting up and start to get down to business really quick?

A: It's really in his posture. He's just stiff. He's a guy that can cut up with you but you can also tell when it's time to get serious.



Submitted photo

Brody Morgan plays running back and defensive end for Ranburne.

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SPRING GARDEN PANTHERS

Senior spotlight on ... Spring Garden's Noah Barber

BY MARK EDWARDS

Star Senior Editor

Spring Garden senior Noah Barber is entering his first year as the Panthers' starting quarterback, and he's ready.

He's relying on a solid team that includes 11 other seniors on the roster. It's an experienced group that should help Spring Garden reach the level of excellence it has displayed for the last decade or so.

Before that, Spring Garden had some lean years. After winning seven games in 1987, the team didn't have a winning season until 2008. Now, the Panthers are riding a streak of 10 straight playoff appearances.

But, they want more. After winning five straight region championships, the Panthers finished second last year and posted an 8-3 season. Barber and his teammates want another championship in Class 1A, Region 8.

Barber took time recently to talk about his team and individual goals and expectations for the season.

Question: What are the goals you would like to see this team meet?

Answer: Definitely, just win. Win the region. We won five region titles in a row, and then last year we ended up losing. Try to get another region championship and execute what the coaches want to do as much as we can. Those are the main goals.

Q: What about individually? What are your goals?

A: I think as a quarterback, what tells you a lot is if you can't win as a quarterback, and you're probably not a very good quarterback. So that's probably my goal, lead my team to wins. Just be a leader. I want my team to know that they can depend on me no matter what, even off the field.

Q: Is this your first year at quarterback for the varsity?

A: This is my second, really. So last year, me and Chapel (Pope) split the snaps.

Q: What do you think you learned last year that's going to help you going forward?

A: If this would have been my first year coming into quarterback, it would've not been very pretty. So it helped me a lot. I had a lot of struggles again. I could barely take a snap on the center last year. I could barely hand the ball off. I could throw a little bit.

But just getting that experience really helped me, just knowing how the game is like. I played junior high quarterback, but those varsity minutes really helped me a lot.

Q: What made you decide back then that you wanted to be a quarterback?

A: I really didn't have a choice. I played pee-wee football when I was real little and I never played quarterback. I played running back and linebacker. I played a little bit of quarterback, maybe, but then when I got here, Coach Ward was the junior high coach. Kevin Ward — and he just told me to try quarterback. So I did seventh-grade year, and then from then on, I played quarterback.

Q: The quarterback is always considered a leader. How do you handle that role of being considered a leader?

A: Well, I try not to think I'm better than anybody else just because I'm a quarterback. I mean, I'm on the same level of all these guys. We're all seniors, so we should be able to lead the same way. Let's handle it like if I was playing running back or receiver, I would handle it the same way, because I'm no different than anybody else.

Q: Does it feel different being a senior?

A: A little bit. You got one last chance to get it done. That's about it. Really, it's going by pretty fast. But, yeah, you got one more chance.

Q: What do you think your head coach, Barrett Ragsdale brings to the table?

A: A lot of experience. He's been coaching here for I know, I think he said 15 years. So he's got a lot of experience. He knows what's going on. He knows what we want as a team. He knows our standard. He's been at the very bottom, you know, and we've worked our way up to where we are now. We want to continue keeping that same standard that we have and win.

Q: What does the winning tradition here mean?

A: Well, it means a lot. When we go on the field, we think we're going to win, no matter what, no matter who we're going against. No matter if we're playing the best team in 1A or we're playing the worst team in 1A.

We expect the same no matter what. This is not trying to sound cocky, but you should think you're the best when you go on the field. If you don't have the attitude, you're probably not bringing your best to the table.



Mark Edwards/The Anniston Star

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