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Q-AND-A WITH THE COACH

With this year's title, Gatewood won the fifth football state championship in school history and third in a row. That puts the Gators in a company with programs like Tattnall Square Academy who three-prated from 1988-90 and Memorial Day who did it from 2013-15. Sports editor Gil Pound spoke with Gatewood head football coach Jeff Ratliff about how his team was able to reach such rarefied air.

Q: Coach, how does it feel to be able to say your team has now won three state championships in a row?

A: Winning a championship is special — period. For us to have done it three times in a row now, that's obviously pretty special. The way I look at things though, is our goal every year is to try to make it to the state championship game. If we get in it, we expect to win it. Nothing changed this past year except we had lost a ton of talented football players. We returned five starting positions with a couple of those guys playing on both sides of the ball. The significance of winning three in a row is pretty special, but at the same time that's really not my mindset. I'd love to tell you we planned it out that way, but state championships don't just grow on trees. They are earned. We worked really, really hard the last three years to win each one of them. It may not always look like that, but there's a lot of things that go into winning a title. I was fortunate enough to coach under Barney Hester down at Tattnall for 17 years. We made that championship game I think 13 times in those 17 years and won it a few of those times. I'd like to say we've established a similar culture and expectation at Gatewood, but everything still has to go right. An injury here or there and your season can blow up on you. We were fortunate in that we stayed healthy, and the few injuries we did have some people stepped up to fill those needs at a high level.

Q: You lost a large, talented group of seniors to graduation after that second championship. How was this year's team able to keep the streak going?

A: There are so many places I can start, but I'll start the same way I always do which is with my seniors. They have to establish those leadership and expectation roles. I also have a great coaching staff that I feel like is one of the best in the state. They have been with me all these years. Every position on the offensive line was replaced this year with the exception of Jayson [Burner] at tight end. That unit got better and better as the year went on. On the defensive line Garric [Embry] was the only returning guy, and he was a sophomore that played in that group last year. It's a combination of a lot of things. When a group thinks it can win they're hard to beat. I don't know what gave this group the right to think they couldn't be beat because most of them had not played significantly, but hopefully that comes from playing up under some good guys for two and three years. It was their turn this year.

Q: What was it like playing football in a pandemic, and how much was your team affected?

A: First of all, hats off to our administration from our headmaster to our AD to our board of directors to our trainer, Troy Burner. Our administration established our guidelines early, and we abided by them. You feel fortunate to get through it without major incidents because you don't know who's going to come down with it. You see these college teams around the country with 30 and 40 guys who can't play. If you scale that down to us, we lose five or six off of our football team and that would have put us in trouble. We only had 33 guys. We were very fortunate that we didn't run into that type of problem. We took precautions just like the other schools and did what was required and mandated. There were four or five kids who had to be tested going all the way back to the summer, but there was never a positive case on our team.

Q: You'll be losing some key guys to graduation again. I won't ask if you'll win it all again next year, but how do you feel about the state

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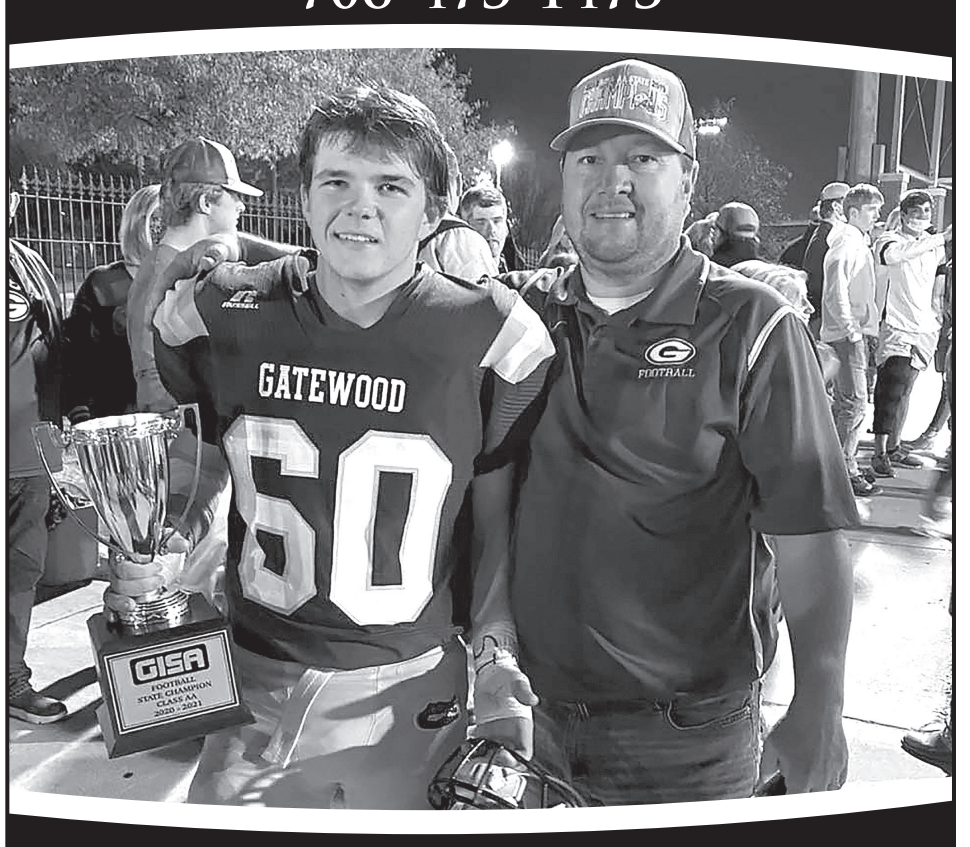


CONGRATULATIONS
GATEWOOD GATORS 2020
STATE CHAMPS

Gators beat Brentwood to complete 3-peat

By GIL POUND
gpound@unionrecorder.com

MACON, Ga. — The hands of the Gatewood football juniors and seniors are going to be feeling heavy soon.

State championship rings are pretty weighty, and the Gators (12-1) have now won GISA AA football's top prize three years running, thanks to the 34-14 defeat of the Brentwood War Eagles (9-3) at Mercer University.

Gatewood got three touchdowns from the speedy Bryce Johnson, a pair of field goals from Jayson Burner, and some gutsy play from both their quarterback Luke Haley and linebacker Will Harper in the win. Johnson had over 100 yards rushing on his two offensive touchdowns alone, and added a pick-six mere seconds before the final horn sounded.

The championship meeting, held in Macon, was a rematch of the Nov. 20 Region 1-AA title-deciding game that went 22-18 in Gatewood's favor. It looked as if fans were in for another knock-down, drag-out affair in the championship game as the Gators went into the half up 13-7. The second half was a different story, though. The Eatonton school won the final two quarters 21-7 to slam the door shut.

Eighth-year Gatewood head coach Jeff Ratliff was nearly at a loss for words shortly after his players were handed the trophy.

"First I want to praise the Lord," Ratliff said before talking about his team's performance. "Our guys kept playing. We seemed to want to not finish these guys. We had plenty of chances, but they're a great team that was able to keep coming back. Eventually, we did what we do, which is get after them and we executed. That's the bottom line. I'm just so proud of these guys."

With the win, the Gators earned their football program's fifth state championship in school history.

Gatewood had an immense leg up in the kicking game against the War Eagles, no pun intended. Brentwood tried an onside kick to open the proceedings, but that was easily gathered by the receiving team. It wouldn't hurt the War Eagles of Sandersville, however, as the two teams wound up trading interceptions on their opening drives. The ineffective kick did mark the start of a trend in the game, though. The Gators showed off their superior special teams late in the first quarter when Burner hit his first field goal to put his squad up 3-0.

Two bad Brentwood punts followed, the second of which turned into three more points for the top-seeded Gators as Burner was good from 42 yards away with seven minutes left in the half.

After a War Eagle turnover on downs, the Gatewood triple-option offense finally found its spark. That came in the form of the tailback Johnson's first touchdown of the night. Ratliff's I-formation option worked to a T as the quarterback Haley perfectly pitched the football to Johnson who streaked up the right sideline for an 81-yard score.

Needing an answer in the worst way, the GISA AA second-ranked War Eagles got one just before the half. A big pass play from Brentwood senior quarterback McKinley Newton to Will Wright set the Eagles up near the red zone. Junior Robert Jackson polished off the drive with a 4-yard rumble to bring his team to within six with only a minute to go before halftime.

Brentwood's offense was stifled coming out of the break. The War Eagles tried a couple of trick plays to try and get things going, but they missed their mark despite having players running open.

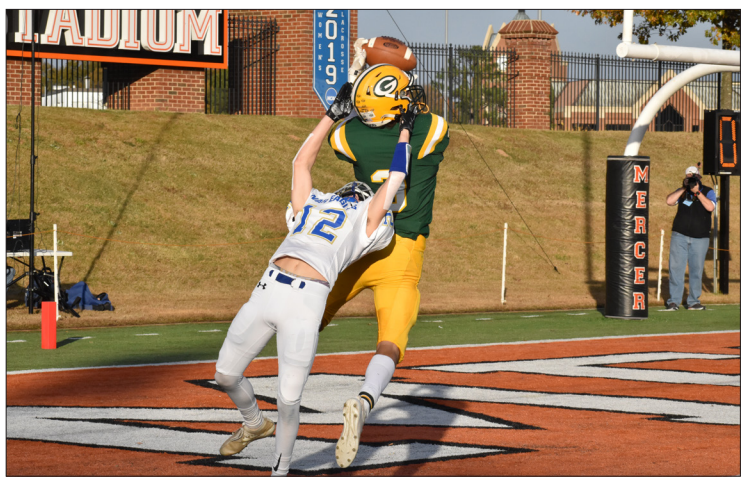
Johnson's second rushing touchdown with four minutes in the third gave the Gators some breathing room, and even more was provided in the period's final minute. Haley executed the speed option to perfection and pitched the football to freshman running back Evan Bennett who took it 64 yards into Mercer's orange end zone. Gatewood took a 27-7 lead into the fourth quarter, just 12 minutes from back-to-back-to-back state titles.

Brentwood got a touchdown with just under eight minutes to go, but their drives were eating too much clock to mount a credible comeback. The game was completely salted away with three minutes left when Gatewood junior defensive lineman Garric Embry forced a fumble. The football was scooped and scored, but the touchdown was erased by a block in the back. The Gators would get that coveted non-offensive touchdown with only seconds remaining though, as the senior Johnson picked the football off and housed it to bring the game to its final tally.

The Gator defense this season held a Brentwood offense that had been averaging 40 points per game to 18 and 14 points in their two meetings this season.

For the Gatewood head coach Ratliff, he can now say the phrase he's been avoiding this season — three-peat.

"It feels good to be able to say it now," Ratliff said.



"Your talent determines what you can do.
Your motivation determines how much you are willing to do.
Your attitude determines how well you do it." -Lou Holtz

Q&A

Continued from page 2

of the program looking ahead to next year?

A: I think our program is in good shape. We've got 15 juniors who will be seniors next year. We've got good numbers at the middle school level and fairly large eighth-grade class coming up. We've got returning juniors who have now figured out what it means to start and lead. How do you replace Luke [Haley] at QB? You don't. Luke is a great athlete who was a three-year starter at quarterback and a three-time state champion. But I'm confident the next guy will step up and we'll figure out what he can do well. Hopefully he'll jell with our system and we'll figure out how it works. Sometimes us option guys get pinned by others who think that if we don't have an option quarterback we can't be good. That's where you hope the coaching comes in and gets the guy you want to run it, but you may also have to let him do some things that he needs to do. Our goal is going to be to win a state championship next year, but we've got a lot of work to do.

That's what makes it fun. We'll have a good group coming back, and again I'm happy with where our program's at right now. I think we've got some challenges just like everybody else, but we'll see. We'll celebrate this one and have our banquet sometime in January, then we'll start focusing on next year.

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SENIORS' FOUR-YEAR RECORD: 46-6
2020 RECORD: 12-1
OUTSCORED OPPONENTS: 394-151
CONSECUTIVE REGION TITLES: 4
POINTS PER GAME: 30
POINTS ALLOWED PER GAME: 11.6

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ROAD TO THE PLAYOFFS

Date	Opponent	Score
9/11	Edmund Burke Academy	35-0 W
9/18	Trinity Christian	54-6 W
9/25	Terrell	14-0 W
10/2	OPEN	
10/9	John Milledge Academy	40-0 L
10/16	Briarwood Academy	21-12 W
10/23	Southland Academy	16-7 W
10/30	Westfield School	24-19 W
11/6	The King's Academy	52-7 W
11/13	Piedmont Academy	42-21 W
11/20	Brentwood School	22-18 W
11/27	Robert Toombs	45-0 W
12/4	Southwest GA Academy	35-7 W
12/11	Brentwood School	34-14 W

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