

SENTINEL-ECHO & TIMES-TRIBUNE'S

PIGSKIN PREVIEW



CORBIN



LYNN CAMP



NORTH LAUREL



SOUTH LAUREL



WHITLEY COUNTY



WILLIAMSBURG



2026 PIGSKIN PREVIEW

UNION COMMONWEALTH FOOTBALL

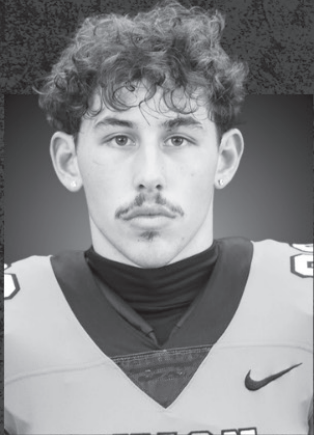


2026 UNION FOOTBALL

ALL COMMONWEALTH TEAM



JOHN LAW



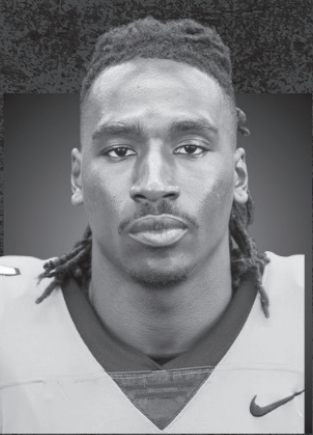
TATE SPAYD



ANTWAN YOUNG



TRENTON CHILDERS



DEMARCO HOPKINS

Five Union football players named to 2026 All-Commonwealth Team

BARBOURVILLE, Ky. – The Kentucky Pro Football Hall of Fame recently announced the 2026 Collegiate All-Commonwealth Team, which is presented by Community Trust Bank.

This preseason honor represents the top college football players who are attending a Kentucky college or university.

John Law, Tate Spayd, Antwan Young, Trenton Childers, and DeMarco Hopkins each received this honor for Union Commonwealth University.

When discussing the five players, head coach Boston Bryant said he is proud of their accomplishments.

“We are very proud to have

these five men represent our program as members of the All-Commonwealth Team,” Bryant said. “These guys are all from the great state of Kentucky and represent all the standards for this great honor. They are great players, caring teammates, hardworking students, and active members on our campus. We

are thankful that they are part of Union football.”

The student-athletes selected to the All-Commonwealth Team were recognized at the 2026 Kentucky Pro Football Hall of Fame Induction Ceremony.

The ceremony was held at the Pam Miller Downtown Arts Center on Friday, June 26, at 3:30

p.m. Each player received a Collegiate All-Commonwealth Team championship ring during the ceremony.

The players also were recognized during the Kentucky Pro Football Hall of Fame’s Purple Jacket Dinner and Induction Ceremony at 6 p.m. the same day at the Hilton downtown.

2026 Union Football schedule announced

BARBOURVILLE, Ky. – Union Commonwealth University football has announced its 2026 schedule. The Bulldogs are set to play six home games next fall.

Similar to last season, the Battle for the Brass Lantern will open the 2026 campaign, this time at James H. Taylor II Stadium in Williamsburg, Ky. The game is scheduled for Thursday, Aug. 27 at 7 p.m.

UCU follows with another non-conference road game at Faulkner on Sept. 5 at 1 p.m., closing out the home-and-home series. Union will then have a bye week.

Following the bye week, the Bulldogs have a pair of nonconference home games at Williamson Stadium. Union hosts Taylor on Sept. 19 at noon, followed by Lindsey Wilson on Sept. 26 at

2:30 p.m.

Home conference play begins Oct. 3 against Reinhardt at 6 p.m. Homecoming follows on Oct. 17 against Rio Grande at 4 p.m. The Bulldogs host Pikeville on Oct. 31 at 3 p.m., before closing out the home schedule on Senior Day against Bluefield on Nov. 14 at 4 p.m.

Union’s two conference road

games will be at Point on Oct. 10 at 1 p.m. and Kentucky Christian on Oct. 24 at 1 p.m.

Throughout the season, an up-to-date version of the schedule can be found by clicking here.

2026 Union Football Schedule

Aug. 27 – at Cumberland
Sept. 5 – at Faulkner

Sept. 12 – Bye Week
Sept. 19 – Taylor
Sept. 26 – Lindsey Wilson
Oct. 3 – Reinhardt
Oct. 10 – at Point
Oct. 17 – Rio Grande
Oct. 24 – at Kentucky Christian
Oct. 31 – Pikeville
Nov. 7 – Bye Week
Nov. 14 – Bluefield

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LYNN CAMP WILDCATS

Mitchell returns home looking to build winning culture at Lynn Camp

2026 FOOTBALL SCHEDULE

- Aug. 21 — at Jellico, 7 p.m.
- Aug. 28 — Berea, 7:30 p.m.
- Sept. 4 — at Knott County Central, 7:30 p.m.
- Sept. 18 — at Jackson County, 7:30 p.m.
- Sept. 25 — Middlesboro, 7:30 p.m.
- Oct. 9 — Williamsburg, 7:30 p.m.
- Oct. 16 — at Harlan, 7:30 p.m.
- Oct. 23 — at Pineville, 7:30 p.m.
- Oct. 30 — Clay County, 8:30 p.m.

BY LES DIXON
SPORTS CONTRIBUTOR

LYNN CAMP — For Allen Mitchell, taking over the Lynn Camp football program means a little more than accepting another coaching job.

It’s a return home. After spending 15 seasons away, Mitchell is back at Lynn Camp, where he once suited up as a Wildcat himself.

Now he’s beginning his first season as head coach of his alma mater with hopes of building a program that competes on every snap.

Lynn Camp is coming off a 5-6 season, but Mitchell isn’t entering his first year placing a certain number of wins or championships on his players.

“Being my first year back home after 15 seasons away, I only have one expectation from our guys, and that is for them just to compete every play, whether it is in practice, a game or the classroom,” Mitchell said. “If we can do that, the winning will happen on the field and in life.”

Mitchell takes over a Lynn Camp team that will be young in several areas but does return experience on both sides of the football.

Throughout the offseason, he’s been encouraged by the work ethic and excitement surrounding his players.

“Our student-athletes are working tremendously hard and are excited to show their growth from all the work put in during the offseason,” Mitchell said.

For Mitchell, that growth isn’t just about individual improvement.

He wants to establish a team-first mentality throughout the program, and he believes the relationships his players have developed could become one of Lynn Camp’s biggest strengths.

“The strength of our team is the bonds that they have formed with each other,” he said. “I believe that they will play for each other and won’t care who scores, just that we have more points at the end of the game on Friday night. One of the things I talk with our group about is being the best teammate you can be, and I think they are trying to live up to that expectation.”

The Wildcats return five starters offensively, and Mitchell makes no secret about where Lynn Camp’s success on that side of the football will begin — up front.

Jason Kiskaden, Blake Partin and Ethan McFarland give the Wildcats three experienced pieces along the offensive line, and Mitchell believes their performance could go a long way toward determining what Lynn Camp accomplishes.

“We have five returning on offense, and we will go only as far as our offensive line takes us,” Mitchell said. “I have a lot of confidence in three of our returners up front with Jason Kiskaden, Blake Partin and Ethan McFarland. I have high expectations for those guys.”

The Wildcats also return



The Wildcats return experience at two of the most important offensive positions. Quarterback Conner Mabe and running back Christian Hart (pictured) will be counted on to provide production out of the backfield. | FILE PHOTO

experience at two of the most important offensive positions.

Quarterback Conner Mabe and running back Christian Hart will be counted on to provide production out of the backfield.

“I also look for quarterback Conner Mabe and running back Christian Hart to have breakout years,” Mitchell said.

Lynn Camp also brings back five starters on defense.

Some of the same players expected to carry significant responsibilities offensively will be asked to do the same on the other side of the football.

“We also have five returners on defense,” Mitchell said. “Some of those same offensive guys will be relied upon heavily, as they have the most experience even though some of them are young.”

Special teams is another

area Mitchell plans to emphasize heavily during his first season.

“Special teams usually win or cost you at least three games a year, so we work heavily in this area,” Mitchell said. “We will split kicking and punting duties with multiple players, but Christian Hart has been punting the ball extremely well through the early season practices.”

Despite the optimism surrounding his return and the

progress Lynn Camp has made throughout the offseason, Mitchell understands there will be challenges.

“There are a lot of concerns, as we are going to be an extremely young team and we have some guys in new positions, but our kids will rise to each challenge presented to them,” he said.

Making things even more difficult will be an early-season

SEE CAMP, PAGE 10

WILLIAMSBURG YELLOW JACKETS



Quarterback Reese Hatcher returns to lead the offense and will be surrounded by an experienced group of playmakers that includes wide receivers TJ Cornett, Lane Jeffries (pictured) and Chase Meddles, along with running back Eli Meadors. | FILE PHOTO

Experienced Yellow Jackets have high expectations entering 2026

2026 FOOTBALL SCHEDULE

- Aug. 21 — Leslie County, 7:30 p.m.
- Aug. 28 — Paris, 7:30 p.m.
- Sept. 4 — at Frankfort, 7:30 p.m.
- Sept. 11 — Sayre, 7:30 p.m.
- Oct. 2 — at Pineville, 7:30 p.m.
- Oct. 9 — at Lynn Camp, 7:30 p.m.
- Oct. 16 — Middlesboro, 7:30 p.m.
- Oct. 23 — Harlan, 7:30 p.m.
- Oct. 30 — at Knox Central, 7:30 p.m.

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BY LES DIXON
SPORTS CONTRIBUTOR

WILLIAMSBURG — There’s plenty of experience back, plenty of strength and, plenty of reason for optimism surrounding the Williamsburg Yellow Jackets entering the 2026 football season.

Williamsburg is coming off a 6-5 campaign that saw the Yellow Jackets advance to the second round of the Class A playoffs before their season ended with a 56-18 loss to perennial power Pikeville.

With nine starters returning offensively and a roster Williamsburg coach Jerry Herron believes is one of his strongest, the Yellow Jackets have their sights set on taking another step forward.

“We have several returning players with a lot of experience,” Herron said. “If we continue to improve, we’ll put ourselves in a position to compete in our district and region.”

Herron likes what he has seen from his team throughout the offseason, especially in the weight room. Williamsburg has added

strength to a roster that also gives the Yellow Jackets plenty of flexibility on both sides of the football.

“This is one of the strongest teams we’ve had at Williamsburg,” Herron said. “These players have skill and a good work ethic.”

The Yellow Jackets will have plenty of familiar faces on the offensive side of the football with nine starters returning.

Quarterback Reese Hatcher returns to lead the offense and will be surrounded by an experienced group of playmakers that includes wide receivers TJ Cornett, Lane Jeffries and Chase Meddles, along with running back Eli Meadors. Gavin Smith returns at tackle to help anchor the offensive line.

“We’ve worked hard in the weight room and developed strength,” Herron said. “We’re very versatile. Everyone can play multiple positions.”

Williamsburg returns five starters on defense with experience spread throughout each level of the unit.

Xavier Quant and Jacob

Jones return along the defensive line while Jeffries and Landon White will be counted on at linebacker. Noah Jones and Meadors give the Yellow Jackets experience in the secondary.

The ability of several players to contribute on both sides of the football will be important, but it also brings one of the biggest challenges that comes with playing at the Class A level.

“Like all Class A teams, we worry about injuries and depth,” Herron said.

Williamsburg also has several key roles on special teams.

Hatcher will handle punting duties while Quant will serve as the Yellow Jackets’ kicker. Cornett and Meddles are expected to give Williamsburg playmaking ability in the return game.

With several players filling multiple roles, staying healthy will be especially important as Williamsburg works its way through a schedule Herron believes will prepare his team for the games that matter most.

The Yellow Jackets are scheduled to play Leslie County, Paris, Frankfort, Sayre, Pineville, Lynn Camp, Middlesboro, Harlan, and Knox Central.

“Schedule should get us ready for our district and region if we continue to stay healthy,” he said.

The expectations at Williamsburg remain high.

The Yellow Jackets aren’t entering the season simply hoping to reach the postsea-

GOOD LUCK

Wishing all the teams and coaches a successful season!



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WHITLEY COUNTY COLONELS



“Eli Rose will be a key part of our offense as the quarterback,” Coach Matt Rhymer said. “He brings a ton of leadership and ability to the offense and makes everyone around him better.” | FILE PHOTO

Rhymer excited for season to begin for his young Colonels squad

2026 FOOTBALL SCHEDULE

- Aug. 21 — Knox Central, 7:30 p.m.
- Aug. 28 — at Hazard, 7:30 p.m.
- Sept. 4 — at Rockcastle County, 7:30 p.m.
- Sept. 7 — Pulaski County, 6 p.m.
- Sept. 11 — South Laurel, 7:30 p.m.
- Sept. 18 — at Bell County, 7:30 p.m.
- Sept. 25 — at North Laurel, 7:30 p.m.
- Oct. 9 — Perry County Central, 7:30 p.m.
- Oct. 16 — Corbin, 7:30 p.m.
- Oct. 23 — at Harlan County, 7:30 p.m.
- Oct. 30 — Madison Southern, 7:30 p.m.

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BY LES DIXON
SPORTS CONTRIBUTOR

WILLIAMSBURG — After posting a 1-10 mark last season that led to a first round loss to Boyle County in the Class 4A state playoffs, coach Matt Rhymer is excited to see what his Whitley County Colonels can accomplish this fall.

“We certainly are excited for the season to get started,” he said. “Our team worked hard this off season and had a productive spring practice. We have a young team, and they understand the process of development and the vision of getting better every day.

“Our demeanor has been positive through fall camp this far,” he added. “We have a lot of guys who have played some level of varsity football and an off season to get stronger. Experience and development create higher confidence and expectations. Our team is beginning to

believe in themselves as a result of this process.”

Rhymer said the Colonels will be returning talented and experienced players in both sides of the ball.

“We have multiple guys who played varsity football last season on both sides of the ball,” he said. “Eli Rose will be a key part of our offense as the quarterback. He brings a ton of leadership and ability to the offense and makes everyone around him better. Key contributors at the skill positions will be Landon Rose (WR), Christian Wilson (WR), Aaden Taylor (RB), John Richardson (OL). These, along with several others, will play significant roles on offense.

“On defense we have multiple players who are returning with a lot of Varsity experience,” he added. “Jerry Barnes (LB), Brayden Stephens (DB), Landon Bryant (DL), will all be leaders

and key for our defense success.

“Special teams are always a big focus for our team,” Rhymer continued. “We will get our best players on special teams and try to gain an edge in that portion of the game.”

With tons of experience returning, Rhymer believes that will pay off in the long run for Whitley County.

“Our strength will be the fact that we are returning a lot of guys who have played varsity football against quality opponents,” he said. “We are still very young, but those guys are doing a great job developing and understanding how to practice and prepare.

“Our obvious concern is the youth of our team,” Rhymer added. “We have a tough schedule, and each week will be a great challenge. We will be playing 25 freshman and sophomores every week. This is exciting for the future, but we have to be able to weather some storms with a tough schedule and not lose confidence.”

A tough slate awaits the Colonels, which will have Whitley County geared to be ready to play from day one.

Rhymer’s squad opens the season against Knox Central and then follows with Hazard, Rockcastle County, South Laurel, Bell County, North Laurel, Perry Central,



It's football season, and we wish our Colonel football team a successful and exciting season!

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Making Great Things Happen

CORBIN REDHOUNDS

Redhounds embrace high expectations, set sights on another deep postseason run



Corbin brings back numerous players who contributed offensively during last year’s run to the state semifinals. It starts at quarterback with returning signal-caller Mason Salmons. | FILE PHOTO

BY LES DIXON
Sports Contributor

CORBIN — Expectations are nothing new for the Corbin Redhounds. And entering the 2026 season, those expectations might be as high as ever. Coming off a 10-4 season that ended one point shy of a trip to the Class 4A state championship game, Corbin returns a wealth of experience and talent from a team that proved it could compete with the best in Kentucky. The Redhounds reached the Class 4A state semifinals last season before suffering a heartbreaking 34-33 loss to eventual state champion Boyle County. Now Corbin enters 2026 being mentioned among the top teams in Class 4A and as a legitimate contender to bring a state championship back to Redhound Country. Corbin coach Luke Salmons isn’t shying away from those expectations. “I think our team has embraced the high expectations coming into the season, but it still comes down to daily improvement,” Salmons said. “There is a day-by-day mentality with this team, and they are focused

2026 FOOTBALL SCHEDULE

- Aug. 21 — Western Hills (Ohio), 8:30 p.m.
 - Aug. 28 — North Laurel, 7:30 p.m.
 - Sept. 4 — Bryan Station, 7:30 p.m.
 - Sept. 11 — Pulaski County, 7:30 p.m.
 - Sept. 18 — at Frederick Douglass, 7:30 p.m.
 - Oct. 2 — at Johnson Central, 7:30 p.m.
 - Oct. 9 — Harlan County, 7:30 p.m.
 - Oct. 16 — at Whitley County, 7:30 p.m.
 - Oct. 23 — at Perry County Central, 7:30 p.m.
 - Oct. 30 — Great Crossing, 7:30 p.m.
-

on what is next and how to get better. We believe we can win the state title. We have worked extremely hard in the offseason, and this team is coming together as one. It’s a process, but I like this team.” After coming within a point of playing for a state championship, Corbin hasn’t needed much motivation throughout the offseason. Salmons has seen a team willing to put in the work necessary to take the next step. “We have been working hard for months now, lifting and training, learning more about our systems and positions,” Salmons said. “We have an extremely

hungry group. They want to get better every day and are very coachable. They are getting closer as brothers, and it is cool to watch them push each other to be great. Players and coaches have expectations to be the best.” The hunger, combined with an experienced roster, gives the Redhounds plenty of reason to be excited. “Our kids are hungry to be great, and as a head coach, that is a big goal,” Salmons said. “Guys want to contribute and make each unit they play on elite. We have a great group of athletic kids that play as one and have very good leadership by those seniors and expe-

GOOD LUCK

CORBIN REDHOUNDS

HAVE A GREAT SEASON

UNIVERSITY OF THE CUMBERLANDS FOOTBALL

Patriots announce 2026 football schedule

WILLIAMSBURG — The University of the Cumberland's football program is set for another challenging campaign as Head Coach Shan Housekeeper has announced the Patriots' 2026 schedule. The 10-game slate features five home contests and five road games, including matchups against five opponents mentioned in the final 2025 Postseason NAIA Football Poll.

"There's no easy way through our schedule for sure," said Housekeeper. "The Mid-South Conference has a lot of really good football coaches and a lot of good football players. We start at home and work through a tough schedule. We've got some good non-conference opponents and then obviously traveling down to play Keiser is a challenge. It starts out with a rivalry game, so there's no easy way through our schedule."

The Patriots will open the season on Thursday, August 27, when they host Union Commonwealth University in the annual Battle for the Brass Lantern at James H. Taylor II Stadium. Cumberland has won seven straight meetings against the Bulldogs, including a 45-11 victory last season. Kickoff is set for 7 p.m.

"It's always a good opener," Housekeeper said. "There's a lot of people locally that are connected to both institutions. We'll be playing on a Thursday night to kick off the college football season and playing for the Brass Lantern is always

something we want to play well for. There's a lot to play for in that game."

UC will then hit the road on Sept. 5, for a matchup with Bluefield University at 1:30 p.m. The Patriots have won three straight meetings against the Rams, including a 66-12 victory in Williamsburg last season.

The Pats return home the following week to host Warner University on Sept. 12, at 1:30 p.m. Cumberland owns a 2-0 advantage in the all-time series and defeated the Royals 27-14 in Florida last season.

"Those teams all present different challenges," Housekeeper said of the non-conference schedule. "Bluefield has always had an explosive offense, so we've got to be well prepared for that. Warner has really good athletes and played hard last year, and we expect the same thing this year."

Non-conference play continues on Sept. 19, when UC travels to Rio Grande, Ohio for the first-ever meeting between the two programs. The RedStorm are entering just their second season of football and will be led by a new head coach in 2026.

"We've never played there, so you don't know exactly what you're going to get into," said Housekeeper. "They've got a new football coach, so we're not sure what they're going to be schematically at this point, but we are excited for the opportunity to play a new program."

One week later, the Patriots face one of their toughest



The University of the Cumberland's football program is set for another challenging campaign as Head Coach Shan Housekeeper has announced the Patriots' 2026 schedule. | COURTESY CUMBERLANDSPATRIOTS.COM

tests of the regular season when they travel to West Palm Beach, Florida to take on No. 2 Keiser University. The Seahawks advanced to the NAIA National Championship game last season and enter the year as one of the nation's premier programs. The all-time series is tied 1-1 after

Keiser earned a 42-12 victory in Williamsburg last season. Kickoff is set for 3 p.m. and will conclude the non-conference schedule for the Pats.

"It's obviously a challenge," Housekeeper said. "The travel is a challenge and the opponent is a challenge. We've got to have a

well thought out plan with player recovery and preparation. When we get down there, we're going to play one of the top teams in the country, so we've got to be ready for that."

Following a bye week, Cumberland will begin Mid-South Conference play at home against No. 11 Campbellsville University on Oct. 10. The Tigers have won the last two meetings, including a 49-34 decision last season, and reached the NAIA Playoffs in 2025.

"There is no easy way to kick our conference off," Housekeeper said. "Having a bye is nice because we can regroup from the travel, get back to fundamentals and prepare ourselves. Then you open conference play against a team that was in the playoffs last year. It'll be a good measuring stick to see where we're at."

The Patriots then travel to McKenzie, Tennessee to face Bethel University on Oct. 17, at 2:30 p.m. UC earned a 34-10 victory over the Wildcats last season for a ranked win, but the Patriots are looking for their first victory in McKenzie since 2017.

Conference play continues on Oct. 24, when Cumberland University visits Williamsburg on Homecoming at 6 p.m. The Phoenix have won the last three meetings, including a 40-37 overtime thriller last season.

The Pats then head to Georgetown College on Oct. 31. The

SEE PATRIOTS, PAGE 11

PATRIOTS

ONEBIGTEAM

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NORTH LAUREL JAGUARS

Jaguars have pieces in place for big 2026 season

2026 FOOTBALL SCHEDULE

- Aug. 21 — Perry County Central, 7:30 p.m.
- Aug. 28 — at Corbin, 7:30 p.m.
- Sept. 11 — Madison Central, 7:30 p.m.
- Sept. 18 — Lawrence County, 7:30 p.m.
- Sept. 25 — Whitley County, 7:30 p.m.
- Oct. 2 — at Collins, 7:30 p.m.
- Oct. 9 — Southwestern, 7:30 p.m.
- Oct. 16 — at Pulaski County, 7 p.m.
- Oct. 23 — at South Laurel, 7:30 p.m.
- Oct. 30 — at Wayne County, 7:30 p.m.

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BY LES DIXON
SPORTS CONTRIBUTOR

LONDON — The North Laurel Jaguars took another step forward last season. Now they want more.

North Laurel is coming off a 9-3 campaign under coach Steve Nelson that saw the Jaguars advance to the second round of the Class 5A playoffs before suffering a heartbreaking 24-21 loss to West Jessamine.

Despite losing a talented senior class, North Laurel returns plenty of experience on both sides of the football, and expectations remain high entering the 2026 season.

“Our expectations for this team are high, and they are in the community as well,” Nelson said. “We lost a lot of really good seniors this past season. However, we also return a lot from last year’s team. This group has the potential to make a big run and be right there in the fight for a district championship. It is all about improving every single day and doing the necessary steps to be successful.”

For a group that accomplished plenty in 2025, the way the season ended has provided additional motivation throughout the off-season for the Jaguars.

“This team is ready for the next step,” Nelson said. “They have worked hard all offseason and summer and have made more progress than any team I have been a part of coaching. It seems like they get better each day to this point, and it’s a credit to them and the coaching staff. These players want to win and put the team above all. Last season didn’t end the way we wanted it to, and they have a constant reminder every single day.”

The Jaguars return six starters offensively, led by quarterback Jude McWhorter.

McWhorter’s ability to make plays with both his arm and legs gives North Laurel an experienced playmaker to build around, and Nelson believes his quarterback has taken another significant step forward.

“We return six starters on offense and have looked much more explosive,” Nelson said. “Jude McWhorter returns as quarterback and has had a fantastic offseason, and his dual-threat capabilities

are going to be tough for defenses. Running the ball, we have Bryson Nantz and Brody Pruitt, who have both put on a lot of weight and speed. We are very excited for these two guys.”

“We also have Cam Anderson at receiver as a big-time threat for us anywhere on the field,” he added. “Then we have Braxton Fultz and Dylan Hurley as do-it-all guys. Both Braxton and Dylan are going to be big-time players for us this year, and I’m excited for all these guys.”

“I believe the strength of our team is going to come from our skill positions as well as defense as a whole,” he added. “Jude McWhorter has made excellent strides as a passer, becoming one of the best I’ve coached. He also has six guys around him who can score at any time, and they have all put in the work to get so much faster and stronger.”

While the Jaguars have plenty of offensive firepower, Nelson has high expectations for his defense as well.

North Laurel returns seven players on that side of the football and brings back experience at every level.

“We return seven players on defense, and this group can flat-out play,” Nelson said. “Gage Baker has been a big-time guy for us this offseason and has taken a huge jump in play. Jude McWhorter and Dylan Hurley will play safety, and both are excellent tacklers and smart guys on the back end of our defense. We return PT Roberts and Evan Zarate at cornerback, and both guys have looked fantastic going into their senior season.”

“However, our most impressive group has been our linebackers, returning all three starters with Brody Pruitt, Bryson Nantz and Braxton Fultz,” he added. “Then on the line, we have Asher Edwards, Caleb Roark and Colton Prime, who are going to cause a lot of problems for offenses.”

Nelson believes the unit has the potential to establish itself among the best in Class 5A.

“I also believe on defense we can be one of the best in 5A and improve on what we did last year and shut teams down,” he said.

If there is an area where the Jaguars have some un-



The Jaguars return six starters offensively, led by quarterback Jude McWhorter. McWhorter’s ability to make plays with both his arm and legs gives North Laurel an experienced playmaker to build around, and Nelson believes his quarterback has taken another significant step forward. | FILE PHOTO

certainty entering the season, it’s along the offensive line.

North Laurel lost three seniors up front, leaving some significant holes to fill.

“Some concerns we have had are our offensive line, losing three seniors up front is hard to replace,” Nelson said. “I think we have had a few guys step up, and they are going to shock a lot of people, and I think they can turn into a big strength of our team. I truly believe they are going to get better each day and be an excellent unit by Week One.”

Special teams will also be an area of emphasis after miscues proved costly during last year’s postseason.

Nelson and his players haven’t forgotten it.

“Special teams is something we take very seriously and can win or lose you football games,” Nelson said. “We had an early exit last season because of special teams mishaps, and these players understand how important it truly is.”

Cam Anderson will handle both kicking and punting duties, and Nelson has been impressed by what he has seen from him during the offseason.

“Cam Anderson will be our kicker and punter and has improved off of last year,” Nelson said. “Cam has hit up to 60-yard field goals this offseason, as well as kickoffs going in the end zone, so we are super excited to have him back.”

North Laurel won’t have many opportunities to take a week off during the regular season.

The Jaguars are scheduled to face five teams

ranked among the Top 10 in their respective classes, giving Nelson’s squad plenty of opportunities to

find out where it stands. Perry Central, Corbin, Madison Central, Lawrence County, Whitley

County, Collins, Southwestern, Pulaski County,

SEE NORTH, PAGE 11

BELIEVE. ACHIEVE. SUCCEED.

In the classroom and on the court & field, the Knox County Board of Education wishes all students a successful year ahead.

GOOD LUCK TEAMS!

KNOX COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Continued from Page 3

Corbin brings back numerous players who contributed offensively during last year's run to the state semifinals.

Continued from Page 6

Corbin brings back numerous players who contributed offensively during last year's run to the state semifinals.

It starts at quarterback with returning signal-caller Mason Salmons.

Johnny Miller returns at center, while Braxton Tolliver brings experience to the offensive line. Trey Person returns at running back while Zach Thomas and Tayton Cox are back at wide receiver. Clay Akins also returns after contributing at multiple positions.

"We have a lot of returning players on offense," Salmons said. "Guys that contributed, started and have taken over this unit. Mason Salmons is our returning quarterback, Johnny Miller our center, Clay Akins handled multiple positions for us, Trey Person our running back, Braxton Tolliver played on our offensive line. Zach Thomas

am confident we can battle through.”

The road doesn’t get any easier once Lynn Camp reaches the district portion of its schedule.

Williamsburg and Middlesboro enter the season highly regarded while rivalry matchups against Pineville and Harlan add look to be better.

“Our district schedule

our wide receiver, Tayton Cox another wide receiver, all return. Those guys bring a lot of experience to our unit and have done a great job leading.

The Redhounds also have several players looking to expand their roles or make an immediate impact.

“Some new additions include Dre Reese, Larron Westmoreland, Jack Jackson and Jake Salmons, who look to contribute as skill players,” Salmons said. “Easton Hendrickson and Malachi Brown will be returning at tight end. Some new faces on the OL include Brennan Miller, Caleb Cureton, Josh Goins, Keegan Riddle, Eli Centers, Landon McFarland, Landon Jones and Calvin Ellis.”

Landyn Walters and Carson Taylor will also give Corbin additional options at wide receiver.

With experience at quarterback, running back, receiver and along the offensive line, the Redhounds have plenty of pieces to work with entering the sea-

with Middlesboro and Williamsburg, who are both preseason Top Five or 10 in most every poll, presents a difficult set of circumstances as we play them back-to-back again this year,” Mitchell said. “With Pineville and Harlan being such rivalry-type games, anything can happen, so I feel like each week we will be tested to the extreme.

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Corbin also returns a ton of experience on the defensive side of the football.

Malachi Brown, Josh Goins, Malachi Zachary and Dalton Henderson return along the defensive line.

Silas Mahan, Tayton Cox and Jackson Marlow bring experience to the linebacker corps, while Zach Thomas, Clay Akins, Trey Person and Landyn Walters return in the secondary.

“We have a good amount of guys that return on our defense,” Salmons said. “Our Defensive linemen that returners include Malachi Brown, Josh Goins, Malachi Zachary and Dalton Henderson. Our linebacker returners include Silas Mahan, Tayton Cox and Jackson Marlow. Our defensive back returners include Zach Thomas, Clay Akins, Trey Person and Landyn Walters.”

“New faces on our defense include Dre Reese, Larron Westmoreland, Paul Viars, Brody Hart, Bret Estep, Jack Jackson, Jake Salmons, Luke Trett, Easton

"I feel like if we just go out and compete every Friday night, we will have a chance to win every game, but we have little room for error," he added. "So our coaching staff, which is tremendous by the way, will do a great job of getting kids in the right spot for them to be individually successful, which will result in team success."

Hendrickson, Brennan Miller, Bryson Hopkins and Carson Taylor," he added.

While Corbin possesses plenty of weapons offensively and experience defensively, Salmons makes it clear the Redhounds place just as much emphasis on special teams.

"Special teams is just as important to us as offense and defense," Salmons said. "Many of the contributors on special teams will be the same as offense and defense. Our kicker and punter combo of Sebastian Witherington and Trey Person lead those units. They have done a great job, and we are looking forward to a great year on our special units."

Corbin won't have the luxury of easing its way into the season.

The Redhounds' schedule features quality competition designed to test them throughout the regular season and have them prepared when postseason play arrives.

Salmons' squad will face the likes of Western

Continued from Page 4

Herron believes his team is capable of competing for a district championship and putting itself in position to make a deep run once post-season play begins.

"We believe we can win the district every year,"

Hills, North Laurel, Bryan Station, Pulaski County, Frederick Douglas, Johnson Central, Harlan County, Whitley County, Perry Central, and Great Crossing.

"Our schedule is full of very quality opponents and teams we have a great amount of respect for," Salmons said. "When we schedule, we want and invite really good competition to see where we are really at and prepare us for postseason play. We believe we have built a schedule that will make us better week to week. We expect a quality, tough, competitive game each week."

Salmons said one of the biggest questions entering any season is how off-season preparation translates once a team lines up against someone wearing a different uniform.

"I would say all coaches have the same concerns going into a year," he said. "It is really about seeing what you have worked on for a year at this point come together when you face a

Herron said. "If we win as many games as we can and improve, we will put ourselves in a position to compete in our district and get some home playoff games in the region. This is a strong and versatile team that has good chemistry and will continue to improve and put us in a place to be competitive in all our games."

team that isn't yourself. We practice and train at a high level, and we believe we will take that over to the field on game day."

Corbin will enter district play as the team to beat, but Salmons isn't taking anything for granted.

"Our district has a ton of teams you can see improving this last offseason," Salmons said. "We expect a ton of competition between teams that know each other well and are hungry to roll out the ball. We understand we are picked highly in the district preseason, but it comes down to daily improvement if we want to be at the top when the season is over.

"We are very excited about this group of young men after seeing how hard they have worked and how badly they want to win," he added. "Our entire program is getting closer day by day, and we have seen great leadership bring it all together. We believe in our team and set of coaches to make a deep run through a great competitive season."

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COLONELS

Continued from Page 5

Corbin, Harlan County, and Madison Southern.

“Our schedule is a tough mountain football schedule,” Rhymer said. “The challenges of each week should prepare us for the next week.

“Going into the season, there is not one game we will be the favorite in,” he added. “Our team understands we are the underdog and have our backs against the wall before the season starts. This has created a lot of motivation to embrace the process and try and change that narrative as the season progresses. District is tough, and our goal is to finish in the top two and play a home playoff game.

“Rhymer continued. “We have a tremendous group of student athletes that will represent Whitley County in the right way. We are excited to see Colonel Stadium filled up with our home opener and get the season rolling.”

PATRIOTS

Continued from Page 7

Tigers have won three straight meetings in the series, though Cumberlands’ last victory over Georgetown came on the road in 2022 when the Patriots secured a 24-23 win.

“Bethel is always a challenge and they’ve got really good athletes,” Housekeeper said. “Then Cumberland comes in and they’re always well coached and prepared. Georgetown

is another good environment to play in and another well coached team. Hopefully by that point we’re building some momentum and staying healthy because that’s such an important stretch of the season.”

After another bye week, the Patriots will conclude the regular season on Nov. 14, when they host No. 7 Lindsey Wilson University on Senior Day. The Blue Raiders reached the NAIA Playoffs last season, while UC will be looking to replicate its last home victory over Lindsey

Wilson, an 18-14 triumph in Williamsburg during the 2024 season.

“That’s going to be an important game,” Housekeeper said. “They’re a playoff program and being able to finish at home is important. Hopefully by the time we get there there’s some incentive to play for. We devote a lot of time and effort into making sure we can get our guys to game 10 healthy and fresh.”

As the Patriots prepare for the 2026 season, Housekeeper

believes consistency and resilience will be key to navigating one of the nation’s toughest schedules.

“The biggest thing is our ability to bounce back,” Housekeeper said. “There’s always going to be challenges. If we can have emotional regulation, the ability to reset, and focus on the things we can control, I feel like we’re going to be all right.”

Kickoff times and additional game information can be found on the Cumberlands football schedule website.

NORTH

Continued from Page 9

South Laurel, and Wayne County,

“We play a very tough schedule,” Nelson said. “We play five teams who are Top 10 in their respective class, and it brings out the best in our players. It definitely gets us ready for postseason play, and it has our players more motivated every week.”

There might not be much sep-

aration between the teams battling North Laurel for the district crown.

Pulaski County is coming off a trip to the state championship game, South Laurel finished 9-3 last season, and Nelson expects Southwestern to be much-improved.

“We play in a really tough district,” Nelson said. “Pulaski County just played in the state championship, South Laurel is coming off a 9-3 season and Southwestern has reloaded go-

ing into this season. I think we are right in the mix for winning a district championship and have to prepare and practice like champions.

“To be the man, you have to beat the man, and Pulaski County holds that title right now,” he added. “We have to be mentally prepared to go there and take it from them, as well as South Laurel and Southwestern. In our district, you can be district champs or come in fourth in the district with any slip-ups. Every

team has a talented roster.

“I think we have an excellent football team this season and one that North Laurel fans are going to enjoy watching come this season,” Nelson continued. “We have had our best summer practices yet in my three years as head coach, and I’m excited to get started. We can’t become complacent and relax and have to practice hard every day to get better. But this group is very player-led and going to be a lot of fun to watch and coach.”

SOUTH

Continued from Page 8

done a fantastic job for us in the kicking department. He’s almost automatic on extra points and is a very solid field-goal kicker with good range.”

Roark will handle punting duties with Jackson Hart serving as his back-up.

“Junior Caleb Roark will handle the punting duties, backed up by sophomore

Jackson Hart,” Hines said. “Long snappers are sophomore Brady Valentine and junior Malachi Smith. Valentine will also do the bulk of short snaps. Extra-point holders will be Maddox Warren and freshman wide receiver Bracen Middleton.”

Unlike last season, when South Laurel entered with numerous veteran players who had been through varsity battles, Hines admits there are plenty of unknowns surrounding

this year’s team.

The talent is there, though.

The question is how quickly that talent can turn into production.

“Our team is truly a big question going into the season,” Hines said. “We feel like we have some talented players that are ready to blossom into outstanding high school football players. However, the experience is not there. We’ll take some growing pains early in the sea-

son, and if we can kind of put things together when we get to the district, we might have a chance to have a decent season.”

The young Cardinals won’t have much time to ease into varsity football.

South Laurel faces a challenging schedule that includes Pulaski County, North Laurel and Somerset, all teams Hines expects to be among the best in their respective classifications.

“It is a very tough sched-

ule,” Hines said. “Pulaski County, North Laurel and Somerset are all ranked in the Top 10 in their respective classes. Every game is tough. And we must learn to bring our best effort each and every Friday night.

“The district is very, very strong,” he added. “Obviously, Pulaski County is going to be ranked in the Top Five in the state starting the season, North Laurel probably as well. Southwestern has a whole

new staff, new regime. They’re on the mend to get better fast. We’ve got our work cut out for us with every single district game.

“We feel good about our team,” Hines continued. “We feel like there’s a lot of potential. Our goal for the season simply is to achieve our potential. I don’t know how many wins and losses that’s going to turn out to be, but if we can achieve what we believe our potential is, then I believe we can have a solid season.”



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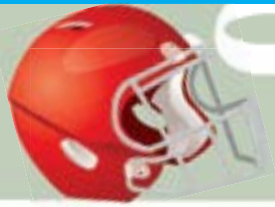
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