

August 2023

PIGSKIN PREVIEW

A SPECIAL SUPPLEMENT TO THE ST. CLAIR TIMES



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PIGSKIN PREVIEW 2023

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Changing it up: Ashville embraces new, updated offense under first-year coach

BY TYLER WALDREP

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ASHVILLE — First-year coach Kirakias Shepard is ready to drag the Bulldogs' offense into the modern era, although he'd prefer to remain quiet on the specifics until the season starts.

"Just getting our athletes the ball in space," Shepard said. "Me being a defensive coach, I know one thing I hate having to defend is space. It really puts stress on your defenses."

The key to unlocking everything seems to be athlete Jaden Harris who will line up in the slot, at quarterback and at running back. Oh, and just in case he doesn't have enough on his plate, Harris will also punt.

"He is really dynamic, so we will really lean on him," Shepard said.

Although Harris will have packages in place where he lines up under center, the team's starting quarterback will be returning starter Ryan Harris, no relation.

"He knows the offense just as good as the coaches do," Shepard said. "He could go out there, he could probably go out there and call it if we needed him to."

Ashville's quarterback will rely on a receiving corps led by sophomores JB Potter and Nate Huckbay, who lead the way along with senior Justin Jones, who recently moved back to Ashville after liv-

ing out of state for two years.

Shepard said the offensive line is the only position group that probably had a steeper learning curve this offseason than those receivers.

Luckily for the Bulldogs and their first-year coach, that line appears to be the strongest position on the entire team.

"Their job is even harder than the quarterback because they have to ID the front, then they have to make specific calls and specific checks off of the front that they are getting," Shepard said.

Left tackle Ethan Turner and right guard Mike Tindal will anchor the line, and left guard Parker Cross has emerged as the group's leader.

Sophomore right tackle Caleb Bragg and freshman center Justin Henderson round out the group.

That group will be tasked with clearing the way for lead running back Jonathan Beason, who actually played eight-man football last season.

"A kid that works hard, a kid that is very coachable," Shepard said. "Wants to get better, wants his teammates to get better. Takes it to the max every day."

Sophomore Parker Smith starts at tight end, but he's really impressed his coaches with his ability to lead on the defensive side of the football, where he lines up as a middle linebacker.

"Us being able to put that trust in him knowing he can get that job done shows

how much of a leader he is already and shows how mature he is already," Shepard said.

He will be joined on the field by fellow linebackers Jones and Nick Williamson, who has emerged as the team's best linebacker. Thanks largely to that trio, Shepard believes it is the second strongest position group on the team behind the offensive line.

Up front, Shepard will lean on Tindal, Turner and Cross.

Potter and Huckbay will line up at safety while Jaden Harris and Shuntear McCain start at corner.

Ashville's new coach believes the offensive changes will also help the defense since the Bulldogs will be facing a more similar offense in practice.

"We'll be that much more prepared to play the pass or play offenses that spread the ball out that much more," Shepard said.

Shepard knows that his players and coaches have been put in a tough spot this offseason. He wasn't hired until late June, which meant the Bulldogs have been up against the clock for the last month to convert the offense.

Despite that, Shepard isn't letting his team lower its goals for the season.

"Our goal is to contend for the playoffs, and I think we can do that," Shepard

See Ashville, Page 4



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Ashville

From Page 2

said. "And before I hired my OC like I knew I wanted to change what we did offensively. I knew it was going to be different. To do that, you gotta be a little crazy even to take the job as late as July, you have to think a little different."

Shepard said his players and coaches have embraced that challenge.

"These kids that have been in that (old) offense for three, maybe four, five years," Shepard said. "I wanted to spark their imagination. They needed to be excited."

Considering Ashville is only fielding a team of roughly 30 players, the Bulldogs will need that excitement to persist into the season if the program is going to reach its potential in the coming seasons.

"If the kids are excited, that's what recruits the program,"

ASHVILLE

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- 9/01 At Lincoln
- 9/08 Vs Etowah
- 9/15 At Hanceville
- 9/22 BYE
- 9/29 Vs Hayden
- 10/6 At Fultondale
- 10/13 At Good Hope
- 10/20 Vs Oneonta
- 10/27 Vs Cherokee County
- 11/03 Vs Munford

Shepard said. "So those kids get excited. They're talking about the program with their families. They're talking about it with their friends. You know, and they have some pride in Ashville football. And that just creates excitement all the way up."



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Leeds' defensive front capable of overwhelming opponents

BY TYLER WALDREP

twaldrep@dailyhome.com

LEEDS — Defensive end Kavion Henderson has already put together a career worthy of recognition. Unfortunately, for the rest of 5A, the consensus 4-star prospect committed to Arkansas still has one year left to pad his resume.

"Kavion, he is our best player," Leeds coach Jerry Hood said. "He is the president of our leadership council, he has the most energy, he cares the most about detail, and he is the undisputed leader of the team ... When your best player is your best leader, that helps the locker room."

On the other side of the line, defensive end Chris Burge is finally getting the recognition he deserves. A 3-star prospect, according to 247Sports, Burge reportedly has offers from Missouri, Jacksonville State and several other D-I programs.

"Chris is like right there with him as far as athleticism, energy, and all those kind of things," Hood said, comparing Burge to Henderson. "We think both of those tall, long athletes gives us an advantage."

Advantage? Talk about the understatement of the season, and Hood also has faith that linemen Joseph Stone and Nick Davis can more than do their part inside to open things up for the ends.

In fact, their dominance is a big reason the Leeds coaching staff moved Sean Hicks over to right tackle.

"We got four senior D-linemen that all will play college football," Hood said. "So he was stuck in a backup role with them, but he had the athleticism and the toughness to play offensive line, so we made the switch for the team, but it was a better opportunity for him too."

Hicks will learn the ropes alongside three returning starters in right guard Carlos Plascencia, left guard Taylor Pulliam and left tackle Gavin Bowlin.

Jax Garner and Wilson Beasley are competing for the open spot at center.

Conner Nelson split time at quarterback last season with former teammate Jarod Latta who has since graduated. Now it's finally time for Nelson to run the show, and Hood is confident he can air the ball out even though he rarely attempted passes last season.

"He's got a really huge arm and all," Hood said. "Reading coverages and all that is a little new to him. So we keep it fairly simple for him, but as far as throwing the ball, he has a lot of arm talent, and of course, he's a great athlete. You got always the run possibility there."

Often Nelson was Leeds' most reliable

LEEDS

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9/01 At Pell City
9/08 At Springville
9/15 Vs St. Clair County
9/22 BYE
9/29 Vs Sylacauga
10/06 At Southside
10/13 Vs Alexandria
10/20 Vs Moody
10/27 At Lincoln
11/03 Vs Center Point

receiver last season. Now that he's under center, he will depend on receiver Jaelyn Felder who has emerged as the top option. Rylan Rose, freshman Taylon Gaiter and Brooks Ford are all expected to see significant time at receiver this fall.

Running back Z.J. Dale will lead a committee on the ground that includes Grayson Ford and David Luna.

Former running back Miles Jones will start at middle linebacker this season, although he remains an emergency option to carry the ball if the team needs more depth.

Linebackers Gavin Howard and Will Ford should split time this season while Josh Lee lines up outside.

"I think the verbal leader over there is Josh Lee," Hood said. "The guy can fly. He is a tough hitter. Miles has a lot of responsibility because he is the Mike. He is going to get us lined up and stuff like that."

Both corners Jeremiah Hall and Miles Ashford return this season, but Leeds must replace both safeties. Reece Bittner, Dorian Hunter, Tikeem Fitts and Nolan Moore compete for the open spots.

One of the biggest question marks on the team might just be at kicker. Jackson Arthur was a reliable weapon for Leeds last season, both on kickoffs and when it came to midrange field goals.

Avery Lanford will take his place on extra points and field goals. He may also handle kickoff duties, but the coaching staff is also looking at Plascencia.

Leeds ranks No. 6 in the 5A preseason poll. The team finished tied for fifth last season after blowing a fourth-quarter lead to eventual state champion Ramsay in the quarterfinals.

"It made me sick," Hood said.

That's as close as Hood gets to discussing last season's playoff run. However, there is one exception where the coaching

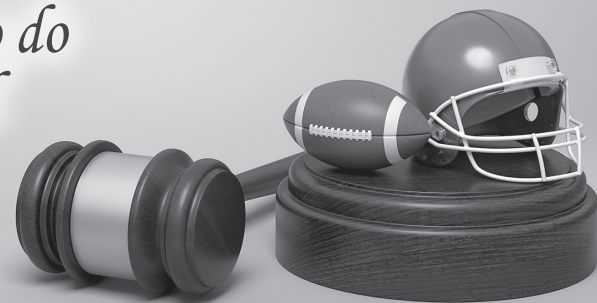
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Leeds

From Page 8

staff will remind the players of the loss to Ramsay.

“We give the kids more of a cautionary tale of don’t waste those unique times in your life where you have a great opportunity and because of turnovers or penalties or whatever the case may be, don’t let it be because you didn’t do something in August and September,” Hood said.

“Let it be because the other team is just that much better than you.”

Hood said he expects Ramsay to be the favorite to repeat again this season. Of course, Leeds doesn’t have to look ahead to the postseason to find worthy opponents.

Leeds will host No. 7 Moody on Oct. 20 for a matchup that could deter-

mine the region for the second year in a row. Leeds won last year at Moody 14-13 after Henderson and Burge combined for at least four sacks, three additional tackles for loss and four quarterback hurries.

While that showdown deserves a spot on the shortlist for the most exciting games that will take place in the state this fall, Hood hopes that fans show up for every opponent on

the schedule.

“We are going to pack it out for Moody,” Hood said. “Moody knows that we know that. That is a great rivalry. That will be a fun game for this side of town, but when we play anybody on our schedule, I think at this point, our boys have proven that they are a beacon in this community, and I would love to see it just jam-packed all the time.”



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SPRINGVILLE TIGERS



Tight-knit Springville hopes to make most of bond forged last season

BY TYLER WALDREP

twaldrep@dailyhome.com

SPRINGVILLE — When Springville coach Jon Clements looks at quarterback Jake Conner he can't help but think of his principal, Gregory Moore.

"I know that's a funny comparison," Clements said.

In both Conner and Moore, Clements sees a leader that establishes the tone by setting the right example.

"So many people love coming to work here for him because of the same exact thing," Clements said. "And I think that just bleeds into our team with Jake. Jake's the same way. He doesn't talk a lot, but he's there every day. He works his tail off."

Although Conner is the front-runner in fall camp, he has yet to win the starting job over Noel Cox.

No matter who wins the job, both guys will see the field plenty this fall. Conner's secondary position is at safety, while Cox is the team's top option at receiver, although Cle-

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 10/27 At St. Clair County
 11/03 Vs Pell City

ments believes Cox would excel anywhere on the field.

"To coach a Noel Cox, everybody, every coach should get to coach one of him," Clements said. "Because he is that type of player. He can do anything out there on that field. And whatever he can't do. If you tell him he can't do it, he'll figure it out. He's a tireless worker."

Some players crack the starting lineup thanks to their raw athleti-

cism, but that wasn't the case with receiver Seth Jones. He worked exceptionally hard to earn his spot on the roster.

"As far as being the best teammate and best person for us, he's incredible," Clements said.

Sophomore Reed Wallace and senior Drake Digiacoimo should also see plenty of time at receiver this season.

The Tigers' head coach said the team's strength probably lies up front with the line. The three standouts are center Nathan Baldwin, Spencer Stewart and Brodie Ginn.

Clements isn't exactly sure where the last two will play or who will start alongside them, but that has more to do with finding the best combination than it does with a lack of talent.

Lineman Joseph Glenn hasn't locked down a starting role for the Tigers this year yet, but Clements praised him as a possible sixth man that has the versatility to play any of

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Springville

From Page 32

the line positions.

"They are all interchangeable, and I think that is something that's gonna make our team have a really good dynamic," Clements said. "I mean, we're gonna play seven or eight offensive linemen in different spots throughout a game."

The Tigers might need every one of them in order to capitalize on running back Mahlon Alverson's potential.

There was no doubt he would be one of the focal points of this offense, but Clements said he's seen a huge change in the running back's attitude this offseason.

"Something clicked with Mahlon, and Mahlon kind of got out of his own way and started really believing in the weight room and taking care of his body and really maturing," Clements said. "I guess that's the best word to use. ... I told him the other day after practice that was probably the best practice I've seen from a single player since I've been here."

He didn't tell Alverson that just because he dominated physically, which it sounds like he did. Alverson also volunteered to jump in with the scout team and looked for little ways he could help his teammates get the most out of their practice opportunities.

That's not who Alverson has been in the past. Now that his running back sees the bigger picture, Clements expects others on the team to follow his lead.

"Kids do what kids see. ... It doesn't take long when the guys whose names are in the paper all the time are doing the right things, how everybody else wants to do it, too," Clements said.



Fellow running backs Colby Ellis and Gavin Webber will mix in when Alverson needs a break this year.

Kayden Hanrahan will rotate in at tight end in addition to his duties as the team's long snapper.

The specialists relying on Hanrahan will include sophomore kicker Patrick Williams and junior punter Brady Seaman.

Seaman, a safety, is also one of three returning starters in the secondary. Conner will likely see some time at safety as well, although the outcome of the quarterback battle could minimize his role on defense if the Tigers want to play it safe.

The other returner is cornerback Kaden Jeffrey. A committee including defensive backs Jacob Adams and Cody Ingram will cover the rest of the secondary.

Linebacker Cole Tittle, a returning starter, will be tasked with making all the calls for the defense this fall.

Defensive linemen

Landon McKendree and Talan Swallows return to anchor things up front for the Tigers.

Edge Elijah Wasden would have been another returning starter for the Tigers, but he missed all of last season with a back injury. Clements said Wasden lost a lot of weight due to the injury, but the defender looks like a "new human" these days.

"All of the sudden, he is healthy now, and we're like wow, this is going to be a good player for us," Clements said. "So I'm really looking for some big things out of Elijah."

Speaking of big things, Clements looks like a coach with the weight of the world off his shoulders this August.

"They had an opportunity to quit," Clements said. "They had an opportunity to leave and go to another school. ... They stuck with us through the hard times. And I think they deserve to see the fruits of their labor."

"Now, does that mean

that's gonna happen? I can't sit here and tell you that. But I know waking up and coming to work every day. It is a pleasure because of the people we get to be around."

Clements quickly adds that his comments aren't a criticism of last year's seniors. That group showed the returning players how to deal with the adversity that comes with a 1-9 season.

It's possible the Tigers emerged from last year stronger for it. Clements said he's never seen a team with better chemistry than this group. A lot of the credit goes to the current senior class.

"These 14 seniors, I can almost bet that no matter what happens, they are going to be successful people," Clements said.

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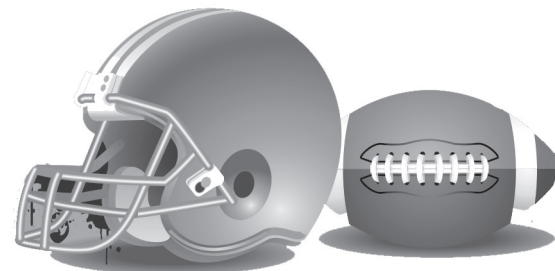
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VICTORY CHRISTIAN LIONS



Lions start new era celebrating increased depth

BY TYLER WALDREP

twaldrep@dailyhome.com

PELL CITY — There's an empty locker in the middle of Victory Christian's locker room. On the top and bottom of the locker read the words "The Beast."

Each week that place of honor is supposed to be given to the football player that sets the best example on the field. Last year, Asa Warren might as well have set up permanently in that locker, considering he spent at least half the season there.

"Because he is the one that is going to come up and get you," Victory Christian coach Terry Etheredge said.

Warren should have plenty of chances to back that up on the field this season, considering the outside linebacker will also see time at safety and cornerback. Etheredge wasn't with the program last year, but Warren's physical play on defense more than earned the first-year coach's respect.

"He is smart, for one," Etheredge said. "He knows the defenses. He can get the kids in the right coverages. ... He really, really studies the defensive side of the

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ball. It is like having a coach on the field."

Inside, the Lions will rely on Kaden Dixon and Caden Brunson while Dylan Hollis is the front-runner, outside of Warren, of course, to earn the start on the outside.

Backing them up will be a secondary that includes starting safety Alex Hoggard. Etheredge said he's watched the sophomore gain confidence throughout the spring and summer.

In fact, the coach said he's confident Hoggard will end the season with multiple

picks.

"He got an interception at the end of the year," Etheredge said. "And during the spring and coming into 7-on-7s, I think it finally clicked with him how you play this position."

Elsewhere in the secondary, Brayden Holliday will lock down one of the cornerback spots.

The other corner spot will be split between brothers Issac and Noah Baker, although Etheredge said Noah has the edge heading into fall camp.

Up front, the defense will lean on linemen Brady Hart and William Wilson-Hueter inside while Reed Martin and Walker Caldwell start at the two defensive end positions.

Of course, the defense will just be one of many places the Lions will lean on Wilson-Hueter. The 6-foot-4, 280-pound lineman is also one of two front runners for kicking duties this year. He's the early favorite for field goals more than 30 yards away.

Freshman DeWayne Talley is competing to handle short field goals this season. He's also competing for some or all of the team's place-kicking duties.

There's also a bit of a competition ongoing at punter. Etheredge said it would be either Hoggard or junior Shepard Sargent who handled it last year.

Of course, while Sargent might have to prove himself this fall as a punter, that's not the case at quarterback, where he will start for the Lions for the third straight season.

"That is huge, huge," Etheredge said. "He sees things that a younger guy ain't going to see. He's been in situations now that none of our younger kids have been in. He's going to make our offense go."

Sargent will be lining up behind a line anchored by Wilson-Hueter on one side at right tackle and Phillip Brasher on the other side at left tackle.

It's safe to say both tackles have made an impression on the Lions' new coach. Brasher lost 60 pounds this year already.

"He said, 'coach nobody is going to outwork me this year, nobody,'" Etheredge said.

Then again, anyone who speaks to Etheredge hears more than enough about Wilson-Hueter.

See **Victory**, Page 38



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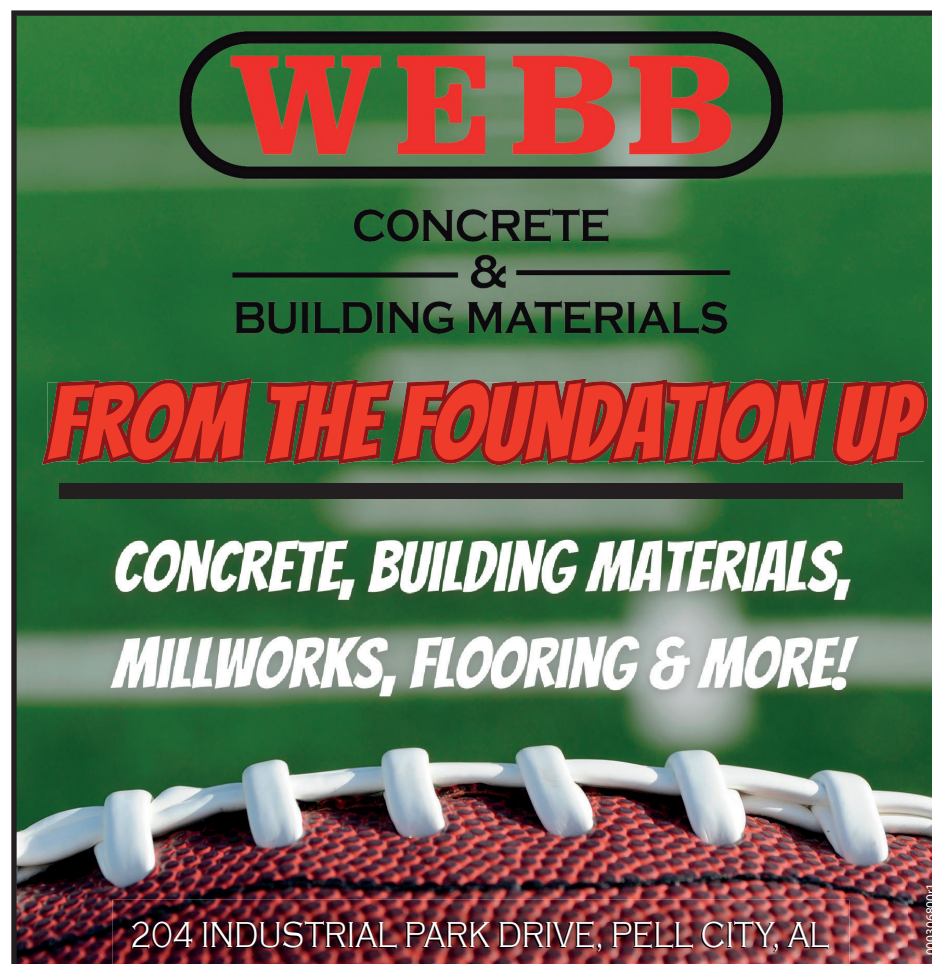
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Victory

From Page 36

"He's got great feet," Etheredge said. "The kids start laughing when I start talking about how great his feet are because I say it so much. His feet, I haven't seen a big man with feet like him, and I think basketball has helped tremendously."

The other line positions remain up for grabs.

Hart will definitely start, but Etheredge isn't sure if he's going to end up at center or one of the two guard spots. Twins Jude and Kade Whittington are in the mix as well, along with Caldwell.

Caleb Powers will likely be the first offensive lineman off the bench should anyone need a breather. Lance Ly, a 6-foot-2 senior lineman, is another reserve that will be used to spell people on both the offensive and defensive lines this season.

Whichever combination of guys ends up on the field will be asked to pave the way for Dixon, a senior running back who weighs more than 200 pounds.

"He's a load, and he's fast, and he likes to deliver a lick," Etheredge said. "He doesn't wait for the lick. He delivers it."

When it's not Dixon carrying the ball, it will likely be Brunson, the starting full back. Reed Martin could see time at full-back since he started there last season, but he will likely spend most of his offensive snaps starting at tight end.

Etheredge said the Lions have a number of capable backup options for the running back and fullback positions, including Jayden Hicks, Warren, Holliday and Caldwell.


Several of those guys will also see time at receiver, but the Lions' starters will likely consist of Warren and Holliday, the latter of whom is reportedly one of the fastest guys on the team.

Victory Christian hasn't won more than four games or made the playoffs since 2019, when the Lions did both. Despite being a first-time head coach, Etheredge said he's confident his team has what it takes to surprise people this fall in part because he's dressing 10 kids more, for a total of 30, than the last year's group had available.

Not only will that minimize the load on certain Lions, but it should also help the coaches make in-game adjustments, especially if an opponent hits a groove on one side of the ball.

"A lot of things you can't see from the sideline," Etheredge said. "We need a kid to go in and relieve the kid that is in that spot so we can go over and talk to that kid."

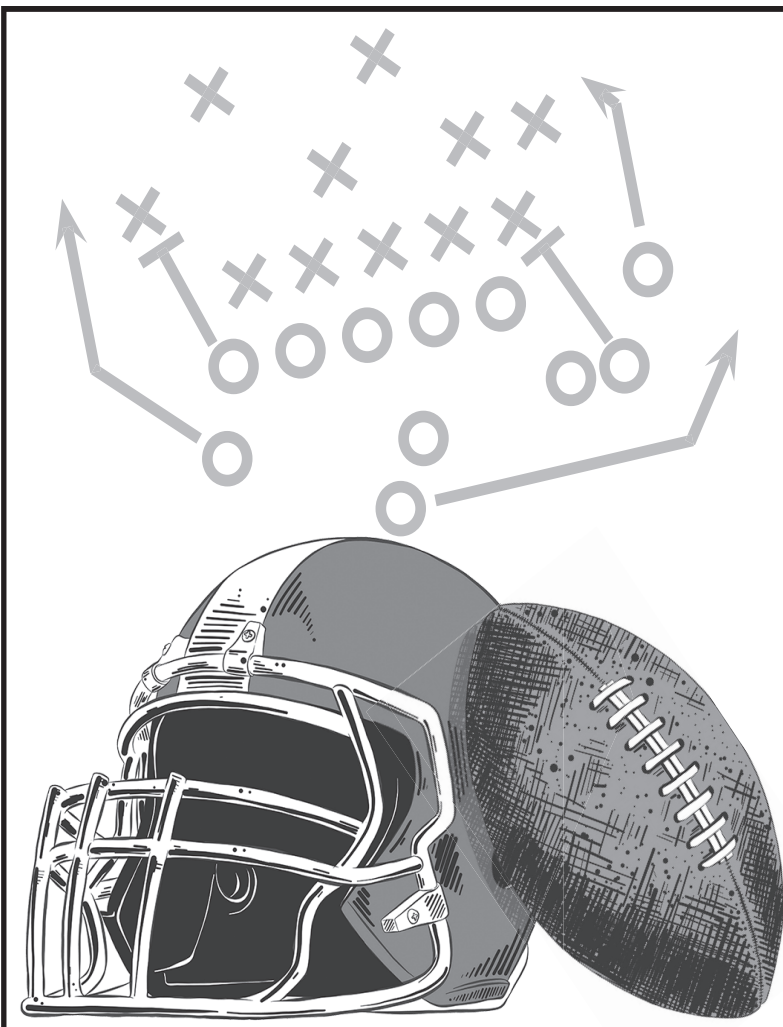
"So giving our kids a chance to get a break and talk to us for a play or two to come up with something to stop something that is happening or to give them a technique that will work better is going to be huge for us."



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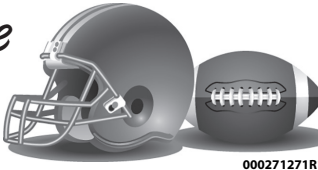
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Pick your poison: Veteran Moody secondary should give new offensive leaders time to grow

BY TYLER WALDREP

twaldrep@dailyhome.com

MOODY — Last year Moody shattered the school's offensive records, won the program's first playoff game since 2004, and came two points short of claiming the region championship with a win over Leeds.

Just don't expect Moody coach Jake Ganus to stop and reflect on any of it.

"I think that every season and every team is completely different and has their own identity," Ganus said. "And I think that where coach (Mark) Freeman is so good at, Thompson is not living on last year's success because they keep winning it. ... We just hammer it is about today. It is about what is important in this moment."

Speaking of today, the Blue Devils rank No. 7 in 5A entering the season, and the talent in the secondary more than backs that ranking up.

On one side sits junior cornerback Sidney Walton, a 3-star prospect according to 247Sports. Walton reportedly has offers from Kentucky and West Virginia already.

"He is a vocal leader, which I love," Ganus said. "You look out there, you might look at A'Mon (Lane) and Sidney and say I'm going to throw at A'Mon, which is good. We want you to do that, but Sidney, just that presence of being 6-3, 190 out there and can run and move and is quick and can jump."

Speaking of Lane, Walton's counterpart on the other side of the field is a 4-star Auburn commitment that ranks among the state's best seniors this fall.

Lane spent last season

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9/08 At Alexandria
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9/22 Vs Lincoln
9/29 Vs Shelby County
10/06 At Springville
10/13 Vs St. Clair County
10/20 At Leeds
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at Moody's nickel, where Ganus expects his son to play when he arrives at Auburn. Still, the Blue Devils coach can't help but get excited about seeing Lane play corner this fall.

"Where he has really taken his game to the next level is man coverage," Ganus said. "He has always been good at man, but I think moving him to corner and letting work with coach (TD) Marshall every day on footwork, off-hand jam, the little things, that are going to put more tools in his toolbox to play man."

Then at the safety level, the Blue Devils have AJ Madison, who Ganus praised as the team's best tackler lining up alongside Coastal Carolina commitment Chase Jackson.

If that wasn't enough, Ganus said junior cornerback Eric Vance, sophomore safety Caden Cofield and freshman safety Jalijah Rutledge are all pushing the established starters for playing time this fall.

Dezron Mobley should replace Lane at nickel this fall. He will be lining up next to a linebacker corps that includes senior returning starters Zane Smith and Gavyn Baker on the inside and outside linebacker Kaleb Goff who has 22 career starts under

his belt already.

Things don't get less intimidating up front. Cameron Mallory, the only freshman to start last season, is back on the inside.

"He is special," Ganus said. "We ride his tail. ... but it is only because we see greatness in that kid."

He is flanked by senior returning starters Logan Hall and Brady Dodd. Simon Mollay and Charlie Kitts will see time at defensive end while fresh-

man Ba'Roc Willis moves around as a defensive edge.

Speaking of an edge, Ganus is excited to watch kicker Junior Moreno show off this year after he improved his field goal range and worked on his kickoffs.

The offense doesn't boast quite as many returning starters, but Arkansas State commitment Blaine Burke might mask a lot of that all by himself. Last fall Burke proved he could more than earn his keep as a pass catcher alone. It sounds like Ganus will reward that production with a greater role in the passing game.

That will mean more running back snaps for Abram Jackson, who Ganus said somehow managed to top 600 rushing yards last season, play-

See Moody, Page 15

Go Blue Devils!

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Moody

From Page 14

ing clearly in Burke's shadow.

Speaking of shadows, Moody's top receivers last fall, Davion Dozier and Kolby Seymour, are off at Arkansas and UAB (walk-on), respectively.

"I love our receiver group, Ganus said. "They are going to be in the shadow of Davion until they get out. And that is what we talk about. What a fun challenge it is for them to have to go and replace the production of Davion and Kolby, who had over 2,000 yards between the two of them. To me, that is exciting because that is 2,000 yards that are out there for the taking."

The guys seeking to answer that bell include returning starters Aidan Robinson and Braden Wright. They will be joined in the starting lineup by Jacob Hadaway, a former linebacker, and Josiah Dozier, Davion's cousin, who requested to wear the No. 4 jersey this year.

Bradley Blais and Isaiah Hatch also wait in the wings to take the field. Then there's Hewitt-Trussville transfer KD Barnes who will get a chance to earn playing time or even a starting role during the final weeks of fall camp.

The offense will be anchored by an offensive line that includes returning starters in center Brennan King, right guard Jackson Randall and left tackle

Jaxon Huckeba. Those three are the favorites to start again alongside two of JB Meyers, Caydon Smith and Ryder Hixson.

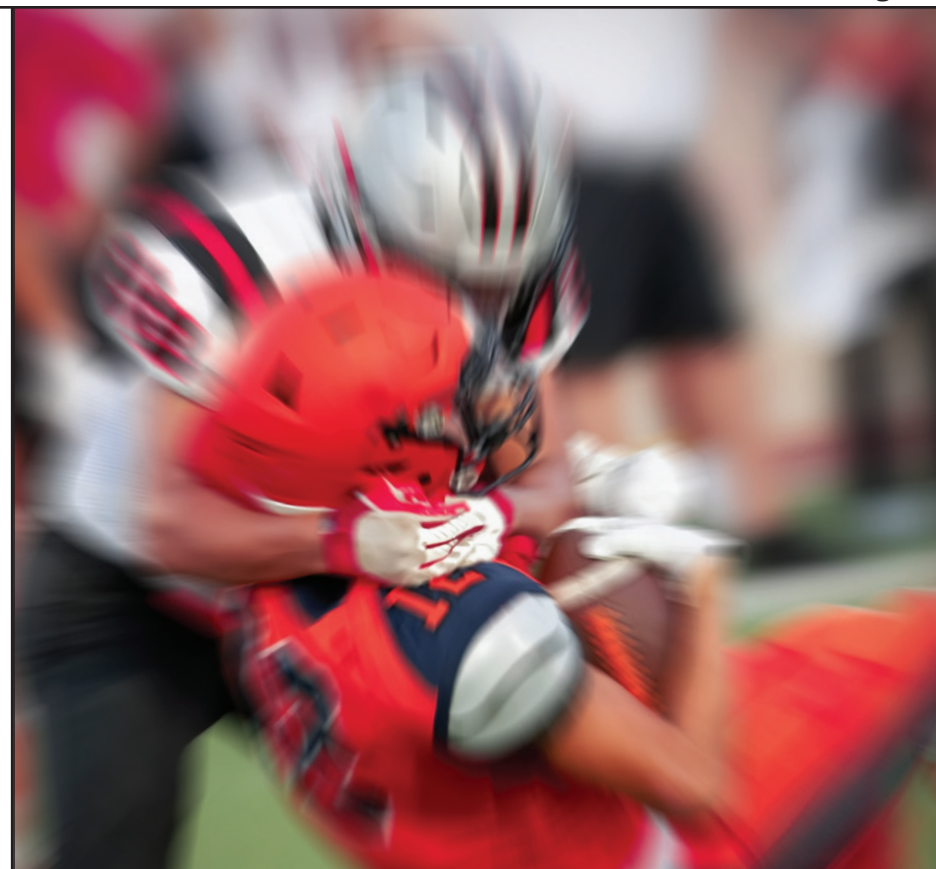
The guy asked to bring it all together will be starting quarterback Charlie Johnston. Despite lacking varsity tape, Johnston has already received several Division I offers, including one from Pittsburgh.

Ganus expects Johnston to have his pick of Power Five schools from this region of the country that still have scholarship offers remaining before the season ends.

"An offensive coordinator at a big, big school around here and call, and basically they are like we want to see this kid under fire, we want to see him when the bullets are going," Ganus said. "And he's a no-brainer offer kid, and it's a huge school. That is the consensus with a lot of schools that haven't pulled the trigger."

Despite Johnston's talents, he won't be the only quarterback to take the field this fall for the Blue Devils. Bryton Usrey, a dual-threat quarterback Ganus said could have started for other schools.

"But he wants to be at Moody," Ganus said. "And I want him at Moody, and we're going to use him and get him involved in the offense and the game plans and make sure teams have to prepare for both of them."



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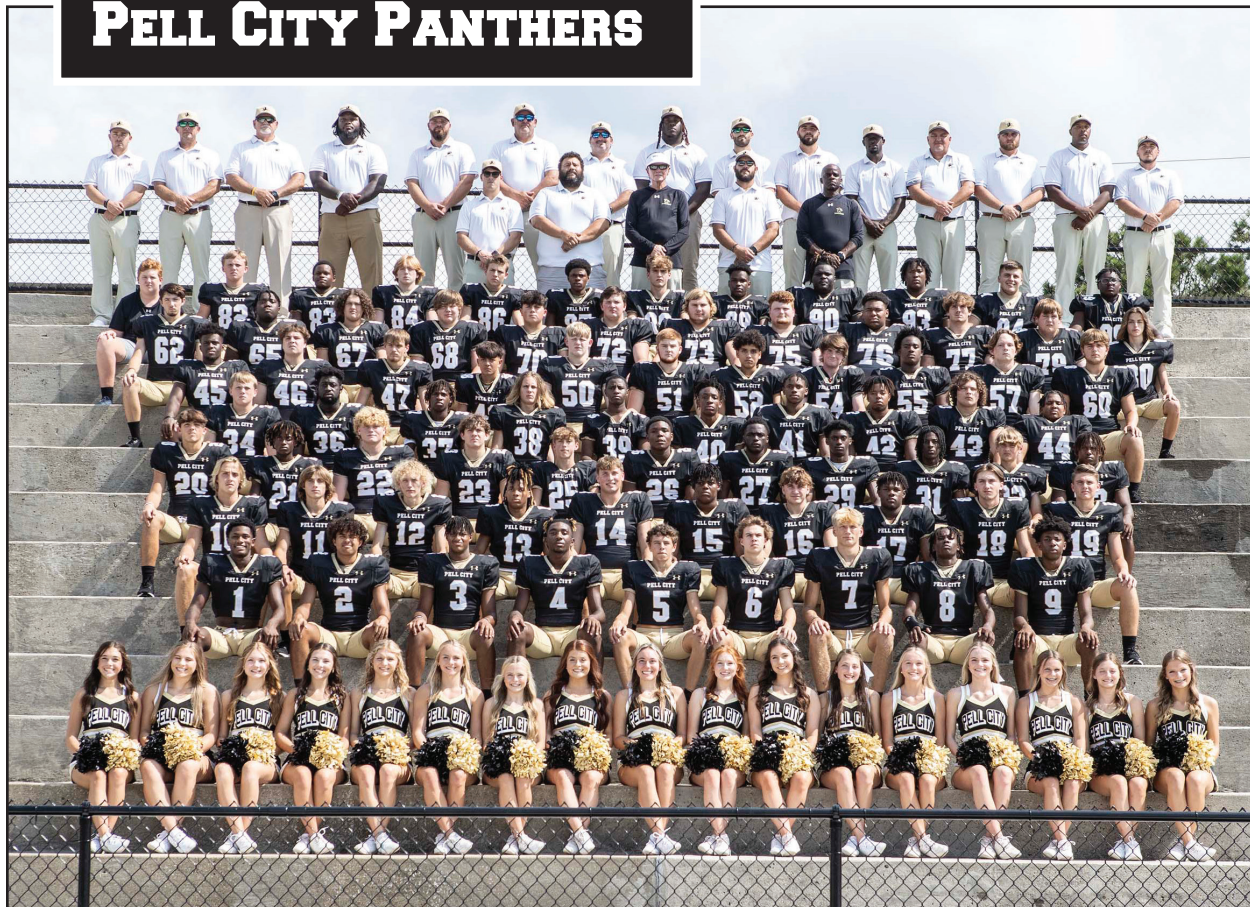
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PELL CITY PANTHERS



Pell City changing culture, expectations under Rush Propst

BY TYLER WALDREP

twaldrep@dailyhome.com

PELL CITY — Pell City spent the summer upgrading the helmets, water dispensers and even bought cases of Catapult GPS sensors. That's probably just the tip of the iceberg.

"Changing the culture," Pell City coach Rush Propst said. "Everything we are doing is changing. This place was in the ditch now. This place was the worst place that I have been to ever, as far as in bad shape. But the excitement is really good. And people are all pulling in the same direction, so I am happy with where we are going."

Propst's career includes more than 300 wins, some of which were vacated, and seven state championships. Many view Propst as a rebuild-er. Pell City could certainly use one after the team finished 1-9 last year and 13-37 in the last five years.

There was reason for optimism before Propst arrived on the scene. Quarterback Caleb Groce seemed to

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put things together in the final weeks of last season.

It remains to be seen what role Groce will play this fall. He's currently battling with transfer quarterback Nikita Getmanschchuk and freshman Brody Gossett.

Propst said Getmanschchuk "has a pretty decent arm. I think he throws the deep ball okay, I think he struggles with certain things, but I think

he can throw an accurate ball down-field. You know we got to protect him a little better. ... And then Caleb is an athlete. Just happens to be playing quarterback, and then you've got Brody, the freshman, he's savvy, and he's got the it factor."

Propst said the winner will be the guy that takes care of the football. His quarterback can turn the ball over at most once every two weeks.

To help them in that effort, center Michael Snow will lead an offensive line that includes three other seniors, including left guard Caden Alridge, right guard Lance Sanderson and right tackle William Molan.

Malik Watts, a junior, will start at left tackle. Junior Dylan Ascunce is currently the first lineman off the bench ahead of BJ Swain, Hunter Brown, Andrew Allan and Jordan Posey.

Running back Markise Bedford will lead a running back stable that could see as many as five guys

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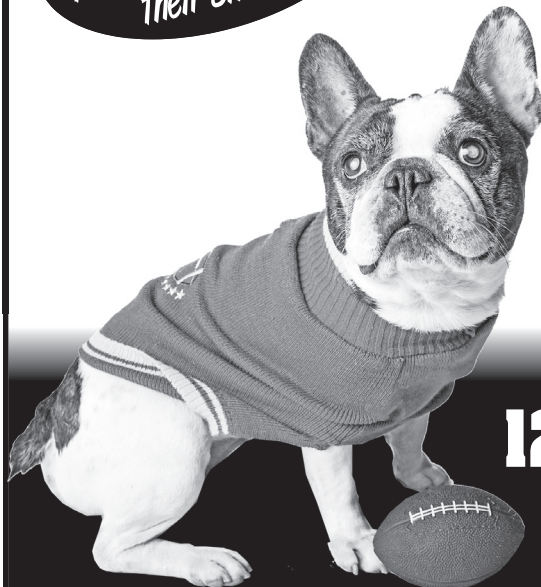


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Pell City

From Page 18

rotate through the lineup. Landen Strong appears poised to be second up in what could be a competitive group.

Propst said Bedford is "very explosive. Got a chance to do a lot of different things. He can do a lot with the ball in his hands."

Joining him in the starting lineup will be tight end Dalton Fink and receivers Zack Duncan, Ethan Everett and John David Propst.

Before discussing the defense, Propst stops to single out kicker Jake Blackstone as someone the Panthers head coach believes has promise.

On the defensive side,

position battles continue to rage. Cornerback LJ Berry is one of the first defensive backs to lock down a starting job.

"I'm really impressed with him this summer," Propst said. "Especially the last few weeks. He's been offered by North Alabama."

Sophomore Ethan Isbell seems poised to start at the opposite cornerback spot. The open safety spots remain an ongoing competition between Justyce Ammons, Cayden Sawyer, Tristan Stancil and JJ Johnson.

Colston McCombs currently leads Jaydyn Love in what has become a very tight competition at nickel.

Jordan Perry and DJ Verges earned the start at linebacker. Sean Boyle and Mayson Dates are squaring off for the last spot.

The defensive line starters will include Hunter Otwell, Jachian Dunnaville, Jaden Elston and Brandon Smith.

Jordan Woods, Trey Kurzejewski, Kaden Joiner and Landin Hardy are all expected to rotate in on the defense line.

Usually, first-year coaches feel the need to ask their community to come out and support the team in the year ahead. Propst doesn't have that problem with the excitement surrounding the

Panthers.

"It has been wonderful," Propst said. "Very appreciative of this community what they've done, what they are doing. ... all this is new to them. The level which we are trying to get this is all new to them. It is a lot of hard work."

He added that it's special to be back in St. Clair County, where he first became a head coach at Ashville. Now, he hopes to finish his career with the greatest challenge he's ever undertaken.

"We're going to turn this thing around, and it is probably going to be as gratifying as any job I've ever had," Propst said. "I

look for this to be something that is really, really special. Whether it is this year, next year or the next or the next. Once we get there, I think you'll have a gratification, it is the rea-

son you get into coaching is to feel like this. To turn something as bad as this into something that means something is why you get into coaching, and I'm excited for it."



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Ragland hopes familiar faces result in faster start in 2023

BY TYLER WALDREP

twaldrep@dailyhome.com

RAGLAND — Last season Ragland head coach Wes Tidwell let his two sophomores battle it out at the quarterback spot until the very last whistle.

It might be a new season, but Tidwell sees no reason to make any changes this year. At least, not until quarterbacks Drake Kay and Antwan Byers give him a reason to.

“Both of them can help us at that spot,” Tidwell said. “So, somebody is going to have to outright win the job for me to make that rock-solid decision. And really, neither one of them ever did. ... We’re really looking for one kid to step up and take it. That way, we can maneuver the other guys to where we can get the best 11 out there possible.”

So Ragland fans, and opponents, will likely see plenty of both behind center again this season. Speaking of the center, Brandon Hill is one of three returning offensive linemen that started every game for the Purple Devils last season alongside right guard Skyler Barber and right tackle Tacorion Soles.

“They know what we are trying to get into and what checks and adjustments,” Tidwell said. “And they can

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 10/06 Vs Victory Christian
 10/13 At Winterboro
 10/20 Vs Talladega County Central
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help set those other guys as well, so it is a huge advantage.”

Those other guys include left tackle Brandon McCulley and whoever wins the ongoing battle at left guard between Luke Brewer and Cash Robinson.

Several Purple Devils will get the chance to run behind that line, but Brett Sisson and La’Darius Rembert should see the bulk of the running back snaps.

A’Ron Lee might mix in as well. After all, he was one of Ragland’s main backs last year. However, Tidwell believes he could be even more valuable splitting time out wide and in the slot.

“Because he’s so athletic,” Tidwell

said. “Just try to get the ball to him in space.”

Tidwell said Lee is one of two players who Ragland needs to see touch the ball at least 15 times a game. The other is starting wide receiver Brayden Collins.

“He’s got a lot of experience under his belt,” Tidwell said. “But he’s going to be a lot more heavily involved. ... Get the ball in his hands, and he’s going to make a lot of people look stupid. He’s got a lot of shake to his game.”

The other starting receiver will be Jagger Cox. Tidwell said Hunter Nolin, who didn’t play last year, will also see time at receiver once he’s up to speed.

It’s also possible the coaching staff gives D’aunderay Bothwell a chance at receiver since he is, in Tidwell’s words, “the most athletic kid in the school.”

“The other day, we put him at D-line,” Tidwell said. “Well, our guys could hardly block him, he’s just so athletic. Then we put him back there to give us a look at tailback, and we can’t seem to hem him up. You’ve got to figure out how to get him the ball because he’s just athletic.”

Last, but certainly not least, Ethan

See **Ragland**, Page 24

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Ragland

From Page 23

Courtney will serve as the team's main H-Back. The Ragland coach said Courtney must have scored 10 times from that position last fall.

"Outside of your quarterback, there is more responsibility on that spot than any other in the offense," Tidwell said. "So you have to have somebody that can listen and learn."

Of course, that's not the only place Tidwell is counting on the reigning St. Clair County Co-Defensive MVP.

Courtney will likely see his biggest impact come off the field.

"He don't have to say a lot, because he does a lot," Tidwell said. "And then when he does say stuff, it has meaning because it has merit behind it. So he's going to play a much bigger leadership role for us, but he is very much equipped to do so."

Sisson, who moved to the outside linebacker spot last fall, is back inside this season. Tidwell expects freshman Shaun Hawkins to start in his place outside after he sat out last year.

"Shaun has got a lot to learn. ... He's a kid that I feel good about moving forward for the next several years here," Tidwell said. "And physically, he can do it."

He will be learning behind and alongside a defensive line that includes Rembrement and Soles in the starting spots.

They will be backed up by Barber, McCulley in addition to Hill, Robinson and Bradly Dill.

Tidwell said he isn't overly concerned with starters when it comes to the defensive line. He plans to rotate through the reserves enough that the first two strings see equal playing time.



"It is extremely helpful," Tidwell said of his experience on the line. "You refresh instead of rebuild. ... You don't have to start over from scratch, and then they kind of teach those younger guys."

The secondary is easily the most untested part of Tidwell's defense. Cox, a safety, is the only returning starter back there. The coaches expect him to lead all the defensive backs, including Lee who will see time at corner and fellow safety Greyson Hay who was promoted to the varsity roster after he spent last season with the junior varsity squad.

"He is a very smart kid, is very intelligent," Tidwell said. "He is going to take some lumps, but he is going to be fine, he is going to be better because of it."

Last year Ragland opened the season, dropping three of its first four

games before bouncing back to win five of its last seven.

This season, the Purple Devils will get to avenge its first three losses with games against non-conference foes Vincent, Southeastern, and Randolph County in the first four weeks of the season.

Ragland lost each of those three contests by at least 15 points, and Tidwell expects each one of them to be tough outs again this year.

Except this time, Ragland will be home, and a good showing against them could spark an incredible run in region play.

"The first four games, a couple of those guys are going to be as tough as you play all year. ... If you figure out how to beat teams like that obviously, it gives you confidence heading into your region," Tidwell said.



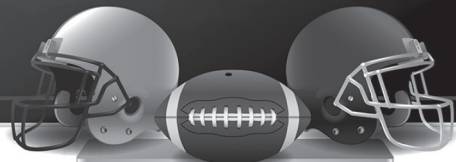
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ST. CLAIR COUNTY SAINTS



Saints expect big things from offensive duo

BY TYLER WALDREP
twaldrep@dailyhome.com

ODENVILLE — St. Clair County's first-year coach Tyler Robinson isn't shy when asked about wide receiver Jeremiah Thomas. In fact, Robinson hopes Thomas is one of the worst-kept secrets in 5A by the end of the season.

"Our passing game is built to go through him first," Robinson said. "To me, you have to with a kid like that, and you got to have some fun with that kid, move them around and try to get him mismatch. ... I mean, the kid truly is, I think, a hidden talent in 5A football."

Robinson already has the junior down for 1,000 yards and at least eight touches per game. Oh, and if teams try to double him, then Robinson is confident sophomore receiver Tra'Vel Jones can make them regret that decision.

"He is special with the ball in his hand," Robinson said. "He will make you miss quick, and he is one that will make you miss, and he is gone."

Plus, Thomas' younger brother, eighth-grader Jordan Thomas, will line up in the

ST. CLAIR COUNTY

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9/08 BYE
9/15 At Leeds
9/22 Vs Southside
9/29 At Elmore County
10/6 At Alexandria
10/13 Vs Moody
10/20 Vs Lincoln
10/27 Vs Springville
11/03 Vs Dora

slot.

While the receivers will likely be the offense's driving force this season, they are hardly the only weapons on the team.

Starting running back Ryan Parker is back this year, and the five-foot-11, 200-pound back is ready to leave a lasting impression this fall in what Robinson believes will be a breakout season.

"He is the strongest kid we have in the weight room," Robinson said. "And

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SCCHS

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really, truly, he is being so big, especially at the high school level. Those kids typically don't move like he does as well. He can run, you know. When he breaks one, he can get out on you, and nobody is going to catch him."

Fellow running back Aiden Huff will come in when Parker needs a breather, but that might not happen often. Especially if Parker is going to make good on Robinson's belief that he will top 1,000 yards on the ground this season while also increasing his role in the passing game.

The offensive line tasked with making all this possible will include seniors Jacob Ingle, Lucas Mrachkovskiy and Bradley Smith at left tackle, right tackle and left guard, respectively. That trio combines to weigh 830-plus pounds.

Sophomores Jacob Curry and Michael Gomer will join them on the line.

That experience on the line, especially at the tackle positions, gives Robinson a lot of comfort, considering he decided to start freshman Landyn Smith at quarterback.

"Being so young, making mistakes early that scares you because you don't want it to ruin a kid, you know, for the rest of his career because that kid, Landyn Smith, has a bright future here at St. Clair County High School," Robinson said. "But that is one thing we've talked about and harped on is he is going to make mistakes."

But the quarterback won't be the only one.

"I'm going to make mistakes," Robinson said. "This is my first time ever being a head coach. I'm going to make mistakes. There are a lot of things I'm going to learn and grow



from."

Knowing that keeps Robinson up some nights, but it also fills him with excitement each day. Well, that and the chance to see Smith in action.

"He has taken complete ownership of this offense," Robinson said. "He has learned and he has grown so much over the summer, far more than I ever thought he would, to be honest with you. He's just special in the way he thinks. He's a competitor."

On the other side of the ball, the Saints will look to junior linebacker Carson Jones.

"Probably one of our best overall football players," Robinson said. "He

will be a leader for us, and he is probably our most vocal and true leader on this entire football team."

Fellow linebackers Bo Simmons and Chandler Hall will join him on the field.

Up front, the Saints will look to former linebacker Landon Houts at defensive end, sophomore end Jamarcus Hardy and nose guard Noah Burgett.

Nickel corner Devin Tilley, a three-year varsity player, will lead a secondary that includes cornerbacks Travis McClendon and Amir Gulley. Caden Ray and Jacob DeGrado will start at the safety spots.

One change from last year is the Saints will no

longer lean on two-way starters. Some kids will have packages allowing them to help on offense or defense, but Robinson said the program has around 80 kids.

That's a significant change from the 43 he believes the Saints had in 2022.

One of the hardest parts really is when you go both ways, you never get time to make adjustments with those kids," Robinson said. "Especially in-game, because if Jeremiah makes a mistake out there on offense, but he's playing corner on defense, I never get a chance to correct him. So having that ability where when they come off to the sideline, they are catching their breath, getting water, but they are also getting coached."

THE ST. CLAIR TIMES

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