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Contents

NSU

Game Schedule.....4
Building an Identity.....5
Starting Over.....6-7

Keys

Game Schedule.....18
Maxfield Takes Charge...19
Cougars Experience..20-21

Tahlequah

Game Schedule9
Tigers Answer Hype...10
11 Dynamic Duo....12-13

Hulbert

Game Schedule.....22
Scott Sapulpa.....23
Starting from Scratch..24

Sequoyah

Game Schedule.....14
Big-Play Threats.....15
11 Starters Return..16-17



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NSU Football

2019 Schedule

September 5 (THU) 7 p.m.

AT EMPORIA STATE
Emporia, Kans.

September 21 (SAT) 7 p.m.

AT PITTSBURG STATE
Pittsburg, Kan.

October 5 (SAT) 2 P.M.

AT NEB.-KEARNEY
Kearney, Neb.

September 12 (THU) 7 p.m.

VS CENTRAL MISSOURI
Gable Field
at Doc Wadley Stadium

September 28 (SAT) 2 p.m.

VS MISSOURI WESTERN STATE
Gable Field
at Doc Wadley Stadium

October 12 (SAT) 2 P.M.

VS WASHBURN
Gable Field
at Doc Wadley Stadium

October 19 (SAT) 2 P.M.

AT LINCOLN
Jefferson City, MO.

October 26 (SAT) 2 P.M.

VS MISSOURI SOUTHERN
STATE
Gable Field
at Doc Wadley Stadium

November 2 (SAT) 1:30 p.m.

AT NORTHWEST MISSOURI
STATE, Maryville, MO.

November 9 (SAT) 1 p.m.

AT CENTRAL OKLAHOMA
Edmond, Okla.

November 16 (SAT) 2 p.m.

VS FORT HAYS STATE
Gable Field
at Doc Wadley Stadium

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NSU is building an identity

By **BYRON BEERS**

bbeers@tahlequahdailypress.com

KANSAS CITY, Missouri — Establishing an identity is crucial for a first-year head coach and a program that hasn't tasted success over recent years.

It's a situation the Northeastern State football program has faced since day one of J.J. Eckert's hiring last December.

The RiverHawks were winless in 2018 under former head coach Rob Robinson, while Eckert was guiding Kilgore to another successful season, leading the Rangers to a 10-2 mark, NJCAA No. 4 ranking, a Southwest Junior College Football Conference championship and a berth in the Heart of Texas Bowl.

Eckert has talked about everybody walking the same path since his arrival and he touched on it during MIAA Football Media Day at Kauffman Foundation Center in Kansas City, Missouri one week before the start of fall camp.

"The big thing was trying to make sure that we could get everybody pulling the rope in the same direction," he said. "Ultimately that was one thing we really wanted to do was work hard on being a great team."

"We can talk all about schemes and all of the other things that go along with that, and those are very, very important, but if you're not going to have a team where everybody has the same goals, same ambitions on a daily basis, it's going to be tough to be very successful."

"We've been working on being a close-knit family and good teammates that love each other on and off the football field. We've made a lot of strides since January. Are we there yet? No, we're not. We've still got a long way to go."

Senior offensive lineman Jason Staggs and senior defensive lineman Ukoh Esang have seen drastic changes within the program this offseason.

"A lot of guys have bought in with this coaching staff," said Staggs, a senior who started in 10 games as a junior. "You can see everybody come together as a team"



See NSU, page 8

RiverHawks are starting over

By **BYRON BEERS**

bbeers@tahlequahdailypress.com

A massive reset button is being punched within the Northeastern State football program.

A breath of fresh air arrived last December when J.J. Eckert was announced as the new head coach.

Wholesale changes were needed after an 0-11 season in 2018 and a combined 1-21 record over the past two years under former head coach Rob Robinson.

Eckert and his staff will be building from the ground up.

“What I hope for more than anything else is that we can make a commitment to be successful in everything we do - academically, athletically, in this community, on this campus,” Eckert said following the first weekend of fall camp. “That way it’s not one of those deals that we talk about that commitment. It’s got to be something that we do every day.

“If we do something consistent for a long period of time and we keep on working at it for a long period of time, whether it be our classes or our schemes, we’re going to find what we’re looking for. We’ve got to work hard on creating a winning work ethic because once we get to the winning work ethic we’ll start making it where our preparation becomes important. It won’t be just about playing the game on Saturday, it will be about preparing Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday. They’ll have a lot of the expectations for what that can look like on Saturday.”

A lot will be asked from a group of 17 seniors.

“Our first and greatest challenge is we don’t need to be a bunch of talkers,” Eckert said. “We need less talking and more action. Once you get to the point where your actions speak volumes - because you lift harder than anybody else, you run harder than anybody else, you practice harder than anybody else, you watch more video than anybody else - then as a senior, people start recognizing that and you don’t have to talk



See RIVERHAWKS, page 7

because your actions speak volumes."

OFFENSE

The RiverHawks have seven quarterbacks on campus, but only one with any game experience in senior Jake Pruitt, who played in 10 games last year. Pruitt threw for 947 yards with two touchdowns and eight interceptions, completing 85 of his 206 attempts.

Other candidates are junior Quez Allen, who played under Eckert at Kilgore College, redshirt freshman Jacob Medrano, sophomores Blane Burns and Cayden Aldridge, and freshmen Caden Pennington and Beau Teel.

Boo McKnight, Tre'von Overstreet and Kevin Jackson each had carries at the running back position last year.

McKnight rushed for 149 yards on 56 carries with a pair of TDs and played in all 11 games. Overstreet, who was sidelined with an injury at the start of fall camp, is the top returning rusher. He had 283 yards on 80 carries. Jackson added 122 yards.

Terron Moses is a freshman running back from Vian who will factor into the mix as well, and Carson Schlotfeldt is an incoming junior fullback.

Cory Jones and Mark Wheeland are the only experienced receivers back. Jones had five catches for 44 yards with one touchdown in 2018, while Wheeland had three receptions for 42 yards and one score.

Kaden Kerr, Jacob Norman and Gage Ramey, along with incoming freshmen Kaleb Fellers, Jared Taylor and Claude Williams will also look to make an impact.

Tight ends Tre Currin, Nick Thompson, AJ McEntire, Riley Nebeker, Clarence

O'Quinn and Brenden Ryan are other receiving options. Currin had six grabs for 99 yards as a freshman, and Thompson had two catches, both for touchdowns, as a sophomore.

Senior Jason Staggs, sophomore Madison Wrathier, senior Damarii Tryon, sophomore Chaz Jimerson, senior John Waters and junior Nick Paul will be the foundation on an offensive line that was plagued with injuries and inconsistency last year.

Wrathier started in all 11 games in 2018, while Staggs had 10 starts. Tryon has 19 starts over his career, Waters played in nine games, and Jimerson saw action in seven games.

Incoming freshmen include Beau Curry, Malik Gilliam, Ronzell Raven, Tyler Sivard and Braden Vanderpool.

DEFENSE

Most of NSU's experience is on the defensive side of the ball. The RiverHawks have production returning on each level.

Amir Sa'id, Michael Simmons, Dailon Holmes, Eli Harvey, Billy Baker and Ukoh Essang have experience on the defensive line.

Sa'id recorded 50 tackles, two tackles for losses and played in all 11 games as a freshman. Simmons finished with 29 tackles, 3.5 of those for losses, and also played in all 11 games as a junior. Holmes had 21 tackles and a sack, Harvey collected 19 tackles and had one interception in nine games, and Baker logged nine tackles in seven games. Essang will become a full-time member of the defensive line after playing fullback in 2018.

Jaylen Thomas, Kristien Curl, Jeremiah Fordham,



Chance Kelley and Tre Randle are newcomers up front.

J'Quille Washington, Lane Yoder and Daxx McCalister give the RiverHawks a solid trio of linebackers returning.

Washington registered 69 total tackles as a sophomore and led the team with 10 tackles for losses. He also had two sacks, one hurry and a forced fumble.

Yoder had 22 tackles in six games with an interception, and McCalister posted 20 tackles across 10 games.

Sophomore Brady Kropp, redshirt freshman Steve Adair, and sophomore Ken Torrance also return at linebacker.

Last year's top two tacklers return in the secondary. Senior Jean Bazile finished with 99 tackles, three tackles for losses, and had two pass breakups. Also back is Courtland Clark, who recorded 91 stops and had five pass breakups.

Also returning are Ashton Antwine, who has been missed most of the last two seasons with injuries, Jordan Prince, Ty Nichols and Joshua Dykes. Prince had two interceptions to go along with two pass breakups as a sophomore.

Newcomers on the back-end include Jaylin Coleman, Elijah Tabut and Elijah Wallace.

and believe in what they tell us.”

“For me, I’ve noticed consistency,” Essang said. “It’s way more consistent with the work ethic. It’s more fun. Last year, people didn’t really have fun playing. The new coaching staff came in and brought in a new culture.”

Essang, from Arlington, Texas, recorded three tackles and recovered a fumble while appearing in all 11 games as a junior. As a sophomore, he registered seven tackles, 3.5 of those for losses, and 1.5 sacks across six games.

NSU, picked 11th in both the MIAA Preseason Coaches Poll and MIAA Preseason Media Poll prior to Wednesday’s media day, reports to fall camp on Thursday, Aug. 8 and opens practice on Aug. 9 at Doc Wadley Stadium.

“We’re really looking forward to 2019,” Eckert said. “It seems like it’s been a really, really fast seven months and it’s been one of those scenarios with all the new faces, hiring coaches and being able to get to the whole process going in the right direction...it’s been a whirlwind.”

Eckert, the 20th head coach in program history,

coached the previous 12 years at Kilgore. He was named SWJCFC Coach of the Year in his final season.

He played under his father and former head coach, Tom Eckert, from 1994-97, and was a member of NSU’s 1994 NAIA national championship team.

“I’ve really been excited about the opportunity to return to Tahlequah and to Northeastern State University,” Eckert said. “It’s been a place I’ve called home for many years. I’ve got a lot of memories of Northeastern State football through the years, and it’s a great honor to be able to be back and have a chance to lead a very storied football program through many decades.”

The RiverHawks open their season on Thursday, Sept. 5 on the road against Emporia State. Their home opener is Sept. 12 against Central Missouri.

“We’ve got a very good group of individuals returning for 2019,” Eckert said. “We’ve got some guys in the upper class areas that you definitely need in the division to model to be successful so our seniors are something that’s exciting to look at when you have 17 of them.”



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Tahlequah Football



2019 Schedule

September 6 - 7:00p Fort Gibson
Location: Tahlequah High School

September 13 - 7:00p @ Coweta (Coweta, OK)
Location: Coweta High School

September 20 - 7:00p @ Sallisaw (Sallisaw, OK)
Location: Sallisaw High School

September 27 - 7:00p Will Rogers College (Tulsa, OK)
Location: Tahlequah High School

October 4 - 7:00p Skiatook (Skiatook, OK)
Location: Tahlequah High School

October 11 - 7:00p @ Collinsville (Collinsville, OK)
Location: Collinsville High School

October 17 (Thur) - 7:00p @ Pryor (Pryor, OK)
Location: Pryor High School

October 25 - 7:00p East Central (Tulsa, OK)
Location: Tahlequah High School

November 1 - 7:00p @ Memorial (Tulsa, OK)
Location: Memorial High School

November 8 - 7:00p Claremore (Claremore, OK)
Location: Tahlequah High School

Tigers look to answer the hype

By **BYRON BEERS**

bbeers@tahlequahdailypress.com

The hype is strong for Tahlequah.

It's easy to see why.

The Tigers, coming off a nine-win regular season, have a plethora of key players back on both sides of the ball.

They have quarterback Tate Christian to pilot the offense.

They have the program's single-season rushing leader in Dae Dae Leathers.

They have a host of weapons at receiver.

They have a pass-rushing specialist in defensive end Blake Corn.

They have a patrol-the-field linebacker in Dylan Parish.

They have depth and skill in the secondary.

The Tigers have been tabbed as a Class 5A preseason top 10 team.

Head coach Brad Gilbert acknowledges the preseason buzz. He's just not claiming it.

"We still haven't done the things we want to do all in the same year," Gilbert said. "That's something we're striving for, and yes, expectations are somewhat high and we haven't had those expectations before. I think it's a testament to where we're at, with what we've been able to do. But on the other hand, it's not something we ever pay attention to. We've got to go out and win football games."

Even with ample parts in place, the Tigers do have holes to fill on both sides of the ball.

But replacing lost production hasn't been an issue during Gilbert's tenure.

Tahlequah's ability to plug and play has been impressive. Entering his seventh year, Gilbert operates a fine-tuned machine, along with a coaching staff that has thrived with continuity.

It's a culture that shines.

"I was told a long time ago that winning football games has as much to do with the culture that is established more than anything else," said Gilbert, who has guided the Tigers to five consecutive playoff appearances and 37 wins since 2014. "We have a system, and we have a great coaching staff that has remained in place for the most part. They understand what I want within the program and the expectations that I have. We really feed off of each other."

"We have accountability, attention to detail, all of those things that go into being disciplined. There's a fluidness and a consistency in what we do. I think all of that goes into what we've been able to accomplish the last five years."

"You look year in and year out, we always lose key guys and we've been blessed enough to have young guys understand the expectations within the program and we do a good job as a staff prepping them for their opportunity, and when that time comes

See **TIGERS**, page 11

Tigers

Continued from page 10

they always seem to be ready.”

OFFENSE

Tate Christian directs an offense that averaged better than 350 total yards last year and scored 40 points or more four times. The senior threw for 1,434 yards and 15 touchdowns and matched a single-game school mark with five touchdown passes in just his second start in a week two win over Coweta.

Dae Dae Leathers flashed greatness and was the workhorse on offense in 2018. He broke the school's single-season rushing mark, finishing with 1,586 yards, and also reached the end zone 19 times. Averaging over five yards per carry, he rushed for 200 yards or more on three occasions, including a career-high 295 against Sallisaw.

Carson Ferguson is also back at running back after rushing for 259 yards and six touchdowns as a sophomore.

Jaxon Jones, Kobey Baker and Simeon Armstrong are the top returning receivers. Baker led the team with 28 receptions and had 445 yards and three TDs. Jones had 368 yards on 19 catches with a team-high five scores, and Armstrong had five grabs for 58 yards and a touchdown.

Tristian King, Qua'shon Leathers, Tanner Christian, Bradley Pruitt, Trae Patrick and Lane Matlock are expected to contribute at receiver as well.

The question marks come on the offensive line with the departures of Brandon Davis, Nick Grasshopper and Aidan Yahola. Left tackle Blake Corn, left guard Hayden Napier and center Joe Hendrix are the most experienced and the only



three who have starts under their belts.

Kooper McAlvain, Montana Wood, Justin Hitchcock, Brandon Jackson, Tristan Walters, Lance Holcolmb and Rocky Hensley are battling for spots and will provide depth.

DEFENSE

The defense starts with Blake Corn up front at defensive end and inside linebacker Dylan Parish, seniors who have started in every game since the start of their sophomore seasons.

Corn was disruptive in every way in 2018. He logged six sacks, five hurries, had 11 tackles for losses and 53 total tackles.

Parish led the team with 97 tackles, eight of those for losses. He also had 3.5 sacks, a forced fumble and had a

fumble recovery.

What's around Corn and Parish in the front seven is the question.

Gone on the defensive front are Brandon Davis and Isaac Strain. Hayden Napier is expected to become the regular at nose tackle after seeing time there as a junior where he recorded four tackles, and juniors Justin Hitchcock and Brandon Jackson, and senior Montana Wood are expected to fill in and provide depth.

At linebacker, the Tigers must replace Cole Goodnight and Simon Escalera on the outside and Zach Fuentes in the middle.

Joining Parish on the inside will be Angel Quezada, who had 14 tackles in a limited role last year. In the mix at the outside spots are junior Shaw Thornton, senior Tristan King and junior Carson Ferguson.

The secondary has the most overall experience with Kobey Baker, Qua'shon Leathers, Trae Patrick, Simeon Armstrong, Dae Dae Leathers and Bradley Pruitt providing solid pieces.

Baker started all 11 games at strong safety in 2018 and collected 71 tackles.

Leathers started in the final three games at free safety as a sophomore and didn't disappoint. He had a pair of interceptions, two pass breakups and collected 35 tackles.

Patrick is the other returning starter at one of the cornerback spots. As a junior, Patrick had two interceptions, was tied for team-high honors in pass breakups and had 22 tackles.

Other candidates at corner are Pruitt, Armstrong, Leathers, Riley Reed, Nelijah Tatum and Malik McMurtrey.



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Tahlequah has a dynamic duo in Corn and Parish

By **BYRON BEERS**

bbeers@tahlequahdailypress.com

Blake Corn and Dylan Parish will carry a lot of weight on their shoulders as seniors. They are the only full-time starters returning within Tahlequah's front seven on defense in 2019.

They're seasoned veterans.

They form a dynamic duo.

They're also what head coach Brad Gilbert calls the best he's coached at their respective positions.

Corn can put pressure on opposing quarterbacks and wreak havoc in backfields from defense end. He collected six sacks, five hurries, 11 tackles for losses and 53 tackles last year.

"When it comes to being blocked one on one, I just don't know if there's too many people that can do that [against Blake]," Gilbert said during the spring. "He puts an immense amount of pressure on an offense with just his ability to get to the quarterback. He's made a lot of big plays for us, not just as a junior but also as a sophomore."

Parish is a field general in the middle of the field at inside linebacker. He's led the team in total tackles the past two seasons. He had 97 as a junior to go along with eight tackles for losses, 3.5 sacks, one forced fumble and a fumble recovery.

"I still remember calling Coach [Keith] Wilson on a Saturday morning after Dylan's first start against Fort Gibson his sophomore year," Gilbert said. "I said, 'Dylan's got a chance to be one of the best we've had since we've been here.' You saw glimpses of it even though he was young in his first game. He had a lot of instinct, natural instinct. He had the ability to make plays."

"They've both played a lot of football," said Wilson, the defensive coordinator. "They've learned a lot. Everything is faster for them because of their instincts, and they know what's going on. I don't have to spend a lot of time coaching them like I did when they were sophomores."

Corn and Parish will not only have to continue to shine, they will have to lead an inexperienced group around them.

"We've got to get the young guys ready," Corn said. "We've got to get their reads down and get them where they can play at a high level, and that



See DUO, page 13

Duo

Continued from page 12

comes from working as a group and improving every day. I have to be a better leader and lead the guys and help out in every way that I can since I do have the experience. Somebody will step up and we'll be just fine."

"We have a young group this year," Parish said. "I just have to do my job. I can't do more than what's my job or I'll mess it up for another player."

Corn, who will also play a big role at left tackle on the offensive line, says he has gotten better with his quickness over the offseason and his stronger than he's ever been. He played at 245 pounds as a sophomore, dropped to 215 last year, but is at a happy me-

dium at 230 now.

"I knew I needed to be quicker and stronger, but also work on my pass rush more," he said. "I'm really trying to work on my technique for pass rush so I can get us off the field on third down, force a punt or something. There were a lot of things I could've done better last year. I've gained a lot of strength this offseason and now I've got my weight where I want it."

"What's different about Blake than anybody else is his motor," Wilson said. "He can still play fast even in the fourth quarter. He plays both ways. He's playing 60 plays on offense and 50 on defense. There's not a drop off. His motor is pretty much the same in

the first quarter as it is in the fourth quarter."

Parish has put on 20 pounds since that first start against Fort Gibson as a sophomore. He's also soaked in every bit of information from film room study to interactions with Wilson, who is his position coach.

"I've learned so much about the game since my sophomore year," Parish said. "I've gotten stronger and I've gained more speed. I think the biggest thing is the knowledge. I understand the defense and learning about the teams who we're playing. My sophomore year I was really young and pretty small as a middle line-backer."

"Dylan is like having a

coach out on the field," Wilson said. "He has great instincts and knows where he needs to be. You watch film and you say, 'That's Dylan. He's just making play after play and has great ball instincts.' Dylan just knows how to play football."

Corn and Parish will be the teeth of the Tiger defense, a defense that prides itself in flying to the football.

They're the leaders. They're the difference makers.

"Blake and Dylan have brought so much to the program," Wilson said. "They can play ball. They have played a lot of snaps being in this program. They're guys to lean on."

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Sequoyah Football



2019 Schedule

September 6 - 7:00p Muldrow (Muldrow, OK)
Location: Sequoyah High School, Thompson Field

September 13 - 7:00p @ Miami (Miami, OK)
Location: Miami Public Schools

September 20 - 7:00p Locust Grove (Locust Grove, OK)
Location: Sequoyah High School, Thompson Field

September 27 - 7:00p @ Keys (Park Hill, OK)
Location: Keys Public Schools

October 11 - 7:00p @ Vian (Vian, OK)
Location: Vian High School

October 17 (Thur) - 7:00p @ Holland Hall (Tulsa, OK)
Location: Holland Hall, Football Stadium

October 25 - 7:00p Westville (Westville, OK)
Location: Sequoyah High School, Thompson Field

November 1 - 7:00p Panama (Panama, OK)
Location: Sequoyah High School, Thompson Field

November 8 - 7:00p @ Spiro (Spiro, OK)
Location: Spiro High School

Indians have big-play threats on offense

By **BILLY NICHOLS**

TDP Special Writer

Sequoyah suffered through a disappointing season, going 3-7 in its first season in Class 2A-5.

The Indians will look to establish themselves this year and get back to the playoffs, and they will have the experience to do so on offense.

They return 10 starters from last year's squad.

The offense will be directed by the same quarterback, Skylar Birdtail (5-10, 175), who will look to be a much bigger threat passing the ball in 2019 after passing for 885 yards and 11 touchdowns last year.

Look to see improved stats from Birdtail this year while he directs a spread offense that could have some big play capabilities from a few different players.

A huge weapon for Birdtail this year will be wide receiver Trenton Harris, who coach Shane Richardson will make a point to get the ball to more this fall.

Harris (6-3, 190) logged 25 catches for 390 yards and six touchdowns in 2018. Harris will look to significantly increase his totals and should do so as he has all the physical tools to be dominant at the wide receiver position he is tall, rangy and could be a big deep threat this year for the Indians.

"We feel like with him you've got a little bit better chance than 50/50 on what you would call a 50/50 ball," Richardson said.

Typically in the past the Indians have been a more conservative offense when it comes to passing, but with the emergence of Harris they have a legitimate deep threat for their spread attack. Look to see a lot more deep shots thrown down the field this season to Harris. He will definitely be a player to watch out for this season.

Another key feature on offense is at the running back position just like it has been for a while at Sequoyah, who always seems to have a very talented player in the backfield.

Returning at running back will be Vype top 100 player Shade Watie, who had 191 carries and 1,220 yards rushing with 13 touchdowns for the Indians in 2018.

Watie is nowhere near a one dimensional player. He also had 21 catches for 330 yards along with five receiving touchdowns out of the backfield. Watie played primarily slot receiver for the Indi-



See **INDIANS**, page 17

Sequoyah returns all 11 starters on defense

By **BILLY NICHOLS**

TDP Special Writer

Just like on offense, Sequoyah is overflowing with experience on the defensive side in 2019.

The Indians return all 11 starters and will be ready to help the team compete.

In numerous games last year, Sequoyah lost close games down the stretch and the defense will certainly look to turn those close losses into wins. This year, the Indians will have a ton of experience, and with that they will look to not give up big plays to the opponent.

Along with stopping big plays, the defense will also look to wreak havoc on opposing offenses and force more turnovers than they did last year. Sequoyah will come out and run a 4-2-5 defense, a system that fits because of its personnel up front. The 4-2-5 is great against the run because you have the four down linemen to disrupt the offense right from the jump.

Look for defensive lineman Christian Dry (5-10, 240) to come out and make some big plays up front.

The 4-2-5 is also good in pass coverage depending on how good your linebackers are and how many big plays they can make, and the Indians have some good linebackers.

Dakota Sanchez (6-1, 190) is one of the linebackers back for the Indians this season. In 2018, Sanchez had 106 total tackles and will be looking to do more of the same this season. Trenton Harris (6-3, 190) will



also be playing linebacker for the Indians this year.

The standout is Tyler Purkey (5-10, 180). Purkey, another VYPE Top 100 player, recorded 132 tackles for the Indians last season. With this being Purkey's senior season, look for him to be an even better player looking to further improve himself.

While the defense has a lot of guys who have playing experience, it does lack depth and it will look to try to find some depth. The defense knows they will have to come and play hard every single week in order to have success this season.

"In our schedule and in our district if we don't bring it every day we aren't going

to be successful, and there's just no getting around that," Sequoyah head coach Shane Richardson said.

The Indians will look to make big plays on defense without giving up a lot of big plays and limiting their own mistakes and penalties. Last year, they found themselves in a lot of close games and ended up losing a lot of the close ones because of the inconsistent and up and down type of plays.

"In football, penalties are hard to overcome," Richardson said.

This year look to see Shade Watie running the three deep guys in the back to try and limit those big plays from happening for the other team's offense.

The Indians have goals and they will look to make the playoffs even after the down year they had. They still believe making the playoffs is a feasible goal and it is hard to argue with that considering the defense is returning every single starter from last year's squad.

Sequoyah has a chip on it's shoulder and will be eager to prove itself this season from the very start.

Richardson believes his team grew up a lot last season even though it was a down year. Accountability is a word coach Richardson used a few times when talking about his team this summer. His guys respond-

See SEQUOYAH, page 17



Sequoyah

Continued from page 16

ed and were ready to work and get better at summer pride and passing league and that they all hold each other accountable.

"Every week is kind of like its own season and we have got to go out every week and believe that we can win, and if we can do that then at the end of the season we should find ourselves competing for a top spot in our district," Richardson said.

The defense will look to play fast and aggressive

while limiting the big play, which sometimes is hard to do because when playing an aggressive style of defense your trying to force the issue for the offense.

A big thing for this defense will be flying around to the ball and getting all 11 guys to the ball every single play. If this defense can find a way to play consistent all season and limit their own mistakes they have the opportunity to be a good defense in District 2A-5.

Indians

Continued from page 15

ans before 2018 when they decided to make the move to running back where he really blossomed. Look for Watie to also be moved around some in order to get him the ball in different ways.

One big guy paving the way for Watie this year will be the center Joah Fourkiller, who will be returning as a three-year starter on the offensive line. Fourkiller will bring experience up front, which is always a great attribute for an o-line to have.

Along with Fourkiller, look for Drake Breaklander (6-3, 260), Christian Dry (5-10, 240), Garret Neugin (5-10, 215), Kyle Welch (6-0, 240) and Tyson Cochran (5-10, 220) to help protect Birdtail as well as open up the running lanes for Watie. The o-line will look to play a very physical style of play and try to dominate their opponents up front.

Some other notable players to keep an eye on this season will be Clayton Wallace (5-9, 190). He will play the full back position and should help Watie by clearing some defenders out of the way.

The offense knows the pain of losing and will certainly look to change their fortunes around. It was up

and down last year and will look to stay consistent this year and limit the turnovers and penalties.

The experience it has is not something to overlook and it will have chemistry, which is key for any offense to succeed. The Indians will look to run multiple formations from the spread this year and could be a very dynamic offense that can throw over the top or run right through a defense. They will look to have a balanced attack of both and quite frankly they have the tools to do it.

Last year was the first year in Class 2A for Sequoyah and the Indians did not get an easy schedule. It will be just as tough in 2019.

Playing teams like Holland Hall and Vian will always make for a tough schedule, but now that the offense has played these teams and knows what it's up against, it's up for the challenges this year.

Although they are in a very tough district, Sequoyah will look to succeed and try to make the playoffs, which is familiar territory for the program. As a whole, the offensive group will most certainly be one to keep an eye on, and if it can stay consistent the Indians could be dangerous.

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Keys Football

2019 Schedule

September 6 - 7:00p @ Checotah (Checotah, OK)
Location: Checotah High School

September 13 - 7:00p @ Lincoln (Lincoln, AR)
Location: Lincoln High School

September 20 - 7:00p Roland (Roland, OK)
Location: Keys High School

September 27 - 7:00p Sequoyah (Tahlequah, OK)
Location: Keys Public Schools

September 4 - 7:00p @ Holland Hall (Tulsa, OK)
Location: Holland Hall High School

October 11 - 7:00p Spiro (Spiro, OK)
Location: Keys Public Schools

October 17 (Thur) - 7:00p @ Pocola (Pocola, OK)
Location: Keys High School

October 25 - 7:00p Panama (Panama, OK)
Location: Keys High School

November 1 - 7:00p @ Westville (Westville, OK)
Location: Westville High School

November 8 - 7:00p Vian (Vian, OK)
Game Details: Keys Public Schools

Maxfield takes charge at Keys

By **AUSTIN HEADLEE**

TDP Special Writer

Keys enters the 2019 season with a new head coach in Mel Maxfield. Maxfield has over 30 years of coaching experience in Texas and looks to bring a new attitude and culture to the Cougars' program.

"I want to bring the attitude of 'we can do this,'" said Maxfield. "We are not going to try to have any weak links, but if we have a one link that is lagging behind a little bit we are going to do our best to bring them back up to speed and go from there."

Maxfield replaces ex-head coach Mitchell Crittenden who went 3-7 last season in his only season as the Cougars' head coach, but Crittenden went 6-5 the previous two seasons which ended in first-round playoff losses while acting as the offensive coordinator. Maxfield is instilling an offense that closely resembles the offense of the previous regime.

"It is a lot similar to the offense we ran with coach Crit," said senior offensive linemen Drake Hathaway. "We are still running the wing-T but I feel like it will be a little bit more effective."

Last season the Cougars sprinkled in some shotgun formations under necessary circumstances, but Maxfield plans to stick to the wing-T offense throughout the season. While the plays will be run outside of the same basic formation, he plans to have a wide variety of play calls to trick the opposing defenses.

"We are a series offense, and with that series, each back is a threat to carry the ball," said Maxfield. "There is also a play-action pass. For example, our buck series could be a whole offense in itself with the fullback trap, buck sweep, the bootleg, the wing-back counter, the bootleg throwback, the bootleg screen, there's almost enough to just do that exclusively. The wing-T, I've been running that for 33 years now and I certainly do not know everything about it, but that is where my experience lies and we make some adjustments."

Maxfield has identified the offensive line as the team's biggest strength heading into the season with Hathaway leading the group. The line will be essential for the team's run dominant offense.

"I've been impressed with our offensive line," said Maxfield. "First, we had spring training then a team camp and they have shown well there. They have all had productive summers getting stronger and faster. So initially, I think our strength lies in our offensive line."

While the offensive line is a crucial strength it may also lead to problems towards the end of series, games and later on in the season. Most of the offensive linemen will be playing on the defensive side of the ball in Maxfield's multiple 4-3 base defense.

"The flip side of that is that they are also our defensive line, so we are going to identify players and a system that is built-in relief. Right now, if we were to kick off in 30 minutes we would

See KEYS, page 21

Cougars have experience with first-year head coach

By **AUSTIN HEADLEE**

TDP Special Writer

Keys will look to rebound after last season's 3-7 record coming off two consecutive 6-5 seasons which led to playoff berths.

New head coach Mel Maxfield, who replaced former head coach Mitchell Crittenden, brings over 30 years of Texas high school football to the Cougars' program and looks to make an impact in year one.

Maxfield doesn't have a set number of wins to define a successful season, but his observations from over the off-season lead him to believe the team is ready to be competitive and improve with every passing week.

"We have had a good summer program," he said. "I was able to be the head coach during the spring training. I am optimistic about our chances of success."

The Cougars are a young team mostly compiled of sophomores and juniors. Fortunately, most of those players started last year as freshmen and sophomores or gained experience from last season.

"I think we have some experience now," said Maxfield. "I think experience is a plus if it was positive, but I don't know if getting the dog getting beat out of you every week really helps you. We are going to make a big deal out of doing positive things and correct the negative things and push forward."

Sophomore outside linebacker Colby Nottingham played significant snaps during his freshman year and, after an offseason and summer program of bulking up, is expected to have a stronger contribution to the team. Nottingham is also expected to play at the fullback position on offense.

"He has had a really good summer and I'm projecting him to anchor the end," said Maxfield. "He has gained some weight and he has a really great attitude and work ethic. That is the



one thing I want to get established is our work ethic and our can-do attitude. Respect everyone but don't shy away, but that's easier said than done. I think we are hungry for success."

Fellow sophomore quarterback Lane Taylor is projected to have a major contribution for the Cougars. Taylor started every game last season under coach Crittenden and spent time as a defensive back. His athleticism, moxie and leadership will be crucial for the team's offense.

"He has a good foundation," said Maxfield. "He had a good summer program and he is committed to the cause. He also has good leadership skills and he's everything you look for in a quarterback. Of course, it's early and I'm projecting he'll be the guy, but I really believe he'll be the guy."

The Cougars football program has been described as a close brotherhood by the players where the younger players look up to the upperclassmen for inspiration while forming tight-knit bonds and friendships. Senior offensive linemen Drake Hathaway is one

of the team leaders who leads by example and through his actions.

Hathaway is the strongest player in the Cougars' locker room. He has even cooked his teammates breakfast, including a gravy recipe that Nottingham raved over. Hathaway is the leader of the offensive line who expects big things from his peers going into the 2019 season.

"I think we are going to be a young team and our offensive line will be our biggest strength going into the season," said Hathaway. "We have some powerhouse players on the offensive line, but we also have a lot of talent in the backfield and in the secondary on defense. We will have a lot of speed and strength, but I think our offensive line will be the strength of everything."

Hathaway and his position group will be opening up holes and protecting the backfield of Taylor and Nottingham. Senior running back Bryce Sanders will be joining the duo in the backfield and brings a dynamic,

See **COUGARS**, page 21

Cougars

Continued from page 20

smart and speedy option to both the running and passing lane. Sanders is a two-sport star who experienced some injuries during last season. He is healthy entering training camp and is expected to make his presence known on the football field.

"I just want him to have, number one, an injury-free season," said Maxfield. "Also, a good attitude and good effort. He has had some success in the past, so we want to get that reestablished."

Last season the team ran the occasional shotgun formation while primarily playing in the wing-T formations. Maxfield doesn't anticipate bringing that back into the game plan, but he will integrate a new wrinkle into the offensive system.

"What we are going to incorporate into the offense is some options because I like to have the ball in Lane's hands," said Maxfield. "It'll help take some pressure off our running backs."

The team will take the season one week at a time, but seniors Hathaway and Shamon O'Neal are looking forward to facing the school rival Sequoyah. The Cougars bested the Indians last season with a 14-7 win at Sequoyah under cold and rainy weather. Keys has won the rivalry twice over the past three seasons and will look to earn another one.

The young team had a setback in during the 2018 season, but the preparation and experience the underclassmen experienced may be the exact

Keys

Continued from page 19

go in with the idea that we will remain consistent with our offensive line and rotate our defensive line to keep them fresh."

The player's transition to the new defensive system may take some time to fully adjust, but the main goal will be the same as last seasons: limit the opposing offense's big-play potential.

"Defensively it's a change of philosophy so we are looking to get comfortable in our scheme, understand our fits and to be more physical," said Maxfield. "We're trying to limit the big plays. That's not anything more than trying to create big plays on offense, but I would say that's my biggest question heading into the season."

Maxfield wants the team to be competitive from the beginning of the season to the last game. Of course, every team wants to go undefeated and win the state championship, but Maxfield wants to see improvement each week from his team during his first year as the Cougars' head coach.

"We want to improve every day," he said. "I don't have a hardcore certain number of wins that we are shooting for, but we're going to try and win them all. It is like the old cliché, we are going to take it one step at a time. We don't put all of our eggs in one basket for one game. I have seen other teams

do that and then that basket falls and breaks, and they never recover. I have always taken each year as a new year and each game as a new game, no matter what happened in the past, good or bad."

The freshmen and sophomores who started last season due to the lack of senior players have valuable in-game experience that will be beneficial to Maxfield and his coaching staff going forward beyond just the upcoming season.

"We have a good sophomore class in general," said Maxfield. "A lot of kids were forced to play as freshmen who probably were not quite ready. They could not recognize the opponent quite as quick going in as freshmen. If a senior is going up against a freshman the senior is going to have the advantage, but we have some good experience. We got nicked up a little bit, but we're still moving. Hopefully, we learn from that. We are more concerned about ourselves and our progress."

Maxfield is a football guy to his core. His main focus has always been to help the players grow and mature both on and off the field to help them become the best that they can be.

"I'm just ready for football, everybody back in Texas had already had a week so I'm ready to get started up here as well."

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Hulbert Football

2019 Schedule

August 30 - 7:30p @ Hominy (Hominy, OK)

Location: Hominy, Football Stadium

September 6 - 7:00p Drumright (Drumright, OK)

Location: Hulbert High School

September 13 - 7:00p Okemah (Okemah, OK)

Location: Hulbert High School

September 20 - 7:00p @ Ketchum (Ketchum, OK)

Location: Ketchum Public Schools

September 27 - 7:00p @ Porter (Porter, OK)

Location: Porter Public Schools

October 4 - 7:00p Gore (Gore, OK)

Location: Hulbert High School

October 11 - 7:00p @ Talihina (Talihina, OK)

Location: Talihina High School

October 24 (Thur) - 7:00p Central Sallisaw

Location: Hulbert High School

November 1 - 7:00p @ Warner (Warner, OK)

Location: Hulbert High School

November 8 - 7:00p Savanna (Savanna, OK)

Location: Hulbert High School



Riders face challenges under new head coach Scott Sapulpa

By AUSTIN HEADLEE

TDP Special Writer

Hulbert has big expectations for the season after playing in the playoffs for four consecutive years.

First-year head coach Scott Sapulpa, who replaces former head coach Joe Brown, who left Hulbert to coach at Kellyville, wants to extend the playoff appearance streak with a strong 2019 season.

Sapulpa previously worked with the Riders before leaving to learn from other coaches. He coached under former Muskogee head coach Matt Hennesy and later followed Hennesy to coach the Pawhuska Huskies last season.

The Huskies finished 6-5 with a 41-8 loss in the first round of the playoffs to Rejoice Christian last season with Sapulpa as an assistant coach. The Huskies also averaged over 31 points a game while giving up 21 points a game.

"I left Hulbert when I went to Muskogee to work with Henno and I told some people I am going to go learn some football and bring it back someday," Sapulpa said earlier this year in an interview with the Muskogee Phoenix. "That was about 20 years ago. It is time."

Sapulpa took advantage of the opportunity to learn from multiple coaches during his time away from Hulbert and plans to use his new knowledge to help improve the Riders' program. The coaches he learned under combine to have decades worth of coaching and football experience.

"You take a little bit of something from everything you have worked with before and what you lack you keep it and take it with you," said Sapulpa. "There were some good guys here in Muskogee and I learned a lot from those guys, and every day you learn something from everybody else. That is just how I have always done. If you see something you like take it and use it, and if you see something you don't like, then don't do it."

Sapulpa brings years of experience to Hulbert but faces challenges just like other football programs around the state. Many schools around Oklahoma are struggling to find coaches to add to their staff.

Sapulpa brought some coaches with him to Hulbert, but he would still be open to adding another quality coach to mentor the team.

"That is the challenge of all challenges," Sapulpa said. "From what I gather it is not just here, I think there are a lot of schools still trying to get coaches. The whole staff is new. We have got some good guys. I really am glad to have them all and I can't wait to see what kind of

See RIDERS, page 25

Hulbert will be starting from scratch

By **AUSTIN HEADLEE**

TDP Special Writer

Hulbert has finished the regular season with a winning record for the past five seasons and first-year head coach Scott Sapulpa expects to continue the streak and make a playoff push.

Only one starter from last year's 8-4 team will be returning for the 2019 season. It is up to the young and inexperienced players on the roster to make up for the lost production to have a chance at making the playoffs.

Sapulpa was hired as the Riders' new head coach in April, but he has a lot of confidence in the team's grit and coachability in the few months he has spent with the players.

"We have some grit to us," he said. "That was the question when I first got here. These guys are young and I was curious about how much grit they had but I think we're good there. The thing I like about these guys is that they're coachable. They're learning and that's good."

The first obstacle for the players is to learn and understand the schemes of the new head coach. Sapulpa has made it a point of emphasis for the players to play within the rules to transition to the new offense. The team has even participated in extra camps and leagues to be better prepared for the season.

"Learning the offense and defense is the first thing," said Sapulpa. "Learning how to follow the rules and then just getting experience. We're in team camps and passing leagues just like everyone else and that has helped us. Don't put a lot of stock in passing leagues per se, but for a team like us learning a new offense and defense, I think the passing league helped us out a lot."

Oklahoma career rushing leader Jacob Bruce was the focal point of the Riders' offense last season and led the team to the playoffs. Now that Jacob has graduated it is time for James Bruce, Jacob's younger brother, to step up as the team's running back.

"It's different, I'm not used to it," said James Bruce. "I'm still kind of getting used to it. I just feel like it's my time to shine now."

Jacob offered his brother some advice for his new role: Keep running and keep going. James will look to keep the team's offensive production going in the new season.

The quarterback position will also be filled by a new face in senior Jonathan Jones. Jones is entering his first year at Hulbert but looks to make strides as the quarterback. Although he has only been at the school for a short amount of time, the team has brought him in with open arms and has made Jones feel like a part of the Riders' family.

"The bond between us is like I've known them for a long time," said Jones. "For new people that do come in, it's the same way, we treat them like brothers."

Jones believes Sapulpa and the rest of the coaching staff has coached the team in a positive way by encouraging the players to keep their heads up and by practicing correct techniques.

The offense will rally behind senior wide receiver Donnie Grinder who is known as the locker room guy on the team. Grinder has the



See **HULBERT**, page 25

Riders

Continued from page 23

coaching we get done. If you get enough good coaches to help with individual teaching the team will get better by doing that."

Along with coaching challenges, Sapulpa faces the pressure of inheriting a playoff team which lost in the second round. The state's career rushing yards record holder Jacob Bruce led the team to the playoffs but has graduated and is no longer with the team. Sapulpa must replace Bruce's offensive production and nine other offensive starters from last year's team.

Sapulpa must also replace all 11 open defensive starting positions that were filled by last season's seniors. His 3-3 base defense will require the young and inexperienced team to step

up into their new roles.

Despite the obstacles facing the program, Sapulpa and the Riders have their eyes set on the playoffs.

"We expect to make the playoffs, but we have to go one at a time," said Sapulpa. "We can't look at two or three games down the road to make the playoffs and see what happens from there."

Sapulpa's core beliefs for his team is to 'Work hard in preparation and play hard on every snap.'

The team has focused on playing within the rules of the game and to learn their responsibilities on every play. Not only are the players made aware of their assignments, but they are conscious of how what their

teammates are covering on every snap.

Sapulpa wants to instill discipline and accountability into his team before the season starts.

"My main theory is to do your job," he said. "That is what we are teaching all of these guys: what your job is, what your role is on every play, go through your read and all of that stuff. It is probably just like everyone else, but just do your job."

Sapulpa's coaching philosophy has already been spread to the Hulbert players. The seniors of the team understand Sapulpa's goal for the team in order to improve their play.

"What I have gotten from our coaches, the technique is such a huge thing," said Jacob

Beall, senior offensive lineman. "Being more physical with our hands as an offensive lineman, going downfield to make better blocks and open up the run game."

Sapulpa believes the team is picking up the new system well. The season may rely on the player's grit and coachability. However, he believes the team has a bright future.

"We have a positive outlook and we are excited to see the season get started," said Sapulpa. "The boys have worked hard. Of course, with my first year here we have put in a new offense and defense, so the boys have had to learn that. They have picked it up really well and we are excited to get things going."

Hulbert

Continued from page 24

special ability to raise the morale of his teammates in order to get the best out of them.

The team is not bringing back a starter on the defensive side of the ball and the players are fighting for their new starting spots in Sapulpa's 3-3 base defense.

"There are two big things," said Sapulpa. "One is that we don't have five million linemen, we only have to have three and we can rotate if one goes down. Also, it's an uncommon defense, the coverages are uncommon in that the free safety/strong

safety spot is a deep-cover guy, but he's also like another inside linebacker so it looks like we have seven in the box instead of just six."

Sapulpa believes having the box safety will create confusion for the opponent's offense and give them flexibility with their play calling.

Both Jacob Bruce and Jones are expected to spend playing time as one of the five defensive back positions along with their offensive duties.

Sapulpa wants to take the season one game at a time. Neither

he nor the team has a particular game circled on the schedule, but they have a playoff mindset entering the season. The team has made a playoff berth during the last four seasons and the players and coaching staff look to expand that streak.

Last season was Hulbert's first season playing football in the A-8 District. The Riders were 5-1 in the first year against their new district opponents with the single loss coming from a close 32-30 finish against the Gore Pirates. Hulbert led the game 30-26 at

halftime but was scoreless in the second half and allowed Gore to score in the final minutes of the game. The team will look to avenge their loss from last season and aim for a perfect district record on their way to the playoffs.

Hulbert will open the season against the non-district opponent Drumright on September 6 for the second consecutive season. Last season the Riders ran away with the game against the tornadoes with a 22-point run in the third quarter after a 14-6 halftime lead.



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