

7-5A DIV II

# Lovejoy LEOPARDS

The Leopards have staked their claim as one of the top teams in Class 5A Division II, compiling a 33-7 record over head coach Chris Ross' three seasons at the helm.

But Ross felt like his team battled inconsistencies at times last season, as Lovejoy's run met an abrupt end in the area round against South Oak Cliff—the third straight year that the Leopards were ousted by the eventual 5A Div. II state champion.

As Lovejoy looks to reverse that trend in a daunting Region II-5A, it'll likely mean another big year from a star-studded offense. The Leopards were the rare team to roster three starter-caliber quarterbacks



## PLAYER to watch

### PAYTON PIERCE LINEBACKER

After injuries limited his junior season, Pierce is back for his last hurrah with the Leopards and entrenched as the centerpiece of the state-ranked team's defense. Head coach Chris Ross said Pierce is healthy for the first time since early into his sophomore season, during which he enjoyed a breakout year with Lovejoy by recording 131 tackles. One of the nation's top linebacker prospects, the Ohio State commit doubles as a top goal-line weapon for the Leopards—leading the team in rushing touchdowns (10) during the 2021 season.

last season, but senior Hondo Franklin enters this fall as the unquestioned starter behind center.

Franklin was a breakout star as a sophomore, throwing 50 touchdown passes as Lovejoy

advanced all the way to the regional finals. He has one of the state's more dynamic one-two punches at receiver between senior Parker Livingstone and junior Daylan McCutcheon—the former verbally committed to Texas after logging 892 receiving yards and 12 touchdowns and the latter firmly on the Div. I recruiting radar after picking up district offensive newcomer of the year honors as a sophomore.

The Leopards have plenty of size at the tight end position as well, with junior Bear Tenney, a three-star move-in from Arizona, and senior Ridge Barker both checking in at 6 foot 5.

Seniors Khalin Williams and Dante Dean bring complementary styles to the Leopards' rushing attack,



PHOTO COURTESY OF JEFF DAHLIA

operating behind an offensive line led by senior William Fry. Juniors Braeden Gibson and Brody McKnight bring additional experience up front, while Lovejoy is hopeful that senior Sam Reynolds will be able to rejoin the team at some point this season. An all-area center and state champion wrestler, Reynolds continues to battle leukemia after being diagnosed in April.

"In my mind, Sam is going to play this fall, and I can't wait to have No. 61 back on the field," Ross said.

Senior Payton Pierce, meanwhile, is back to lead the defense after injuries curtailed the four-star linebacker's junior campaign. Pierce racked up a whopping 131 tackles as a sophomore and is verbally committed to Ohio State.

Senior Nick Perez anchors the defensive line as a four-year starter, while seniors Chase Bogle, Ethan Nelson and junior Owen Magee are expected to shine throughout a defense that returns seven starters from last year's playoff qualifier.

## Varsity SCHEDULE

Aug. 26	College Station	Eagle Stadium (Allen)	7 p.m.
Sept. 1	Argyle	Eagle Stadium (Argyle)	7 p.m.
Sept. 8	North Crowley	Leopard Stadium	7:30 p.m.
Sept. 15	Terrell	Terrell Memorial Stadium	7:30 p.m.
*Sept. 22	Denison	Leopard Stadium	7:30 p.m.
Sept. 29	BYE		
Oct. 6	Princeton	Jackie Hendrix Stadium	7:30 p.m.
Oct. 13	Crandall	Leopard Stadium	7:30 p.m.
Oct. 20	Mesquite Poteet	Mesquite Memorial Stadium	7:30 p.m.
Oct. 27	Greenville	Leopard Stadium	7:30 p.m.
Nov. 2	Melissa	Melissa ISD Cardinal Stadium	7:30 p.m.

\*Homecoming

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