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HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL 2023

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The Anniston Star's Sweet 16

BY THOMAS ASHWORTH
Star Sports Writer

With football season coming at us fast, plenty of new and old faces have a chance to shine.

At The Anniston Star, we're identifying 16 who we think can reach center stage this year. For your perusal, here's the list, in alphabetical order:

Fisher Adams, Piedmont, DL

When it takes two players to hold down a defensive lineman, it's safe to say that they're a force to be reckoned with. Adams, who looks to be a leader on Piedmont's defense, heads into this season as one of the biggest threats for opposing offensive players in the county.

When paired with defensive end Chance Murphy on a standout D-line, it's clear that Adams has the potential to help lead Piedmont back to the brink of a championship.

Ishmael Bethel, Piedmont, WR

Whether it's on the football field or on the basketball court, you can count on Bethel to get the job done. Bethel, who was featured on the ASWA's Class 3A all-state team last season, is a talented junior who has the offensive skill set to play at any receiver position.

As he returns as one of the leaders on Piedmont's new-look offense, Bethel's talents should help the adjustments go that much more smoothly.

Keenan Britt, Oxford, DL

When asked about Britt, Oxford coach Sam Adams immediately bragged about the sophomore's high motor.

Britt, who is a force on the defensive



Bob Crisp/The Daily Home

Camare Hampton, who transferred from Lincoln will be a part of a dangerous receiving corps at Oxford.

line, has already emerged as one of the top defensive players in the county as one of the most athletic pass-rushing threats around. Despite his sophomore status, he heads into his third year starting with offers from Arkansas, Auburn and Central Florida.

Jaden Dobbins, Anniston, DB

Dobbins quickly earned a reputation as

a skilled ballhawk, earning an offer from Arkansas State as a sophomore along with an all-county first team nod and all-state honorable mention.

Along with his skills in reading offenses, the 5-foot-11 junior provides plenty of versatility and size in a loaded position for the Bulldogs. As a junior, Dobbins should be a force alongside Jayden Lewis and Love Kirby in a loaded Anniston defense.

Gavin Doss, Anniston, QB

While Doss is a new face to Anniston, his name certainly rings a bell with plenty across Calhoun County after a strong stint at Saks.

Doss, who has received an offer from Navy, is one of the most skilled rushing quarterbacks in the area, most recently racking up four rushing touchdowns in Saks' regular season finale win over Talladega. While his feet will carry him far this season, don't count him out when there's an opportunity for a deep pass.

Ky'Dric Fisher, Jacksonville, WR

As talented as Fisher is on the football field, his pair of offers from Ivy League programs certainly show that he has both the brains and the brawn to compete.

Fisher turned into one of the top receiving talents in the state last season, earning a first-team nod in the ASWA all-state team, and is about as versatile as they come. When paired with quarterback Jim Ogle, Fisher's reputation should only improve in his final season with the Golden Eagles.

Cleat Forrest, Alexandria, K

From extra points to a long-range field goal, one word to describe Forrest is "money." If you asked him to kick anywhere on the field, it seems like he'd put it perfectly between the uprights.

In fact, Forrest impressed enough this offseason to pick up an offer from Mississippi State. Special teams win games, and with Forrest on Alexandria's roster, the Valley Cubs have a gem leading that position group.

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Cover photos by Bob Crisp and Tucker Webb/The Daily Home

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SWEET

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Camare Hampton, Oxford, WR

While Hampton is fresh on the Calhoun County scene, there's no question he belongs among the top players. The Lincoln High School transfer impressed in Oxford's 7-on-7 tournaments as a long, reliable receiver that can be an over-the-top guy or a player who runs a tricky route. The senior is no stranger to high-level football and should be a huge addition to an already talented Oxford offense.

Love Kirby, Anniston, DB

Anniston's defensive backs are among the best position groups in the county, and Kirby is a big reason why. Kirby, who has been offered by UAB, Arkansas State and Western Kentucky, is a force no matter what play the Bulldogs should run. He's skilled as a ballhawk, he's a force when rushing the passer and is one of the most athletic players in the state, helping Anniston win a Class 4A track and field championship. Anniston's defensive firepower should be a big part of its season, and Kirby should continue to thrive as

part of it. Jayden Lewis, Anniston, DB Just a few short months ago, Lewis helped Anniston take home a second Class 4A track and field championship after winning the 100-meter and 200-meter dashes. With his final season in Anniston ahead, it seems like the Auburn football commit is not just one of the top football players, but one of the best pure athletes in the state. On top of being the lead ballhawk in a talented Anniston secondary, he can play virtually any position on the field. Lewis struck fear into just about every quarterback he faced last season, and he should continue to shred opposing offensive playbooks yet again this season.

Mason Mims, Oxford, QB

It took no time at all for Mims to develop as one of the top quarterbacks in the state. The junior, who holds offers from West Virginia, Mississippi State and Pitt, has been waking up at 5:30 a.m. some mornings to work with Oxford's track team and has put on about 20 pounds after working in the weight room this offseason. With his improvements this offseason being paired with his impressive accuracy and high football IQ, there's no doubt that Mims is bound for a tremendous season.

Chance Murphy, Piedmont, DE Murphy has become one of the defensive players in Alabama that almost any offensive player fears. The senior has been a mainstay on an impressive Piedmont defense for the last few seasons, earning recognition at the county and state level. Along with wreaking havoc on opposing offenses in pursuit of the football, his football propels him to be among the top defensive players in the state.

Jim Ogle, Jacksonville, QB

Even though he is a Troy commit, there's no words to describe how much the Jacksonville community thinks of Ogle. The senior's accuracy and confidence in the pocket has proven to be a huge asset to a loaded Golden Eagles offense, which will hope to take new heights this season. With Ogle's impressive reputation ready to be capped off by one final season in Jacksonville, the senior's stellar passing abilities should help lead his team to another impressive season. Nick Richardson, Oxford, WR As impressive as Richardson is in the leadoff spot on Oxford's baseball team, his skills at receiver have cemented him as one of the top pure athletes in the area.

Richardson, who is skilled in the slot, has developed a reputation of being a chore to cover as a defensive back. When paired with quarterback Mason Mims, Richardson is one of the most under-the-radar receivers in the state. Jaydon Thomas, Oxford, RB Despite missing a portion of the season with a broken ankle, Thomas still has a reputation as one of the top running backs in the area. Thomas, who has an offer from Stetson, is a versatile back that is skilled in vision, protecting the passer and pass catching. He can also be a bruiser, if needed. While there's plenty of reasons to believe in Oxford's offense shining this season, the return of Thomas should be a huge asset for the Yellow Jackets.

Dorrien Walker, Saks, RB

It seems like Walker began to make a habit of running through defenses last season. In addition to his impressive vision and versatility at the position, the first team all-county running back is set to pair with former Jacksonville State fullback Alphonso Freeney, who took the reins at Saks this offseason. With Walker preparing to head into his senior year with returning talent around him, he should be a huge contributor for Saks yet again.



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ALEXANDRIA VALLEY CUBS

Alexandria adds 10th game but will be inexperienced

BY RIP DONOVAN

Star Sports Correspondent

ALEXANDRIA — When Cherokee County called about a game with Alexandria in 2023, the Warriors had the first week of the season open and were willing to commit to a home-and-home series for the 2024 and 2025 seasons. They wanted a home game this year.

Alexandria head coach Todd Ginn wanted a tenth game and wanted to have the final week of the regular season as an open date. Playing at Cherokee County on Aug. 25 fit each of Ginn's requirements and he already had five home games so he agreed. The decision relieved some pressure on scheduling for the 2024 and 2025 seasons but it created some additional pressure for 2023.

Ginn will now send a largely inexperienced team against Class 4A 2022 runner-up Cherokee County, highly regarded Jacksonville and 5A scoring machine Moody on consecutive Fridays to open the 2023 campaign. The Moody game is the Region 6 opener for the Valley Cubs.

"When you think about that, you go, 'Are we going to have our whole season decided on those three or are we going to see where we're at and know that if we win a couple of them or lose all three of them the season's not over or determined at that point,'" Ginn said.

For Ginn, the obvious answer is two non-region games and one region game don't determine the season. He just has to be certain his players understand that, too.

The 2023 Valley Cubs aren't short on talent or potential but they are lacking in experience. On offense, quarterback Ty Barker, back Ty Brown, tight end DaMarkus Williams, guard Ryan Brown and tackle Luke Curvin are returning starters. Ryan Brown started as a freshman last year. Curvin started at center in 2022 but moves to tackle this year.

Experienced players are slightly harder to find on defense. Williams started at an end last year. Ty Brown started at a line-

backer position. Barker was a starting cornerback in 2022 but will start at safety this season. Kaden Deline returns to start again at a defensive tackle.

"We're going to have to mature so fast, so quickly," Ginn said.

Joining Ryan Brown and Curvin on the offensive line will be Caleb Folsom at center, Brett Jones at guard with Dean Boxley or Gavin Sweet at a tackle opposite Curvin. Gaige Kelley will be the main backup at guard.

Place-kicker Cleat Forrest is the starter at split end at the moment. Ginn would prefer not to play Forrest on offense so he is not running a deep pass route one play before attempting a long field goal but no other candidate at split end has emerged.

Tyler Williams appears set at fullback with Deline as his backup. Elijah Hunter is ahead at halfback with Trace Karnes in reserve. Ty Brown can fill the role of wingback and slot receiver. Brodie Slaton is also a slot receiver.

The interior linemen on defense will come from Deline, Tyler Williams, Boxley and Hunter Johnson. Ginn said Trez Turner will be especially effective at nose tackle in short-yardage situations.

Joining DaMarkus Williams as a defensive end will be Cooper Bridges.

The linebacker corps includes Ryan Brown or Kelley in the middle, Slaton or Jeremiah Heathcock on the strong side and Folsom or Aiden Christopher on the weak side.

Headed by Forrest, the Cubs have an abundance of options at cornerback. Included in the mix are Isaac Rodriguez, Quent Chatman, J.J. Beason, M.J. Morris and Garrett Haynes. Hunter appears to be the starter at strong safety with Karnes as the next option.

The rover, called "dog" in Alexandria's terminology, will be Ty Brown.

Jackson Jennings, Jonah Key, Kasen Gardner, Evan White, Dakota Ball, Bridges, Karnes, Heathcock and Rodriguez are all likely to play on the kickoff coverage team.

"We're going to have to mature so fast, so quickly."

— Todd Ginn,
Alexandria head coach



Bill Wilson/The Anniston Star/file

Tyler Brown is a returning starter for the Alexandria Valley Cubs.



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2023 SCHEDULES

ALEXANDRIA

Aug. 25, at Cherokee County
Sept. 1, at Jacksonville
Sept. 8, vs. Moody*
Sept. 15, vs. Lincoln*
Sept. 22, at Springville*
Sept. 29, vs. Central Clay
Oct. 6, vs. St. Clair County*
Oct. 13, at Leeds*
Oct. 20, at Southside*
Oct. 27, vs. Talladega
Nov. 3, OPEN
*-Class 5A, Region 6

ANNISTON

Aug. 25, vs. Wellborn
Sept. 1, at Andalusia
Sept. 8, vs. Munford*
Sept. 15, at Jacksonville*
Sept. 22, vs. White Plains*
Thurs, Sept. 28, at Piedmont
Oct. 6, at Handley*
Oct. 13, OPEN
Oct. 20, vs. Talladega*
Oct. 27, at Cleburne County*
Nov. 3, OPEN
*-Class 4A, Region 4

CLEBURNE COUNTY

Sept. 1, at Northside
Sept. 8, at Talladega*

Sept. 15, OPEN
Sept. 22, vs. Munford*
Sept. 29, vs. Reeltown
Oct. 6, at Jacksonville*
Oct. 13, vs. White Plains*
Oct. 20, at Handley*
Oct. 27, vs. Anniston*
Nov. 3, at Wellborn
*-Class 4A, Region 4

DONOH

Aug. 25, vs. Weaver
Sept. 1, vs. Pleasant Valley
Sept. 8, at Ragland*
Sept. 15, vs. Wadley*
Sept. 22, at Victory Christian*
Sept. 29, OPEN
Thurs, Oct. 5, vs. Winterboro*
Oct. 13, at Talladega County Central*
Oct. 20, vs. Spring Garden*
Oct. 27, OPEN
Nov. 3, at Cedar Bluff
*-Class 1A, Region 6

GLENCOE

Sept. 1, vs. Weaver
Sept. 8, at Hokes Bluff*
Sept. 15, at Westbrook Christian*
Sept. 22, vs. Plainview*
Sept. 29, at Holly Pond
Oct. 6, vs. Sylvania*

Oct. 13, at Piedmont*
Oct. 20, at Ohatchee*
Oct. 27, vs. Geraldine*
Nov. 3, vs. West End
*-Class 3A, Region 6

HANDLEY

Aug. 25, at Valley
Sept. 1, vs. St. James
Sept. 8, vs. Jacksonville*
Sept. 15, at White Plains*
Sept. 22, at Central Clay
Sept. 29, vs. Lanett
Oct. 6, vs. Anniston*
Oct. 13, at Talladega*
Oct. 20, vs. Cleburne County*
Oct. 27, at Munford*
Nov. 3, OPEN
*-Class 4A, Region 4

HOKES BLUFF

Aug. 25, OPEN
Aug. 31, at Southside
Sept. 8, vs. Glencoe*
Sept. 15, at Geraldine*
Sept. 22, vs. Westbrook Christian*
Sept. 29, at White Plains
Oct. 6, at Plainview*
Oct. 13, vs. Ohatchee*
Oct. 20, vs. Sylvania*
Oct. 27, at Piedmont*

Nov. 3, vs. Sardis
*-Class 3A, Region 6

JACKSONVILLE

Aug. 25, at Boaz
Sept. 1, vs. Alexandria
Sept. 8, at Handley*
Sept. 15, vs. Anniston*
Sept. 22, at Talladega*
Sept. 29, at Ohatchee
Oct. 6, vs. Cleburne County*
Oct. 13, at Munford*
Oct. 20, OPEN
Oct. 27, vs. White Plains*
Nov. 3, vs. Oxford
*-Class 4A, Region 4

JACKSONVILLE CHRISTIAN

Aug. 11, at Trinity
Aug. 18, at Meadowview
Aug. 25, vs. Tuscaloosa
Sept. 1, at Tabernacle
Sept. 15, vs. Victory Christian
Sept. 22, at Russell (Miss.)
Oct. 6, vs. Success Academy
Oct. 13, vs. Cornerstone Christian
Oct. 20, at New Life

*Jacksonville Christian students will play eight-man football in the Christian Football Association for Faith Temple of Jacksonville Church.

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ANNISTON BULLDOGS

Bulldogs have sights set on championship under new coach Rico Jackson

BY PRESTON ODAM

Star Sports Writer

New Anniston coach Rico Jackson has one clear goal for his Bulldogs in year one: he expects to compete for a Class 4A state championship. With returning stars and young talent, his goal does not seem that far out of reach.

"State championship," Jackson said. "That's our expectation. It takes a lot to get to that point, it takes hard work, it takes athleticism, it takes skill, it takes the ball bouncing your way. That's our expectation here, and I feel like it's an obtainable goal. But, we've got to take it one game at a time."

The Bulldogs are coming off a 10-0 regular season in 2022 under coach Rico White, who is now at Mae Jemison. Anniston fell to eventual 4A state champ Andalusia in the quarterfinals of the playoffs.

Anniston will compete in a tough 4A, Region 4 with opponents such as Jacksonville, Handley, and Munford. The Bulldogs have a tough non-region schedule as well with the season opener in Week Zero against Wellborn. In Week One, Anniston will travel to Andalusia, and in Week Five Anniston will travel to Piedmont for a battle against the perennial 3A powerhouse.

"We treat every team like it's the Dallas Cowboys," Jackson said. "Right now, we're focusing on Walter Wellborn. Coach (Jeff) Smith does a great job. They're well coached. They're physical. As for fall camp, we work on us this week and the next two weeks we'll prep for Wellborn."

Anniston did lose some elite level talent from the 2022 season because of graduation. Jaylon Cunningham, Kamron Sandlin and Ryquez McElderry are some notable departures. McElderry signed with Alabama, Sandlin with South Carolina, and Cunningham will join Arkansas State as a preferred walk-on.

Although the Bulldogs lost plenty of firepower, they also returned a number of

key contributors. Star receiver and defensive back Jayden Lewis, an Auburn football commit, returns for his senior season.

Junior Jaden Dobbins, senior Love Kirby, senior Collin Wansart, senior Greg Fegans, and sophomore Jakorie Carr have all stood out to Jackson over the summer. He said they have all had "really good" summers, so he expects them to continue that heading into the fall.

"It's been a work in progress because we're real young," Dobbins said. "We had a whole bunch of seniors that left last season, but we've really just been working hard to get back to the Anniston that we were last year but hopefully go out there and win it."

"It's been good, the hard work, the working out every day, running, getting in shape because it's going to be a whole bunch of people that play both sides of the ball. We're going to do what we do."

Kirby, quarterback Gavin Doss and receiver and defensive back Jabez Downie have all received offers to play college football this summer. Kirby picked up an Alabama State offer, Doss received a Navy offer, and Downie got a Miles College offer.

"I really, really push recruiting," Jackson said. "I've been at places where I've had 10 guys sign at a setting. We really push that hard. I feel like the kids work hard for us, the least we can do is work hard for them and push their content out and push their academics out and push their film out."

"Obviously, coaches, we can't sign kids, but we can push them in front of recruiters. That's something that we really pride ourselves in here at Anniston. We're going to do that now and for the foreseeable future."

Jackson is ready to lead the Bulldogs in his first year. He is ready for fall camp and for Friday nights to come to Lott-Mosby Memorial Stadium.

"Fall camp, you're kind of walking on eggshells," Jackson said. "You want to protect yourself against injury, but I'm excited just for today."



Tucker Webb/The Daily Home

Rico Jackson is entering his first season as Anniston's head football coach.

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DONOHO FALCONS

Healthy Cleckler ready to lead Falcons under center

BY THOMAS ASHWORTH

Star Sports Writer

Last football season, Donoho's Kai Cleckler didn't get to play because of an injury.

In March, Cleckler showed he not only was healthy but ready to handle a tight situation. Playing for the Falcons' baseball team, he hit a two-RBI single in the top of the seventh inning to lead Donoho to an upset over Piedmont in the Calhoun County tournament.

After a strong season at the plate for Donoho's baseball team and a full recovery from his injury, Cleckler is not only ready to play football again, but take over as the team's lead quarterback.

"He knows he's the guy. It's a lot on his shoulders, so now it's my job to make it easier for him to be successful," Donoho coach Jeremy Satcher said. "What I think that we're going to do is a little different, because of the type of quarterback that he is, but he's ready. He's a playmaker, so it's going to be a good year."

For Cleckler, the opportunity to start at quarterback means more than just getting playing time.

"Obviously, it's an opportunity," Cleckler said. "Last year, I got injured, so I wasn't able to play, but I'm truly blessed to have this opportunity to lead the team to more success than we had last year."

Satcher said that watching Cleckler step up in the Falcons' Calhoun County baseball tournament win over Piedmont was even more proof that he'd be able to step up to the pressure of being the starting quarterback.

"Pressure was on him at the plate, and he stepped up to the pressure," Satcher said. "So with that, he knows how to have pressure. He's going to do good, I've got faith in him and the team's got faith in him."

Luckily for Cleckler, he said he'll have plenty of weapons to work with in the offense.

He said Hayes Farrell and Richard Goad are two names on the offense to watch this season.



Marcus Lawler (6) returns at running back for the Donoho Falcons.

"I know they're going to go out there and grind every single day," Cleckler said. "I know the older guys will, too, and the younger guys are getting into it a little bit, too."

Goad also said he expects big things out of the receivers.

"I think our receiving corps is really strong. We are all pretty fast and we're all fairly big," Goad said. "I think we all have hands and can catch the ball pretty well."

Satcher said that with Cleckler at quarterback and Marcus Lawler at running back, he will

have plenty to work with on the ground.

"As far as the run game with them two, we've got one who can run and who's big and one who can run who's smaller and quicker, but you're going to have to pick your poison with them two," Satcher said. "I'm excited to see what they're going to do."

Donoho offensive coordinator Trevekio Roberts, who also works with the offensive line, said that he expects the offensive line to be solid as well.

"This year, being the third year I've been here, this is probably

the most experienced offensive line that we have, due to the fact that a lot of these guys had to play last year, forcefully because of the injuries and everything," Roberts said. "The thing about it was that they were young, so I only lost two guys from last year's offensive line to this year, and I only have one senior this year. The future for Donoho for the offensive line is pretty bright."

On the defensive side of the ball, Satcher expects Cash Worley to be a leader on the team after switching positions this season.

"I'm looking for big things

out of Cash," Satcher said. "We switched him to outside linebacker, he's long, he can run, he can come up on the run and contain a lot, so I'm looking at a big year in that position with him."

Worley said that in the offseason, the team has made adjustments which should help the defense find success.

"Our defense is pretty stout," Worley said. "We've got a couple of good guys coming back, switching up positions. Corners are going to play safety, I'm moving from defensive end to playing outside linebacker. Just a few changes here and there but I think it's going to work out."

Along with Lawler playing defensive back, Satcher said that a lot of players will be playing on both sides of the ball.

"1A football, you may have a running back playing defensive line, a quarterback playing linebacker or safety. It's just the nature of the beast," Satcher said.

Satcher said that in year two, he's already noticed that his team is more familiar with the way things are run and are more in tune with the idea of leaving a legacy at Doboho.

"They're more comfortable with me and how I want things to be run," Satcher said. "Sometimes you still need to remind them about some things, but they're just more comfortable."

Donoho is set to play in a competitive Class 1A, Region 6 that includes Spring Garden, Ragland and Wadley, all of which made the playoffs last season along with Donoho. Satcher said that he's excited for the Falcons' schedule, which also includes a season-opening matchup with Weaver.

"I like the schedule," Satcher said. "It really shows us what we need to work on early in the season to get us ready for that bulk of the season where we play a bunch of region teams back-to-back. I'm looking forward to a great game versus Weaver. I know they're going to be ready with their new coach, and so I'm just ready to see the Falcons fly."

Bill Wilson/The Anniston Star/filed

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JACKSONVILLE GOLDEN EAGLES

Success nothing new for Jacksonville, but facilities are

BY THOMAS ASHWORTH

Star Sports Writer

JACKSONVILLE — Jacksonville has developed a reputation for success on the field, and the Golden Eagles have done it by playing an exciting brand of football.

This season, Clint Smith and his team will have the exciting facilities to go along with it.

"It's going to be one of the nicest football facilities around here," Smith said. "New turf, new track, new bathrooms, new concrete, new fencing, new fixtures, bleachers — just an unbelievable atmosphere. I'm excited for our kids. I'm excited for our community. Just a lot of teams and a lot of student athletes are going to be able to use it in multiple sports and different things."

The Golden Eagles will play their first game on their brand-new turf field in the team's rivalry game against Alexandria on Sept. 1, giving fans a new-look gameday atmosphere in Jacksonville.

"You're going to have a good surface on Friday night, regardless of what the weather is," Smith said. "It's something our community can be really proud of. It's something that our student athletes have worked extremely hard and I'm just glad to see them get to have something like this."

With the new facilities in Jacksonville comes plenty of returning faces.

While quarterback and Troy commit Jim Ogle looks to lead the bunch, Smith said that seniors Ky'Dric Fisher, Demonte Sinclair and Imoree Young will be some of the threats in the group of Jacksonville receivers.

Ogle completed 59.2 percent of his passes last season, totaling 2,512 yards and 28 touchdowns while throwing just three interceptions.

While the wide receiver room is full of talent, the connection between Ogle and Fisher, who has earned NCAA Division I offers, is set to be among the best in the state of Alabama.

Both Fisher and Ogle were



Bill Wilson/The Anniston Star/file

Xzavier English returns at running back for the Jacksonville Golden Eagles.

first-team all-county honorees last season.

"What we have is really special," Ogle said at Calhoun County football media day. "Me and Ky'Dric have been pretty close for before football — fifth, sixth, elementary school. It leads on and off the field. Our connection on the field mostly comes from off the field, hanging out or just throwing and going out, having fun. I think it's special and it'll be fun to go one last time with him."

Along with the trio of senior receivers, Smith added that running backs Xzavier English, Trent

Jackson and Tylen Ellis will help lead the backfield.

"Three guys that we're looking forward to seeing what they can do," Smith said.

While there's plenty of returning experience among the skill positions, there will still be plenty of new faces on the offense.

After graduating four offensive linemen who were all-Calhoun County players last season, Smith said that the team is preparing to take on the challenge of a whole new group protecting Ogle this season.

"We've got five new linemen

up front," Smith said. "Those guys have worked really hard. They're scrappy. They work hard in the weight room. We're expecting good things from them. They just need a little experience under their belt. I think as the season goes on, they'll continue to get better. That's just going to be key for us, staying healthy and developing some depth. Hopefully, we'll do that as the season goes on."

"Our skill guys are experienced. Our offensive line's not experienced. So, our older guys are going to have to show some

leadership and help set the tone until these younger guys can catch on and get a little playing time under their belt," Smith said. "We're old in some places, and we're young in some places."

Smith added, "Every team has its own identity. Hopefully, this team will be one that goes out and competes and does what we have to do to continue the tradition of winning."

The Golden Eagles will be returning three of their linebackers from last season in Ryan Mitchell, Charlie Wright and Will Greenwood. The team will also have a solid group of defensive backs in Landon Wise, Imoree Young, Tyshaun Cameron and T.J. Wilson.

"Our linebackers and our DBs, those guys have some experience and we've got some young defensive linemen, that's coming on, that's going to have to step up," Smith said. "It's just kind of a mixture. I like this year's team, I think they're a good bunch of guys and they work hard. Hopefully, they'll continue to do that."

The Golden Eagles are set to take on one of the toughest regions in the state in Class 4A, Region 4, which includes Anniston, Munford and Handley, which all finished with winning records last season.

Along with the tough region schedule, Jacksonville will also face off against Boaz, Alexandria, Ohatchee and Oxford, all of which made the playoffs last season.

"When you come out of this region, when you go play those really, really good teams, it's just like a region game. It's nothing we hadn't seen before," Smith said. "We butt heads with Handley and Anniston, that's two of the better teams we'll play anywhere in the state. I think it prepares you. I think he gets you ready."

"With our non-region, you throw in Oxford, you throw in Alexandria, those guys play as tough every year. It's just a battle every week, but if you can get out of it and get in the playoffs, then you've seen just about everything you could see."

2023 SCHEDULES

OHATCHEE

Aug. 24, vs. Saks
 Sept. 1, at Wellborn
 Sept. 8, vs. Westbrook Christian*
 Sept. 15, vs. Sylvania*
 Sept. 22, at Piedmont*
 Sept. 29, vs. Jacksonville
 Oct. 6, vs. Geraldine*
 Oct. 13, at Hokes Bluff*
 Oct. 20, vs. Glencoe*
 Oct. 27, at Plainview*
 Nov. 3, OPEN

*-Class 3A, Region 6

OXFORD

Aug. 25, at McAdory
 Sept. 1, vs. Huntsville
 Sept. 8, at Shades Valley*
 Sept. 15, vs. Huffman*
 Sept. 22, at Pinson Valley*
 Sept. 29, at Hartselle
 Oct. 6, vs. Pell City*
 Oct. 13, OPEN
 Oct. 20, vs. Clay Chalkville*
 Oct. 27, vs. Center Point*
 Nov. 3, at Jacksonville
 *-Class 6A, Region 6

PIEDMONT

Sept. 1, vs. Centre
 Sept. 8, at Sylvania*

Sept. 15, at Plainview*
 Sept. 22, vs. Ohatchee*
 Thur, Sept. 28, vs. Anniston
 Oct. 6, vs. Westbrook Christian*
 Oct. 13, vs. Glencoe*
 Oct. 20, at Geraldine*
 Oct. 27, vs. Hokes Bluff*
 Nov. 3, vs. Sylacauga
 *-Class 3A, Region 6

PLEASANT VALLEY

Aug. 25, OPEN
 Sept. 1, at Donoho
 Sept. 8, vs. West End*
 Sept. 15, at Holly Pond*
 Sept. 22, vs. Cleveland*
 Sept. 29, vs. Ragland
 Oct. 6, at Locust Fork*
 Oct. 13, at Spring Garden
 Oct. 20, at Southeastern*
 Oct. 27, vs. Gaston*
 Thur, Nov. 2, vs. Weaver
 *-Class 2A, Region 6

RANBURN

Aug. 25, vs. White Plains
 Sept. 1, at Wadley
 Sept. 8, vs. Fayetteville*
 Sept. 15, vs. B.B. Comer*
 Sept. 22, at Woodland*
 Sept. 29, OPEN

Oct. 6, at Vincent
 Oct. 13, at Isabella*
 Oct. 20, vs. Thornsby*
 Oct. 27, at Central Coosa*
 Nov. 3, vs. Randolph County
 *-Class 2A, Region 4

RANDOLPH COUNTY

Aug. 25, OPEN
 Sept. 1, vs. Woodland
 Sept. 8, at Childersburg*
 Sept. 15, at Ragland
 Sept. 22, vs. Weaver*
 Sept. 29, vs. Wadley
 Oct. 6, at Saks*
 Oct. 13, vs. Wellborn*
 Oct. 20, at Beulah*
 Oct. 27, vs. Dadeville*
 Nov. 3, at Ranburne
 *-Class 3A, Region 4

SAKS

Thur, Aug. 24, at Ohatchee
 Sept. 1, vs. Sylvania
 Sept. 8, at Beulah*
 Sept. 15, vs. Dadeville*
 Sept. 22, at Childersburg*
 Sept. 29, at B.B. Comer
 Oct. 6, vs. Randolph County*
 Oct. 13, at Weaver*
 Oct. 20, OPEN

Oct. 27, vs. Wellborn*
 Nov. 3, vs. Talladega
 *-Class 3A, Region 4

SPRING GARDEN

Aug. 25, at Sand Rock
 Sept. 1, vs. Coosa Christian
 Sept. 8, at Wadley*
 Sept. 15, vs. Victory Christian*
 Sept. 22, at Winterboro*
 Sept. 29, vs. Cedar Bluff
 Oct. 6, at Talladega County Central*
 Oct. 13, vs. Pleasant Valley
 Oct. 20, at Donoho*
 Oct. 27, vs. Ragland*
 Nov. 3, OPEN

*-Class 1A, Region 6

WEAVER

Aug. 25, at Donoho
 Sept. 1, at Glencoe
 Sept. 8, at Dadeville*
 Sept. 15, vs. Childersburg*
 Sept. 22, at Randolph County*
 Sept. 29, vs. Asbury
 Oct. 6, OPEN
 Oct. 13, vs. Saks*
 Oct. 20, at Wellborn*
 Oct. 27, vs. Beulah*
 Nov. 2, at Pleasant Valley
 *-Class 3A, Region 4



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OHATCHEE INDIANS

Ohatchee hopes to improve in Year 2 under Findley

BY PRESTON ODAM

Star Sports Writer

OHATCHEE — The Ohatchee Indians were a young team in 2022, but first-year head coach Chris Findley still managed to lead them to the Class 3A playoffs.

Now, entering his second full season at the helm, Findley is liking what he has seen from a core group of returnees.

"We hope to improve," Findley said. "Last year was, I won't say disappointing, but we started off in a disappointing way. We were able to rally and able to make the playoffs, and I was proud of how we finished last year. We want to take some of those lessons, and apply them to this year and see if we can get out of the gates a little better this year."

Last season, the Indians brought home a 3-8 record, including 3-4 record in 3A, Region 6. Ohatchee advanced to the playoffs, where the Indians fell to Gordo.

The team was sophomore heavy, but now with a year under their belts, Findley and his players are excited to see the improvements for the 2023 season. Ohatchee starts the regular season with a home matchup against Calhoun County rival Saks.

"Physically, they look different than they looked last year," Findley said. "Jake Roberson, our quarterback, he's probably put on 25 to 30 pounds. Nate Jones, our running back from last year, he's put on 25 to 30 pounds. Jesse Baswell, one of our lone seniors, has put on about that much. Our guys have physically gotten in the weight room, developed, they look a whole lot better this year. That's the first thing you notice."

"Out here, some are starting to become leaders. That junior group is starting to become leaders along with the few seniors we have. Mentally, physically, they're a lot further along than they were last year."

Ohatchee only has three

seniors in the 2023 season.

They return 16 juniors, including many key contributors that Findley has been impressed with this offseason. Findley said there are a bunch of guys that he has been happy with this spring and summer.

Tristin Kiker has looked "really good for us," according to Findley. Jake Roberson has become a leader through and through for the Indians, Findley said. Findley said Roberson has looked good physically and constantly stays after practice to put in some extra work.

Roberson is a 6-foot-5 junior that definitely looks the part behind center.

"Feels good to come out here and play quarterback," Roberson said. "We've got a big class of juniors. They're all my friends, so it's pretty easy to step into a leadership role like that. I think everybody played at least more than a game all season last year, so we should be comfortable and able to do our thing."

Gus Hunter, a freshman, likely will start on both offense and defense after earning a position there. Findley said Hunter has completely earned the spot. Quinn Nunnally, a sophomore, has impressed Findley as well with his work ethic. Nate Jones and Ayden McNair have both stepped up as well.

Jesse Baswell and Will Folsom are two seniors for the Indians that will play on both offense and defense and help them succeed. Findley said those two have also played some quarterback and still could if the team needs it. He applauded Folsom and Baswell for taking other positions to help the squad.

The Indians are ready for the 2023 season. Findley and his team are preparing day-in and day-out to reach their goals for the year.

"Super excited, super excited," Findley said. "It's part of the grind, it is what it is. You love the offseason, you love the preseason, postseason, you just love every part of it. It's exciting."



Nate Jones returns at running back for the Ohatchee Indians.

Bill Wilson/The Anniston Star/file

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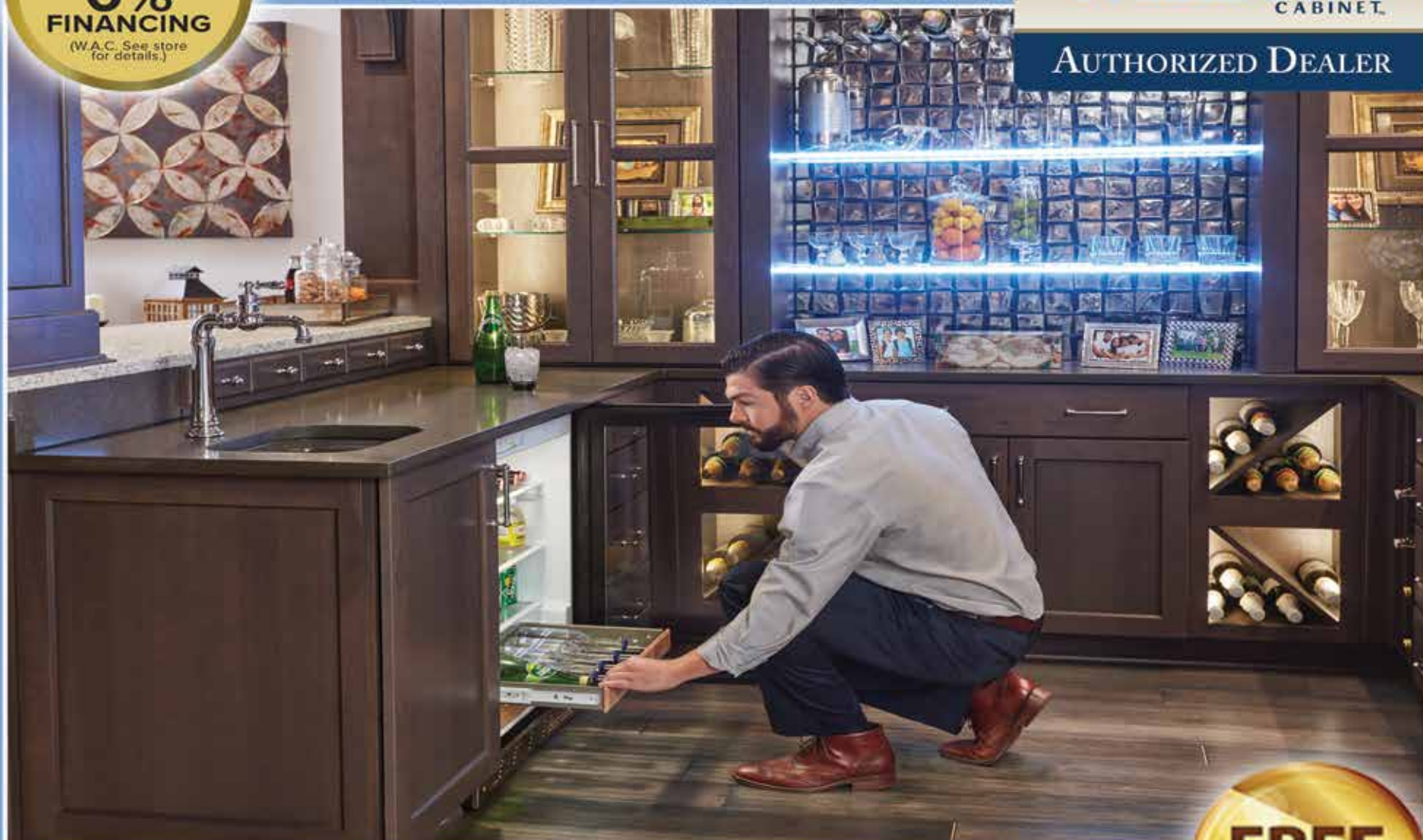
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OXFORD YELLOW JACKETS

Yellow Jackets return plenty of offensive firepower

BY THOMAS ASHWORTH

Star Sports Writer

OXFORD — When Oxford's baseball team took home a state championship a few short months ago, football coach Sam Adams could see how much excitement Oxford athletics can bring to the city.

"Whatever goes on at the high school here in Oxford is the biggest deal in town year-round," Adams said. "The expectations for every academic class, every extra-curricular program are extremely high and that's the way that it should be everywhere. That really helps our kids to thrive, to see the success that our baseball program just had, which was the last athletic season before this one."

When looking at the offensive firepower the Yellow Jackets have this season, it's safe to say Adams and company will bring an exciting year of football to Calhoun County.

The offense will be led by one of the top quarterbacks in the state in junior Mason Mims, who has picked up offers from schools including Mississippi State, Pitt and West Virginia.

Adams said that on top of Mims' high football IQ, he has been improving his strength and speed throughout the offseason, with Mims training at 5:30 a.m. with Oxford's track and field staff and putting on about 20 pounds after training in the weight room.

"What makes him elite is he really understands pre-snap looks," Adams said. "Sometimes you just have a bad call, sometimes the defense has a call to beat yours, and he definitely understands. He doesn't always know what play we want to get to in his head without me coaching through that part, but he knows that we need to do something over here to fix the problem that we have, and that's a great luxury."

In addition to a wide receiver tandem of Nick Richardson and Judd Syer and tight ends Jayden Lewis and Nick Hampton that will lead the skill positions, Mims will have a new, exciting weapon to throw to this season.

Camare Hampton, who transferred from Lincoln, has already made a huge impact for the Yellow Jackets in the team's offseason workouts and 7-on-7 tournaments. During UAB's 7-on-7 camp, Hampton impressed coaches enough to earn an offer from UAB's staff that day.

Adams said that in addition to his football knowledge increasing, he's been

working heavily in the weight room since joining the team.

"He's a long guy, probably 6-foot-2 and in the 180-ish range," Adams said. "He came in March, April, and he's put on 10 pounds."

Senior Jaydon Thomas, who missed a majority of last season with a broken ankle, made a full recovery and will help lead the backfield this season for the Yellow Jackets. Thomas received a Division I offer from Stetson in May.

"He's kind of an under the radar sort of guy," Adams said. "He broke his ankle last year in the fourth game of the season, and that cut his season short. He's got good vision, good power, he protects the passer well, he has good hands. He's really a good, well-rounded back that can play virtually every snap of the game."

Adams said that while each player has a different style of play, all of Oxford's skill players have developed enough versatility to play multiple positions. He said even some, like Syer, are versatile enough to play some on both sides of the ball.

"Each one of those guys brings something vastly different to the table," Adams said. "We try to mix and match them in the formation so they're playing inside and outside and right and left and all that."

He said that one immediate positive he's noticed about the team is the competition between the offense and defense.

"One thing that's stood out is how much back and forth there's been over 'defense wins today,' 'offense wins the next day,' and as a head coach, that's kind of the way that you want it," Adams said. "You don't want one side on top consistently, that means the other side's probably got some big problems. Now, that does mean there's been a little bit of inconsistency on both sides, too, but what sticks out to me is one side does kind of get maybe beat down a little bit one day. They've responded well, and they haven't allowed that to happen two days in a row."

The defense will feature a share of key returners playing familiar positions. Kennan Britt, Caleb Tinner and Donovan Jones will be key on the defensive line and Hudson Gilman, Des Whitson and James Tapley will be names to know at linebacker.

The shakeup of the defensive backs will feature Cedric Twyman shifting from playing primarily cornerback last season to seeing more snaps at safety. Cornerback Cristian Gibson is expected to be one of



Bob Crisp/The Anniston Star/file

Nick Richardson returns at wide receiver for the Oxford Yellow Jackets.

the leaders on the defense alongside Latre-veon Figgers, who had a solid summer in 7-on-7 camps for Oxford.

"He's got good ball skills as far as getting the ball out," Adams said. "Sometimes

the taller guy that may get their hands on the ball up high is good at punching it out as they're coming back down. He's a guy we have a whole lot of confidence in back there."

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Aug. 25, at Anniston
Sept. 1, vs. Ohatchee
Sept. 8, OPEN
Sept. 15, vs. Beulah*
Sept. 22, at Dadeville*
Sept. 29, at Talladega
Oct. 6, vs. Childersburg*
Oct. 13, at Randolph County*
Oct. 20, vs. Weaver*
Oct. 27, at Saks*
Nov. 3, vs. Cleburne County
*-Class 3A, Region 4

WHITE PLAINS

Aug. 25, at Ranburne
Sept. 1, at Oak Grove
Sept. 8, OPEN
Sept. 15, vs. Handley*
Sept. 22, at Anniston*
Sept. 29, vs. Hokes Bluff
Oct. 6, vs. Talladega*
Oct. 13, at Cleburne County*
Oct. 20, vs. Munford*
Oct. 27, at Jacksonville*
Nov. 3, vs. Westbrook Christian
*-Class 4A, Region 4



Bill Wilson/The Anniston Star



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PIEDMONT BULLDOGS

New coach, new QB, same expectations for Bulldogs

BY PRESTON ODAM

Star Sports Writer

PIEDMONT — Football looks a bit different at Piedmont High School without longtime head coach Steve Smith and all-state quarterback Jack Hayes. Even with the changes, new coach Jonathon Miller is looking to continue the winning tradition.

"I have high expectations for our kids," Miller said. "I think they have high expectations for themselves. I think when you look at us this year, there's a lot of new guys that's going to be in the mix in the fall carrying a bigger load than they have carried in past years."

"It's going to be all about getting those guys experience."

The Bulldogs are coming off a 12-3 season in 2022 and a Class 3A state championship runner-up finish. Piedmont has five state championship wins and two runner-ups. The championships came in 2009, 2015, 2016, 2019 and 2021. The other state runner-up was in 2018.

Piedmont's schedule starts with the Bulldogs hosting heated rival Cherokee County on Sept. 1. Cherokee County defeated Piedmont last year 21-14 for its first win over the Bulldogs since 2009. Cherokee County made it to the 2022 Class 4A state championship game before falling to Andalusia 28-7.

"Our schedule starts out pretty tough," Miller said. "Cherokee County, Sylvania, Plainview off the jump, so I think we're going to have to understand there may be some growing pains along the way. But, as long as we stay together and continue to get better everyday, I think we can be a good team by November."

Piedmont is returning some key contributors on both offense and defense this season. On the defensive side, Miller has been impressed so far with seniors Luke Rhinehart at linebacker and Trevor Pike at defensive back.

"Luke Rhinehart at linebacker, he's a senior leader for us," Miller said. "A guy that really sticks out on film as a guy that plays fast. Super smart kid. Just a really tough, hard-nosed linebacker. Trevor Pike on the back end, he's a returning starter at safety. He's another guy that plays fast, he's got good speed. We'll use him a little bit on offense as well."

Offensively, junior Cole Wilson is taking

over the quarterback role, replacing the graduated Hayes. Miller likes what he has seen of Wilson to this point and has been impressed with plenty of other contributors. Offensive tackle Sam Tolbert has looked good thus far, according to Miller.

"You look at a guy like Cole Wilson, who is taking over for a legend around here," Miller said. "Cole's a talented guy himself. He can throw the football, he can make any throw you need him to make, and he's got some talent around him to distribute the ball to."

"Excited to see Cole on Friday nights. He's done a good job for us, so far, we just look for him to continue to grow for us throughout the season."

Miller mentioned that the wide receivers may be Piedmont's most talented group. Sophomore Rollie Pinto, junior Ishmael Bethel, senior McClane Mohon, who is moving from defense to offense, and Junior Jalon Helm are some of the standouts at that position.

"Ish, McClane, we're all fast and stuff, we're all really athletic," Pinto said. "We can make plays when it matters. We use it all as motivation, especially last year losing the state championship. With the new coach it's still the same expectations, win at all costs."

One difference in Miller's coaching style compared to Smith's is the fact that Miller will run a complete no-huddle style of offense.

"I think that's the biggest learning curve so far for the kids is getting their eyes on the sideline after a play," Miller said. "Getting the signal from the sideline and getting lined up, so I think we've done a good job of that so far. It's just something you've got to get used to."

Rhinehart is excited for the opportunity to become a leader on defense and said he cannot wait for Friday nights to get here. He said that they still want to be Piedmont and be the team nobody wants to play.

"It's going to be different," Rhinehart said. "Obviously, it's a lot of different staff changes, there's going to be a lot of changes with the team and the environment in general. With the team, we're not really worried about on the field, it's about the environment here. To keep a winning environment we've got to have a winning attitude. It's all about attitude."



Tucker Webb/The Daily Home

Cole Wilson is expected to take over as Piedmont's starting quarterback.



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PLEASANT VALLEY RAIDERS

Pleasant Valley focused on return to playoffs

BY RIP DONOVAN

Star Sports Correspondent

PLEASANT VALLEY — Pleasant Valley football has seen 41 seasons come and go since its first game in 1982. In that time, the Raiders have reached the AHSAA playoffs on four occasions and lost each time. Not since 1984, the third of Tommy Miller's six Raiders teams, has Pleasant Valley hosted a playoff game.

Pleasant Valley head coach Jonathan Nix, starting his ninth season guiding the Raiders, thinks all that may change this season.

"Our main goal this year is to host a playoff game. We want to host in round one. That's our team goal and that's what the kids are fighting for. ... Those seven region games are what's going to determine who we cross with (in the playoffs)," Nix said recently.

Nix then added: "If we can stay healthy, we've got a good combination of size and speed. We're a little faster than last year's team but I'd like to be as fast as we were Week 8 and (Week) 9 last year. I felt like Week 8 and 9 we started playing really fast football."

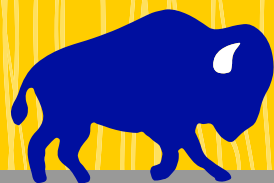
This year's skill players start with returning quarterback Braxton Salster, a freshman. The Raiders graduated three senior running backs — Dalton Haynes, Dason Vick and Zeke Curvin — but injuries prevented the trio from playing together in a game. Nix said sophomore Jaden Sparks had "a lot of carries last year" while filling in for one of the three seniors. Current senior Holt Bentley played more time at wide receiver than running back last year but also had rushing attempts.

Clark Hill, who played mostly at safety



Bill Wilson/The Anniston Star/file

Please see RAIDERS | Page 27 **Braxton Salster returns at quarterback for the Pleasant Valley Raiders.**



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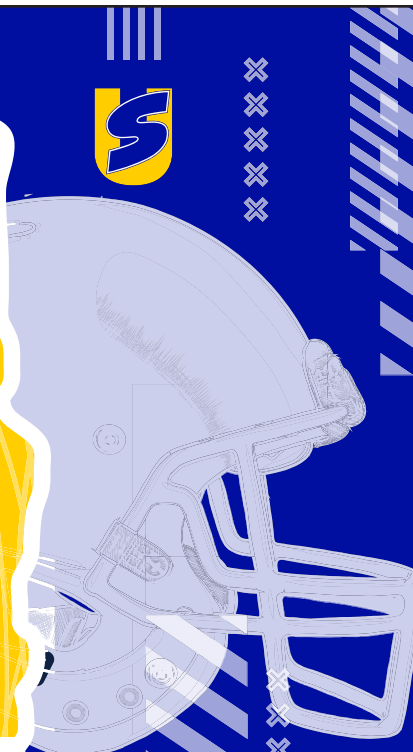
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SAKS WILDCATS

New Saks coach Freeney aims for improved defense

BY THOMAS ASHWORTH

Star Sports Writer

SAKS — It took just one season for Alphonso Freeney to help turn a Florida high school program that didn't win a game into a 9-2 playoff team.

After moving back to Calhoun County after one season at Pasco High School in Tampa, Fla., Freeney is expecting even bigger things from his Saks High team this season.

"Just being back here has been great," Freeney said. "I've been able to see a lot of old friends that I knew in college, and coming back, I get to reconnect with them and spend time with them. And, I've got a lot of them as coaches. You've got Brenton Tolson — me and him were teammates in college at JSU. Rocky Hayes, he's like my little brother, so it's been refreshing to be back."

In his first few months, Freeney has been able to put together an impressive 12-person coaching staff, which includes defensive coordinator Wesley Ginn, former JSU linebacker Tolson and former Arkansas State all-conference defensive back Hayes.

With the impressive coaching staff he's put together and the new team philosophy on getting to the football, Freeney said that he expects the team to have one of the best defenses in the state.

"I think we're going to be great," Freeney said. "The biggest thing I'm bringing to the defense and I've been telling them and I stay all about is getting to the football, because that's the biggest thing about last year. They were really good last year. They've been good in the past, but you turn on the film and

not all 11 are getting to the football.

"I think that's the thing we're stressing, and Coach Ginn is also stressing this year is we need 11 guys to the football, and if you're not getting to a football, that's not the standard, you're not on our defense. We've got high expectations for our defense."

One of the key leaders on the team's defense is lineman Mason Stevens, who Freeney said plays both sides of the ball at a high level.

"Mason Stevens may be one of the fastest D-line-man I've been around," Freeney said. "Mason will probably run a 4.7 for as big as he is, and he's going to be the heart and soul of our offensive line and defensive line. The kid plays both ways, and he plays both ways like he plays one way."

Stevens said that both he and his teammates have embraced the new motivation that Freeney and coaching staff has brought to the program.

"Everybody's on it," Stevens said. "Everybody wants to improve because of the coaches pushing us to improve."

Along with bragging on linebacker Gage Brown and defensive lineman Joseph Buggs as the team's leaders, Freeney also said that he's noticed improvements from the team's defensive backs.

"They're getting it," Freeney said. "I think also what helped us is going and being in the 7-on-7s in Gadsden and against those bigger schools and things like that. Then we went to Boaz and were in there with bigger schools. I don't want the first time we see teams come out throwing the ball that way and throwing the ball well to be Sylvania or

be in the playoffs."

Defensive back Christian Smith said that the team has a lot more motivation to succeed than in years' past, with there being more "want" on this team than in years' past.

"We have had a lot of good defenses, but this defense I expect to be a lot tougher than last year's defense," Smith said. "Flying around more, there's a lot more want on his team. A lot of guys are counting us out, but there's a lot more want on his team than a lot of guys know."

While there's plenty of returning talent on both sides of the ball, there will be a new face leading the team's offense.

The team will turn to freshman quarterback JaMorris Young to serve as the lead signal caller after the transfer of Gavin Doss to Anniston.

Freeney said the freshman, who stands at about 6-foot-2 and weighs 240 pounds, could become one of the best quarterbacks he's ever coached.

"He's doing a great job," Freeney said. "He's really taken on a leadership role on the team as a freshman, and you saw him. He looks like he's a senior, he's a big boy. We're going to use his talent and try to let him thrive."

While Young is having to adjust to the team's new-look offense, which Freeney said will pass more than years' past, he'll have a receiving corps that Freeney described as one of the strong points of the team.

"The versatility is great and the nice thing is how they can run the ball as well," Freeney said. "The way they move with the ball in their hand, I've got to find ways to get them the football. It's only one foot-

ball. That's another thing, too, is these guys don't complain; they just do their job. They're the most unselfish group of kids I've ever been around."

Tight end and linebacker Mykese Gaffney said that the emergence of a strong pass game should also help Saks' running back tandem of Dorrien Walker and Nick Mixson.

"We have some weapons out there," tight end Mykese Gaffney said. "My good buddy, Christian Smith, and Jacori Avery and Tyeshawn Toney. We're expecting to air the ball out this year, be a lot more dominant in the pass game and when the pass game goes good, then that's when the run game will open up."



Bob Crisp/The Daily Home

New Saks Wildcats head coach Alphonso Freeney yells instructions to his players during preseason practice.

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WEAVER BEARCATS

New coach, new attitude for Weaver in 2023

BY PRESTON ODAM
Star Sports Writer

WEAVER — New head coach Ken Cofer is bringing a different attitude to the Weaver Bearcats. He has been impressed with the hunger of his new squad and is looking forward to the season ahead.

“When I got here, I didn’t know what to expect a little bit,” Cofer said. “Didn’t know any of the kids. When I got approved by the board I saw we had two state champion track guys and one that finished in the top three. And then we’ve got two-time defending state champions in wrestling, we did well in baseball. I’m thinking, ‘Man this school’s won,’ but I didn’t really know the kids.”

“I was really surprised at the kids. They are so hungry and eating up the weight room. That’s what’s been encouraging to me.”

Cofer added that he is a big believer that success comes with work in the weight room first, then success on the football field follows. He said that he believes the weight

room is number one in building a culture at a school in all sports.

“We want to make a run to the playoffs,” Cofer said of his first year. “We’re playing in a tough region. We will respect everybody, I guarantee you that. We’ve got to get the best out of our kids, and that’s what we’re trying to do, that’s what we’re trying to practice.”

Cofer is taking over at Weaver after spending two years at Cleburne County as an offensive coordinator. He has spent time in Georgia as a head coach to add to his resumé. Cofer is taking over the Weaver program after former head coach Gary Atchley took a position at Jacksonville High School.

Weaver is coming off of a 2-8 season and went 1-5 in Class 3A, Region 4. Even with the struggles of previous years, Cofer is optimistic about the young core of athletes he has on his team heading into the 2023 season.

The Bearcats open the season with a road game at Donoho on Aug. 25, after a jamboree at Ashville on Aug. 18. Weaver will then travel to Glencoe on Sept. 1, and open up region play at Dadeville on Sept. 8.

“It’s attitude and trying to build that family atmosphere,” Cofer said. “It does start with the weight room, but I always say the relationships, and I’ve had to start out fast because June 6 was when I actually came on board and got approved. Had to start building relationships with kids right off the bat.”

“I’ve never taken a job this late before. These kids have been great, they’ve accepted me and the way we’re doing things. Are they used to it? No, it’s still a process, but they’re just starving for it in the weight room and on the field, wanting to know what we’re doing.”

Cofer said he has been happy to see so many kids stay after practice each day to get in extra work. He said that the reception from the coaches that stayed with the program when he took over has been a “blessing.”

“They love Weaver High School,” Cofer said. “It’s not just their sport, it is Weaver High School and the Weaver community. I just want to be a part of the family. I know



Bill Wilson/The Anniston Star/file

Junior Kaden Gooden will return at quarterback for Weaver.

Please see **WEAVER** | Page 27



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WELLBORN PANTHERS

Offensive, defensive lines carry weight for Wellborn



Bob Crisp/The Daily Home

Jeff Smith is entering his 15th year as Wellborn's head coach.

BY THOMAS ASHWORTH

Star Sports Writer

Wellborn's Jeff Smith believes that a good football team is built on its offensive and defensive lines.

As Smith heads into his 15th year with Wellborn and 27th year as a head coach, he said this is one of the offseasons that he's been proud to brag on his strong set of linemen.

"Your offensive line is the foundation of your offense and the defensive line is the foundation of your defense," Smith said. "Generally, neither side gets a lot of attention. You're going to hear about the backs and receivers and you're going to hear about the linebackers. You're not going to hear about those guys, but without them, you have nothing."

He said that while there are many leaders on the offensive and defensive lines, one of the leaders among the group is Jaysilas Montgomery, who was named to the first team all-county defense last season.

"He's shown a lot of great leadership," Smith said.

Seniors Andrew Salter and Trey Downs, both linemen, are the two remaining players who played on Wellborn's 2019 team that advanced to the Class 3A state semifinals.

Salter, who will play offensive and defensive tackle, said at Calhoun County football media day that this season's offensive line is more experienced and features heavier players than last season.

"I feel like everybody's got their technique really down pat on the offensive and defensive line and I feel like that will be a big aspect of our team," Salter said at Calhoun County football media day.

With the departure of quarterback Grayson Johnson, the offensive line will protect Noah Screws this season as he heads into his first season as the starter.

Last season, Screws helped lead Wellborn to a win over Weaver to clinch a spot in the Class 3A playoffs.

"He's just a worker. He's not a rah-rah guy, but he's steady," Smith said. "He doesn't get up too high or get up too low. He works hard. He's a strong kid, again, he works

hard. He has the utmost respect from everybody on the team, and he's patiently waited his time. Here it is, his senior year, and he's got a chance to start at quarterback for us. I feel like he'll make the absolute most of it."

Luckily for Screws, he'll have plenty of offensive weapons to work with.

Along with a running back tandem of Jabari Williams and C.J. Hubbard, Smith said that Caleb McCurry, Kyle Bright, Jaxson Pope and Brennan Talley are all players who can play virtually every position on the field.

"I believe their toughness is there, and I like that," Smith said. "I see that in them, I think that's their strength. I think their work ethic is good. I think they've got a good work ethic and I think they're tough, and I think that'll carry you a long way. I think that's the strength of our team."

Wellborn is returning eight of its 11 defensive starters from last season, including all-county honorees Williams, Trey Downs and Ethan Carroll.

Smith said that he is especially excited about the return of linebacker Jaxson Newton, who missed last season with a shoulder injury.

"Having him back this year, as instinctive as a football player he is, I think he's gonna help us a great deal," Smith said. "Another thing, too, he's one of those kids that plays real hard, and he plays so hard he hurts himself because he'll throw his body around there real quick."

Along with a difficult Class 3A, Region 4 schedule, Wellborn has games scheduled against Anniston, Ohatchee, Talladega and Cleburne County this season.

Smith said that Fyffe coach Paul Benefield said that he's consistently been impressed by the schedules Wellborn puts together each season.

"He said, 'Your schedule is always tough,'" Smith said. "He said, 'That's one thing about y'all is don't ever have an easy schedule,' and that's hurt us in the past. I think our schedule has been so tough in the regular season once we got to the playoffs, we had to fight just to get there. It's been hard on us."



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WHITE PLAINS WILDCATS

Inexperienced White Plains players must grow as they go

BY RIP DONOVAN

Star Sports Correspondent

New head football coach Blake Jennings said a few days ago that 14 players had signed up for varsity football when he arrived at White Plains in April.

That number has increased to 38 currently but only two are seniors and just one of the seniors, Dylan Barksdale, has playing experience. The other is Cooper Tinney, a baseball pitcher by trade, recruited by Jennings from the White Plains hallways. Tinney, who Jennings said has never played football, may be the Wildcats' starter at tight end in his first high school football game.

A defensive coach for 12 seasons at Ohatchee, Jennings will shift to offense at White Plains. He brings a new offensive scheme but it's not the "ugly eagle" attack that Ohatchee made famous. The Wildcats will run the shotgun wing-T, more simply the gun-T.

"The offense will be a wing-T based offense that also has RPOs (Run-Pass Options) built into it where you can still throw the ball a little bit when you need to," Jennings said.

The formations, motions and shifts of the gun-T are designed to put defenses in a bind. Jennings said as Ohatchee's defensive coordinator, he saw the gun-T in action planning for and playing against Sylvania and Geraldine and thought they were two of the most difficult teams to prepare for that Ohatchee played.

"It can put a strain on defenses getting lined up for it," Jennings noted.

Jennings will bring his Ohatchee defense with him.

"It'll be like the 3-3 stack I've always run, a lot of it will be," he said. "We'll be kind of multiple on defense when we can get to that point. We just ain't to that point yet."

Xs and Os require Jimmys and Joes to make them work and that's a work in progress at White Plains. Lineman Ty Roberts and slot receiver-defensive back Rodney Perry join Barksdale as the most experienced Wildcats.

"I feel like the second week of practice was much better than the first week of practice. That goes back to kids understanding how we were running practice — things being on a time clock and things being scripted, them going from place to place. ... They're getting a little bit better every day. We had our first scrimmage Aug. 10. The scrimmage wasn't too bad. At times I felt like we looked decent. At times, you could tell that we didn't look so great,"

Jennings said.

Barksdale returns as the starter at quarterback. Behind him will be a freshman, either Crew Martin or Luke Richardson. P.J. Holloway, Braxxon Borrelli and Patrick Sams are in the mix at running back. Ben Campbell is ahead at wingback with Richardson behind Campbell. Tinney and junior Ashton Wallace are competing for tight end.

Joining Perry in the competition for slot receiver is Aiden Kilgore. Ethan Turner and Hayden Barksdale are wide receivers.

Offensive linemen are a commodity in short supply.

"We hope they'll all stay healthy," Jennings said.

Jennings has sophomore Logan Laube penciled in at center. Junior Dalton Luker is at left guard and classmate Roberts, a 4A-6A All-Calhoun County honorable mention as an offensive lineman last season, is projected as the right guard. Junior Anthony Stewart should be the right tackle. Hudson Ingalsbe, a 6-foot-4, 260-pound freshman, is the left tackle. Sophomore Beau Madrigal is the lone backup on the offensive line.

"I need more linemen but we just don't have them right now," Jennings acknowledged.

On defense, Roberts, Laube and Richardson are ahead on the front with Stewart, Ingalsbe and Gage Stevens behind them. Inside linebackers will come from Luker, Sams and Wallace. Campbell, Borrelli and Cash Bridges are competing for outside linebacker. In the secondary, Perry and Holloway should start at the corners with Dylan Barksdale at safety. In reserve will be Kilgore, Hayden Barksdale and freshman Bryson Cheatwood.

Cheatwood will handle place kicks and kickoffs. Either Luker or Dylan Barksdale will punt.

What does Jennings think will be required for his first Wildcat team to have success?

"I think if you have success early, in the first couple of games, and you get kids believing in what we're trying to do as coaches, and our guys stay healthy, that will go a long way," he said. "But, also, at the end of the day a kid's got to realize that it is a process. You've got to get better every single day. You can't really focus on the outcome or the wins and losses. You've got to focus more on the details and your technique and your effort and your physicality — those types of things — to make you a better player. Those are the things I'm preaching every day at practice."



Tucker Webb/The Daily Home

Dylan Barksdale is one of two seniors on White Plains' roster.

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WEAVER

Continued from Page 22

I'm the head coach, but I want to be a part of their family. So far, they have accepted me big time. It's been fun."

There have been plenty of standouts on the team for Cofer and his staff. Maybe none more than junior quarterback Kaden Gooden, who has proven himself to be a leader and a true talent on the field. Gooden received an offer from Marshall University this summer.

"He's been fun," Gooden said. "Everybody's liking him. He's pushing us in the weight room and at practice. He's pushing us to get up in the morning on-time, make sure everybody's in class, don't fall asleep or anything. Make sure we've got our grades first, then we come out here. If we don't got our grades, we're not playing at all."

On top of Gooden, Cofer pointed out a number of players he is hoping to see perform for the squad on Friday nights. Gabe King, a transfer from Pelham, will play

linebacker and running back. Eric Barnes, a senior defensive tackle, has led the team well according to Cofer.

DaShawn Barnes, Eric's younger brother, is a junior standout as well. Junior Jabarie Clark, junior Brandon Jolliff, and junior KeShawn Allen are all part of a strong junior group that will be back next season as well. Finally, Cofer has liked what he has seen from senior Christian Marturello.

"There's so many names," Cofer said. "But, those are the ones that stick out right now that's just been here all the time, that just stick out. Been a blessing just being here, looking forward to big things, I really am. I think we have a playoff team if we can keep everybody healthy and get everybody on the same page. Right now, we are on the same page."

Cofer and his team are ready for the season to finally get here. Gooden said he also is excited and cannot wait for their first game.

"Everybody, they're waiting," Gooden said. "We get to put pads on tomorrow, we're going to see how everybody feels and how they like to hit and stuff."

RAIDERS

Continued from Page 19

last year, will get carries in 2023. Also joining the group of running backs is freshman Kayden Vick, Dason's younger brother.

"He's going to be special in the backfield," Nix said of Kayden.

Four of the five Raiders on the offensive line are returning starters. Jackson Rose is the center. Grey Knight and Will Walker are the guards. Connor Crump returns at one tackle and senior Jeremiah Jones is the projected starter at the opposite tackle. As sophomore A.J. Lockridge continues to improve at tackle, he may be able to rest Crump on offense, making Crump better when he's on the field on defense.

Senior Samuel Duncan led the Raiders in tackles as a junior from his linebacker position. This season Duncan will also play on offense at tight end for the first time. Noah Johnson, a first-year football player who migrated from the baseball diamond, will share time at tight end with Duncan.

On defense, Pleasant Valley returns its entire secondary. Hill and Hunter Sparks will start as cornerbacks. Bryce Freeman will be the safety. When the Raiders go to a 3-4 package, Hill will move to a safety and Nick Acker will play the corner vacated by Hill. All but Acker played in every game last season according to Nix. Nix also expects freshman Jackson Acker will move into the defensive secondary rotation as he develops.

Duncan returns at one inside linebacker. Brayden Pappa, Wesley Wheeler or Tristan Williams will fill the second inside 'backer slot. Jaden Sparks and Kayden Vick are ahead at outside linebacker.

"When we were playing the best last year was when our edge was good. ... Those are two positions that are vital to us," Nix said of the outside linebackers.

Sophomore Luke Gunning, freshman Walker Roper and freshman Landen Taylor are also learning to play outside linebacker.

Everyone on the Raiders' three-man defensive front — Knight, Crump and Josh Buse — is a returning starter. In a four-man look, freshman Jonathan Hanson joins Buse, Crump and Knight. Jeffery Hughes gives the Raiders an effective pass rusher on third-and-long situations.

Nix said Hughes is "getting better every day" partly because of his "relentless motor" and partly because he just plays on defense.

Benji Slauson is developing into a reliable backup on the defensive line.

Hill will kick off, kick extra points and handle field goals. He and Salster will likely share punting duties.

Nix said each week he will warn his players against judging this year's game by last year's result. Teams that defeated the Raiders last year won't be the same. Teams the Raiders defeated last year won't be the same either.

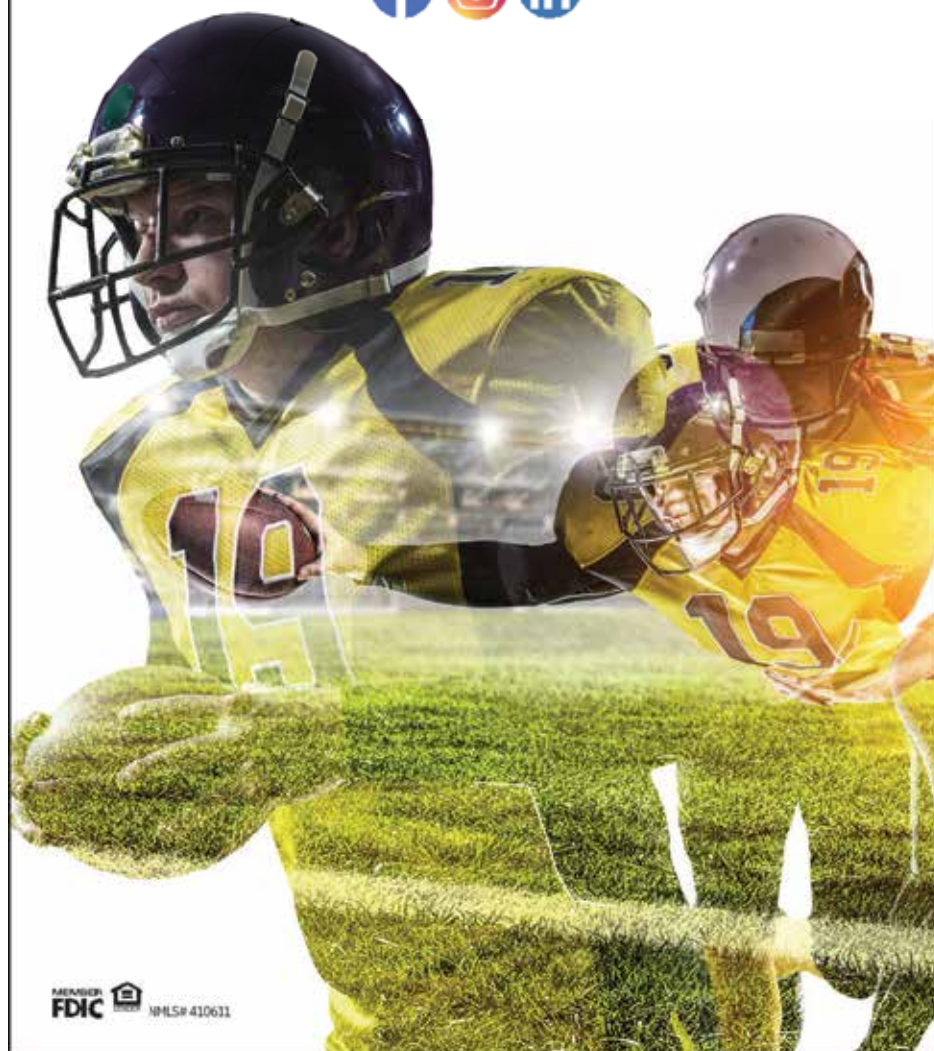
"Last year's result has nothing to do with this year's result," Nix said.

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SPRING GARDEN PANTHERS

Pair of seniors to help lead Ragsdale's first team

BY THOMAS ASHWORTH

Star Sports Writer

SPRING GARDEN — Just a few days into preseason practice, Spring Garden coach Barrett Ragsdale already noticed his team has plenty of intangibles.

"These guys are just serious and competitive," Ragsdale said. "Any time we do anything, whether it's scout team versus first team or we're doing drills, they're locked in. They've been really getting after each other, no slacking."

While all of the players on his team have the same drive to find

success, Ragsdale said that a lot of it comes from a pair of seniors.

Spring Garden has a strong pair of seniors — Chapel Pope and Jacob Dempsey — that will help lead both on and off the field.

Along with playing quarterback, Pope will see time at plenty of offensive skill positions, while Dempsey will help anchor the offensive and defensive lines.

"They've been around a long time and the young guys look up to those two," Ragsdale said. "We've got juniors that have been playing a long time but had that same leadership ability so that

helps bring the young kids and meshing right off the bat."

Pope, who will play plenty of snaps as the quarterback, said that he expects to run the ball plenty this season.

"Most Spring Garden quarterbacks are all the same — they run the ball," Pope said. "I'm probably not much different compared to the ones we've had in the past."

Along with him running the ball, Pope said that the team's group of skill players, which includes Noah Barber, Clayton Sadler, John Welsh and Zane Edwards, are also impressive.

"It's a pretty good room.

You've got some depth in there," Pope said. "They don't have to go and everyone else has to go to every play. They can take some breaks in there and they're all tough, strong runners."

Dempsey said that both Pope and Barber, who like to run at quarterback, make his job a little harder because of their running abilities. He added that since the three grew up together, it makes it easier to take on the tall task.

"I think it's probably the best thing protecting my quarterbacks, Chapel and Noah," Dempsey said. "I've known 'em ever since I grew up, and it's an

honor to block for 'em."

Ragsdale said along with Dempsey and Jacob Welsh returning on the offensive and defensive lines, Hayes Garmon, Zack Scogin and Mason Woods should see a lot of snaps on the line.

With this being Dempsey's last season, he said he has high expectations for the team's group of linemen.

"I think we're pretty strong," Dempsey said. "We've got a couple young guys but going on the year I think we're going to get it done and we're probably going to go to the state championship."

FAITH TEMPLE CHRISTIAN CENTER

Thunder have sights set on winning a championship

BY RIP DONOVAN

Star Sports Correspondent

From time to time this football season, you'll read that an eight-man football team representing Faith Temple Christian Center of Jacksonville has played a game in the Alabama Christian Football Association.

It will be OK to think of the team as Jacksonville Christian Academy because the team is coached by Jacksonville Christian principal Tommy Miller and all the players attend Jacksonville Christian. Think of it as JCA, just don't say "JCA" out loud.

"The league that we play in we can't literally play under Jacksonville Christian Academy because the AHSAA won't let us play eight-man football under JCA," Miller said at the Quarterback Club of Calhoun County's high school football media day July 28. "We have to play under the church name. If you hear Jacksonville Thunder, that's the same thing."

Before joining the AHSAA before the start of the 2002-03 school year, Jacksonville Christian played eight-man football for many years with Miller doing the majority of the coaching. In 2010 and again in 2014, the Thunder reached the first round of the AHSAA Class 1A playoffs then lost.

The 2015 and 2016 seasons weren't disasters in terms of wins and losses but

the Thunder finished the 2016 season with 16 players from seniors all the way down to seventh-graders. In 2017, to put 11 on the field, Jacksonville Christian would have been playing unprepared seventh-graders against experienced senior high players and Miller pulled the plug on the 2017 season.

Miller slowly came to realize JCA's enrollment was unlikely to support an 11-man football team on a regular basis in the future. Twice he made a pre-season trip to Montgomery to speak in person with Steve Savarese, then the AHSAA executive director, hoping to convince Savarese to support eight-man football under the AHSAA umbrella.

The second year, Savarese asked if Jacksonville Christian Academy operated under the sponsorship of a church. When Miller said JCA was a part of Faith Temple Christian Center, Savarese told him Jacksonville Christian should "get the church to have a team and they could hire who they wanted to coach."

After three seasons without any varsity football, Miller didn't ask Savarese to repeat himself. Miller contacted the Alabama Christian Football Association about joining for the 2020 season and was told that a Faith Temple Christian Center team would be welcomed "as long as everybody was a student at JCA." This year, JCA's roster has 19 players. Two are seniors, four are

juniors and seven are sophomores.

"It's been good for us," Miller said of eight-man football. "It would have been unhealthy for us to try to play 11-man football."

In 2022, the Thunder reached the ACFA's four-team playoffs, won its opening playoff game and finished as ACFA runner-up. The Thunder ended 8-2 with both losses coming to ACFA champion Russell Christian Academy of Meridian, Miss. Miller was the league's coach of the year, guiding Faith Temple to the championship game after the team had a losing record in 2021.

At the media day event, sophomore lineman Preston Strawder said after last

year's season he is "motivated to go out there and win the championship."

Faith Temple returns three all-league players from 2022 in senior receiver Travis Barnhill, senior offensive lineman Deon Dupree and sophomore quarterback Noah Lee. As a freshman, Lee completed 126 of his 214 passing attempts for 2,173 yards with 29 touchdowns and just three interceptions in 10 games.

"I actually think we have a chance," Miller said at media day. "(If we) work hard and stay focused we have a chance to get back in the playoffs."

The Thunder's nine-game regular season schedule began in Alabaster on Aug. 11 with a 54-18 win over Trinity Christian.

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RANBURN BULLDOGS

Deeper Ranburne team looking for more wins

BY RIP DONOVAN

Star Sports Correspondent

Ranburne finished 5-5 during the 2022 regular season and a late-season loss to Region 4 opponent Thorsby cost the Bulldogs a place in the Class 2A football playoffs. In 2023, Ranburne head coach Stephen Bailey wants to be certain missing the playoffs doesn't become a habit.

Bailey must find replacements for three two-way starters. Gone are offensive and defensive linemen Carson Hall and Bo Young along with running back and safety Kaleb Benefield. Bailey may find the answers to those questions in depth rather than one player per position.

The Bulldogs held a full-scale scrimmage Aug. 11. Bailey said he got quality repetitions for every player he thought was ready to help at the varsity level. The sloppy field condition, a byproduct of the nearly daily rain in Ranburne since the start of fall practice, was the lone negative.

"We played everybody. ... Offensively, we ran the ball really well. Defensively, I

thought we communicated well. We lined up correctly probably 90 or 95 percent of the time which at this time of the year is pretty good, especially installing new stuff, so I was pleased with both of those aspects," Bailey said.

Senior Kaide Garrett returns as the starter at quarterback. As a junior, Garrett rushed for 820 yards and eight touchdowns on 140 carries. He completed 47 of 85 passes for 502 yards and four touchdowns with four interceptions.

Senior Zach Buchanan, junior Curtis Daniel, junior Logan Crook and junior Brody Morgan, back out for football after not having played in recent years, are the candidates for running back. The four also play similar positions on defense.

"What I'd like to be able to do is take two of them and have them be heavy defensive players and two of them be heavy offensive players and build some depth there," Bailey said. "We'll see if that's how it happens. ... All of them have done some good things and all of them need some work."

At wide receiver, senior Ty Bowling,

senior Tate Bailey, junior Kalon Smith and sophomore Brody Horner are ahead after two weeks of preseason practice with senior Nathan Isbell and sophomore Crimson Champion behind them but still able to catch up.

At tight end are senior Rhett Williamson and sophomore Creed Young. Senior Truett Ward and junior Jacob Alewine play the 'Z' receiver. Bailey said both positions have blocking responsibilities on the edge but "still catch the ball some, too."

Despite the losses of Young and Hall to graduation, Bailey praised the current offensive line.

"I thought through camp that our offensive line is farther along than we were last year," he said. "I've been real pleased with those guys. We're just really thin there numbers-wise."

Senior Caleb Pollard is slated to start at center with sophomore Riley Craft behind him. Senior Trey Ertzberger returns as the starter at quick guard. Junior Aiden Hanson figures to be the quick tackle. Junior Zaden Benefield, who started at quick

tackle in 2022, should start at strong guard this year. Bailey described Benefield's preseason as "excellent." Senior Isaac Calvert started at strong tackle last year and returns to fill that role in 2023.

Bailey acknowledged that the names along the defensive front are "very similar" to those on the offensive line. Hanson and Pollard are the leaders at defensive end. Ertzberger and Benefield are projected to start at the tackles.

The Bulldogs have four players vying for two inside linebacker spots. Senior Jaxon Bailey and Williamson are the likely starters with Young and Crook behind them. At outside linebacker, seniors Buchanan and Garrett are in the lead for starting roles with Alewine and Logan Nolen in reserve.

Ward and Bowling are scheduled to start as the cornerbacks. Smith, who played significant time at safety when Kaleb Benefield was injured last year, should be the starter at safety with sophomore Hunter Hulsey behind him. Sophomore Drew Davenport, Tate Bailey and Horner are currently the backups at the corners.

CLEBURNE COUNTY TIGERS

Cleburne County seeks to be injury free and competitive

BY RIP DONOVAN

Star Sports Correspondent

Defections followed by injuries eventually turned Cleburne County's 2022 football season into a 2-8 train wreck. The defections seem to have slowed down to a trickle and despite last year's adversity the Tigers are far from lifeless.

"I've been pleased with the way we've worked," head coach Joby Burns said a few days ago. "We started a week early and I've really liked that. We've already scrimmaged once. It's been good, hard. Everybody's had great attitudes, worked hard, excited. That first week, before we started school, we did a couple of days where we did two-a-days, started every morning at 6 and everybody was there on time, ready to go. It's been good."

There have been some adjustments in this year's schedule. Mount Zion (Ga.) is gone and the Tigers will open on the road at Northside of Tuscaloosa County. Tall-

dega remains Cleburne County's Class 4A, Region 4 opener.

Gone is high-scoring Moody and the 5A Boaz Pirates replace the 5A Blue Devils. Boaz had an open date Sept. 15 when Crossville dropped football and called looking for a game. Burns said he didn't know much about Boaz but the two teams had comparable loss margins against Jacksonville last year.

"I do think we've got an opportunity in our first few games to win them. ... If we could start out 3-0 going into Munford that would be awesome," Burns said.

Wins certainly aren't guaranteed but Burns expects the Tigers will be competitive. The 'if' factor is avoiding injuries but that's a big 'if' in Heflin in recent years.

"The biggest thing is we've got to stay healthy. We can't have injuries like we did last year. We have got so many people playing both sides of the ball. ... We've got to stay healthy and those kids have got to be able to do it," Burns said.



Locations in:

- Piedmont
- Jacksonville
- Oxford
- Alexandria-Melrose
- Centre

• Gadsden

• Southside

• Auburn

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