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Loaded line, talented team give Irish a lot to like

By CLAY REYNOLDS
Sports Editor

It definitely doesn't hurt to have great players carrying, throwing and catching the football, but there's no question that superiority along the lines of scrimmage is a foundation that elite teams are built on.

Look at Dublin's two in the past couple decades to claim state championships: Though also good at pretty much everything else, both had in common that they were big, strong and deep on both the offensive and defensive lines.

Cut from a similar cloth, last year's Irish were led by some outstanding dudes in the trenches on their way to nine wins, the No. 2 spot in the region and a berth in the second round of the state playoffs.

Out of the three linemen who were seniors, two of them will be playing in college this fall, the highly recruited Na-Sir Johnson at Georgia and the versatile Drew Rozier at Sewanee. The third, Kelwaun Gilmore, was likewise a trusted starter on both sides of the ball who's leaving behind some big size 13s.

Plenty of schools Dublin's size would be left reeling by the loss of that many earth-movers up front. But the Irish will be sitting pretty this fall as another wave of good-looking talent out of a well-filled pipeline moves into place to re-stock the cupboard.

There won't be an individual player with 25 power-5 offers, but that'll likely be the only noteworthy difference between this year and last for offensive and defensive line units that are again projected to be as good as anybody's in the region.

"That could be the strength of our football team," Dublin head coach Roger Holmes said.

Those big dogs who graduated will definitely be missed, though what the Irish have returning – between proven contributors and varsity newcomers – is more than enough to backfill the vacant spots.

Their depth on the offensive line last year, which had several current rising starters rotating in as backups, will give the group more familiarity than you usually get with three new starters out of five.

The two veteran incumbents are junior Ta'Maj Carswell, this year moving from right to left tackle and senior center Brennan "Big Baby" McCloud, entering his third year anchoring the middle.

A pair of new first-stringers who didn't officially start last fall, but got plenty of seasoning as part-timers, will contribute to that returning experience: Senior Kemaurri McRae, who Holmes says played roughly half the snaps in every game at guard, will take over the top spot at the position. Senior tight end Brandon Chatman, who backed up Cornelius Rozier last season, is also set to work as the No. 1 there.

Fresher faces include senior Antwain Hudson, who's making a move from the tackle position to start at the other guard, and sophomore Domimarkyo Walden, a "big ole kid" at 6-foot-3, 280 pounds who's in line to go at right tackle and brings some physical tools that more than assuage any concerns about a lack of varsity snaps.

Holmes expects a feisty set of players making up the second string that "really made huge strides" during the offseason to add some valuable depth similar to last year.

"We feel like, in some ways, we're two-deep across the board," Holmes said of his offensive front. "They all seem to know assignments. They're in good hands with Coach Joel Ingram and Brad Wallace. They've done a phenomenal job working with that position."

And as a whole, the second group – dominated by plenty more of the 30 Irish 10th graders with a makeup similar to Walden's – may look even more physically impressive than the guys ahead of them.

"That sophomore class has six kids that are over 6-4 right now," Holmes said. "There are some big ones coming in that class and they're all weighing in the neighborhood of 250 to 310. So I'm kind of excited about that sophomore bunch that's on the way up."

You couldn't miss the big guys in the middle of the Irish defensive line last year, with the dominant Johnson eating up blocks in the middle to allow Rozier and Chatman to shine on the edges.

Chatman, who led the team in both tackles for loss, with 13.5, and sacks, with 5.5, returns as the main menace for opposing backfields.

McRae, who was the same type of rotational backup last year on the D-line as he was the O, will take over for Rozier on the opposite end.

Carswell, less an edge rusher as a gap-filler, will back up at end in situations where the task is considerably more containing traffic and stopping the run than bringing heat on a passer. Oliver, a "technician" who's shown a talent for reading blocks and rarely getting himself caught in the wrong places, is also a valuable reserve.

Stanley is the frontrunner at the 3-technique and Wiggins, who holds the title of "strongest pound-for-pound" player on the roster, is slotted at nose. But the lengthy Dardy and stocky McCloud (a relative newcomer to the defensive rotation) will spell both players routinely.

"Up front, we feel like we've got a good group of people," Holmes said.

While Dublin's anticipated depth on the lines is nearly ideal, it's a contrasting picture at other positions, where second-string reinforcements become a lot less ironclad below the top of the chart.

The Irish won't lack for senior leadership, with a total of 16 from the Class of 2025 on the roster, but see their experience factor take a big hit with the sharp dropoff to a smaller population of juniors, then sophomore and freshmen classes from which they'll be drawing a number of starters and backups.

"Our overall question marks are our skilled positions," Holmes said. "A lot of them are talented, but they don't know anything about the Friday night lights yet."

The good news: Having such a reliable group setting and taking on blocks at the point of attack will make those players' jobs a lot easier. Nowhere is that more of an advantage than with Dublin's smashmouth ground game, which hangs its hat on some old-fashioned option football.

And returning Irish quarterback Micah O'Neal, a rising senior, has become arguably one of the program's best all-time at making the quick decisions on whether to give, keep or pitch the ball that are the basis of staple plays in their midline and veer series.

All Irish QBs to start into a third season as seniors – from Ben Cochran to Rob East to Robert Strickland to Rodriguez Martin – have led some strong attacks (and three of the four have won region titles) thanks to their command of that phase of the game, and typically a nice ability to spin the ball on top of it.

O'Neal's numbers last season were fair: A little over 300 yards rushing and passing, with seven touchdowns as a passer and two as a rusher. But he took care of the ball and got it where it needed to go.

"Our offense is built on what our quarterback can do," Holmes said. "That's why we're married to what we do and we stay with it... The quarterback has to be able to throw or run the option. You can run five or six basic Wing-T run plays, but it gets challenging because of defensive alignment. The option game makes them play assignment football. Repetition



DUBLIN FIGHTING IRISH

HEAD COACH: Roger Holmes (22nd season; 193-73-1 at Dublin, 266-122-1 career)

OFFENSE: Wing-T
DEFENSE: 4-3

2023: 9-3 (3-1 region 2-High A)
FINISH: GHSA Playoffs, Round 2 (lost to Brooks Co.)

REGION: 2-High A

RETURNING STARTERS:
6 offense / 5 defense

KEY LOSSES: OL/DL NaSir Johnson (Georgia); RB/LB DeMari Foster (Thomas); RB/LB Kam Hampton (Thomas); OL/DL Drew Rozier (Sewanee); RB/DB Malachi O'Neal (Clayton State); PK Connor Daniel (Thomas)

SCHEDULE...

8/16	at Swainsboro
8/23	East Laurens*
8/30	at Southwest Macon*
9/06	Washington Co.*
9/20	at Jefferson Co.*
9/27	Northeast Macon*
10/04	ACE Charter *
10/18	at Bleckley Co.*
10/25	Central Macon*
11/01	at Dodge Co.*

makes it go. The more times you do it, the better off you are. That's one of the reasons it's hard to break in a brand-new quarterback."

Time and experience in the offense also usually turn Wing-T QBs into coaches on the field. And Holmes, who already entrusted O'Neal with the latitude to pick between multiple play calls at the line of scrimmage last season, has complete faith in his command of the offense, and ability to execute it seamlessly.

"His understanding and being on the same page with me about what we're trying to do, when we're trying to do it, that's become much easier to him," he said.

Junior Jeff Davis, who's been on the mend from an offseason injury this summer, will work as the Irish No. 2 under center. "Surprises" Ryland Yates and Will Wallace, both incoming freshmen, have shown some good signs in spring and summer that bode well for the position on the JV field this fall, and into the future.

"Both have shown the ability to throw the football above the ninth grade norm," Holmes said.

The Dublin stable of backs doesn't run amazingly deep, but features some horses at each spot who are certain to pile up some highlights if they remain healthy.

The high-workload full-back position – which demands the most sync with the quarterback in the option game – will fall to a committee led by last year's top rusher Xavier Bostic, who wound up just shy of 1,000 yards and scored the team-high 15 rushing touchdowns as a junior.

The bulkier Jordan Tobridge (a senior at 5-foot-10, 220 lbs.) will split carries, hoping for a chance to bounce back from an injury that limited his potential as a junior.

Tobridge, in fact, was in line to start at fullback last preseason, but was injured in the August scrimmage and sidelined for roughly half the fall, in a setback that ruled out a true chance to break out as hoped. Should he do so this fall, Holmes believes his impact could serve as "a key to our football season."

Dublin figures to use him and "Zay" Bostic on an equal basis, as both are also starters at linebacker and could use a regular blow.

Coaches see potential for a "heckuva year" by sophomore Travion Bostic at wingback, if he can adapt his running style from the middle school/JV game – where plays for sprinters are more of a footrace – and the varsity level, where he'll be asked to take more deliberate tracks upfield, and embrace contact. But as soon as things click, he looks to be a weapon.

"He's got top-end speed when he gets out in the open field," Holmes said. "He can turn it into a big play real quick."

The other wingback spot will be manned by senior Willie Batts, whose top gear – and quickness in getting there – also measures among the best on the team.

Sophomore Azontae Walker, who's also got a "quick first step," will be the primary spell on the wings, where multiple others – including Zay Bostic every now and then – will get occasional touches and a chance to prove themselves as much-needed reserves.

"If we're thin anywhere, it's at those wingback positions," Holmes said.

Senior Sirius Tobridge, a primary first-string wideout, is set to train alongside running backs as well, should, heaven forbid, a rash of injuries create a need for him there. Classmate D.J. Woodard will work as the No. 2 receiver.

"Anytime you've got a third-year quarterback and he not only can execute the Wing-T, but he can throw the football, he's got people that can catch it and he can run and execute the midline and the triple option, then I think you've got a pretty good chance to be very very multiple on the offensive side of the ball," Holmes said.

On defense, the Irish are set to fill out the front seven with more veteran playmakers who tackle about anything that moves.

Zay Bostic (moving from the inside to the "Sam" spot after leading the defense in tackles a year ago), Batts (the "Willie") and Jordan Tobridge (the "Mike") are fairly solidified at the top of the depth chart.

"We feel very good about those three," Holmes said, though noting his concern with some relative unknowns behind them in the rotation.

After seniors Hudson, Davion Moore and sophomore Zion Porter, come mostly brand new players who, in the preseason, had a ways to go.

In the secondary, projected starters at corner are Trav Bostic and Woodard, backed by sophomore Kye Young and O'Neal, who's always on standby as an emergency swing man anywhere on the back end, though coaches overwhelmingly prefer to use him exclusively under center.

Sirius Tobridge and freshman An'Dreakus Taylor were penciled in at free safety. Walker, a convert from linebacker, projects to start at strong safety just ahead of senior Terrell Williams.

With no apparent heir to multi-year specialist Conor Daniel (a Thomas University signee), Dublin entered the past offseason in flux at placekicker. A couple who turned out in the spring – sophomore Ethan Spivey (a baseball player) and junior Urick Andrews (an all-region soccer standout) – proved to be a godsend for the Irish on special teams.

"We've been pretty pleasantly surprised," Holmes said, underscoring how much having viable options at the key position puts your mind at ease after none of them were even on the horizon in November of 2023.

"When the season ended last year, the question was what we were going to do when we didn't even have a kicker in the house."

O'Neal, who's handled punting side-by-side with quarterbacking duties for most of his time, will do so again this fall.

Wallace and Davis – not the fictional entertaining duo

of Bing Crosby and Danny Kaye in "White Christmas," mind you – have both proven reliable deep snappers.

The Irish, in all three phases, will field a team well-equipped to emerge in the upper half of the region with hopes of continuing a streak of home first-round playoff games that goes all the way back to 2017.

But the road to that point, a lot like it was in 2020 and 2021, is likely to be paved with more bumps and setbacks than was the case in the formerly five-team 2-High A, where a win or loss in single games carried a ton of weight, and a long non-region leadup had teams hitting on all cylinders by crunch time in early October.

In addition to nearby rivals who remain, Dublin's 10-team league will re-incorporate mostly familiar opponents from AA regions of the recent past: Dodge County, WACO, Northeast and Southwest Macon among them, plus some acquaintances out of Macon in Central and ACE Charter.

Holmes fully expects the region's top teams, with Northeast as only a slight frontrunner, to beat up on each other a bit over the course of a long race, which'll start for the Irish August 23 in their Shamrock Bowl debut against East Laurens.

Their opener at Swainsboro Aug. 16 will be the only non-region tune-up.

It's Dublin's first time playing this many region games since 2008 and 2009, when 3-AA's 11-team membership took all the schedule-building work out of coaches' hands. The first of those years, Dublin finished first, taking just one hit in a tough loss at Laney before tripping up thrice and winding up fourth with a younger squad the following year.

This season has the makings of a similar grind, though a key difference will be the relief of a new playoff selection system that – due to the separation of intermingled private schools for the postseason – will seed teams at-large, rather than on a top-four basis.

The power ranking formula that'll decide that standing, for coaches between High A and AAA, is a bit of an enigma, besides the guarantee that teams will be rewarded for a top 2 finish in their region with one of the top 16 out of 32 seeds. While any number of the remaining contenders could make the cut, how the math will skew based on differences in region size remains to be seen.

Strength of non-region scheduling is accounted for in the calculation, but it's tough to predict exactly how the better final records expected of schools with more non-region scheduling control will balance out against the likely lower win totals of those who don't.

"We felt like, with the quality of teams in our region, there's a chance five or six teams could end up in the top 32," Holmes said. "But it's going to be hard for teams to win 75-85 percent in our region, because we're all going to be beating each other."

Odds this year would still seem to overwhelmingly turn that question of if into a matter of where for a Dublin team that's got a lot going for it. Getting luck, on a number of different fronts, headed in their direction as well will likely reveal just how successful this year has the potential to be.

After all, the separating factor between a good season, a great season and a title run is usually how healthy you're able to stay over the course of 10-15 games.

"I'd be cautiously optimistic. We've got some very great young men to represent Dublin football," Holmes said. "We feel like we have experience and quality at those key positions, but injuries could turn us in a bad direction quickly, because of the makeup of our roster."

"Our biggest strength should be experience, but our biggest weakness should

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Freshman Falcons to feature quickly in new era

By CLAY REYNOLDS
Sports Editor

For the East Laurens Falcons, the future is... now. And it could be every bit as bright as advertised.

They not only welcome a new head coach, but also a class of 19 rising freshmen who led last year's East Laurens middle schoolers to their first-ever region title. And many of them won't just get into some games this fall, but are set to begin making a varsity impact right away.

It's rarely the case with ninth graders, but there won't be much – if any – lag time in their transition from Wednesday-night lights, last season as eighth graders, to the Friday-night ones they'll soak in quickly as first-year playmakers for the Falcons this fall.

How boldly and confidently they come out of their shells and spread their wings will determine a lot about the type of season the Falcons have ahead of them.

"Probably about six of them are going to start, and it has nothing to do with the fact that they just won a bunch of games down there," East Laurens head coach Jesse Hicks said. "They're just the best kids at those positions."

"Some head coaches say, 'I don't play freshmen.' ... I do. I'm going to play the best 11 I've got, because at the end of the day, no matter how much you pour into those kids, people are looking at that scoreboard at the end of the night."

The group is, without a doubt, a generational one that's got potential to take East Laurens to some heights in football it's never reached before – something they can already say they did at ELMS.

It was evident all season, but particularly in a MGM-SAA championship game against West Laurens that brought out a nearly standing-room crowd to the "Home of the Falcons." East, with Major Floyd scoring all four touchdowns, pulled away to a 32-16 victory that completed its perfect season.

Hicks, since starting with the players in the spring, has taken note of a collective maturity and leadership ability that, along with their athletic prowess, makes them more than ready for the varsity jump. And the current make-up of East Laurens' roster – with many skill positions wide open – made this season the perfect opportunity to throw the readiest of these young studs right into the fire.

Floyd, who Hicks said projects as "one of the better athletes in the entire Middle Georgia area," will be a focal point on both sides at receiver and safety. And his play at both positions has shown his coach some shades of a generational player he coached at Baldwin who was recently drafted out of UGA by the Packers.

"I liken him to a Javon Bullard," Hicks said. "They're very similar... He's going to really, really be good."

Another with an almost identical two-way role, and the standout of the bunch when it comes to intangibles, is Bryson Hazley, who'll start at cornerback and be a regular at receiver. "Hard-nosed" Falcon legacy Jaxten Thomas will likely be another defensive leader at linebacker.

"He's probably one of the toughest kids in our football program," Hicks said. "If I have to go into a dark alley, I'll take Jax with me any day of the week."

Names you'll also hear a lot of include Miles Burke at defensive back and receiver, Jeremiah Rozier as a running back and linebacker, Lagen Mack mostly on the defensive line and Kayleb Butler at guard and defensive tackle. And that's just the handful guaranteed to play game 1.

Expect plenty more to work their way in by season's end.

Though their inexperience leads to some early growing pains, Hicks' calculation is that the Friday-night field is still the best training ground for some players well along in their physical and athletic development whose ceiling, borrowing the quip of Michael

Jordan, is the roof.

"They're going to have games where they're going to make mistakes, but when they make mistakes, that's a mistake that can be fixed in the next three years," Hicks said. "I've got all the confidence in the world in those cats. This is probably, in 28 years, to be honest with you, probably one of the better group of freshmen I've ever had. These kids are special, special kids."

The youth movement is a huge and continuing source of excitement on the East-side. But there's more for the Falcons in 2024 to be encouraged about.

In particular, a new head coach in Hicks whose 133 victories and three region titles in 22 seasons between Baldwin, Doughterty and Central (Macon) High Schools instantly make him – going by career record – the winningest coach of any to serve at East Laurens.

School administration, after a parting of the ways with Bin Turner, who was 15-46 with two playoff appearances in six seasons and laid some of the foundation blocks Hicks is hopeful to build on, moved quickly in November to land a veteran candidate considered to be among the best available.

Hicks makes no bones about East program history, and that in 63 years of football, just 11 teams have reached the playoffs and only one has recorded a postseason victory – a trend that he plans on changing.

But the approach to that is somewhat indirect, based around four pillars – love, trust, loyalty and respect – that mention nothing specific about football. The sport, instead, is the means of teaching those values, and building quality young men.

"Our secret sauce is to win people, then you can win football games," Hicks said.

His early hire provided a huge jump-start on building those relationships, and installing new playbooks, that was no small advantage.

East's unique systems on the offensive and defensive side will mostly resemble those from Baldwin, where Hicks had success with utilizing some top-of-the-line athletes.

Offensively, the Falcons will spread things out to use the field while also emphasizing balance and a "power zone" run game with blockers closer to the formation, with returning line coach Andrew Satterwhite dialing things up.

Hicks' defensive system mirrors the scheme his teams ran at Baldwin, which takes many shapes, but is classified as a 3-4 with a "reduced" front, which calls for a specific method of aligning and fitting players into rushing gaps. Ryan Selby, a fellow Albany State product hired via Hephzibah High School, will be at the controls.

Special teams is also an area of the game Hicks hammers hard, and as legendary Virginia Tech head coach Frank Beamer used to do, takes pride in coaching the kicking game units himself.

"We put two periods into it every day, especially in the summer time," he said. "I think a lot of it is just what you put time and effort into. It is a third of the game, so we're gonna put a bunch of time into it."

As great as this fall's freshman class will have folks feeling about the future, the present will have some intrigue as well with senior leaders, some new and some established, that

have emerged at key positions.

A biggest surprise has been Carson Smith: a relative newcomer to football whose athletic talents have featured most strongly on the Falcons' home field in the springtime, when the three-year starting keeper holds court in goal for the East Laurens soccer team.

Turns out those watching last year weren't the only ones with the impression that his great mitts, and leg strength that sent punts soaring well over midfield, could translate well to football.

Hicks, who convinced him to come out for the team one day at school, expects Smith to stand out in a big way as both a wideout with "the best hands on the team" and specialist handling most of their kicking and punting duties.

"He's put it in the end zone a bunch of times on kickoffs," Hicks said. "That's a blessing."

Senior Ty Snead, who played in about a 50-50 split with leading passer Zaylen Boston at quarterback last fall, returns with some outstanding playmaking potential behind center. Junior Jason Giles will be his understudy.

Smith and sophomore Jaden Griffin (a returnee to the Eastside via transfer) are among some older receivers in the flock who'll mingle with the rookies Floyd and Hazley out wide, though none have much varsity mileage on the odometer.

Everyone who caught passes regularly last year for East all graduated, leaving senior Kemo Mitchell, who had three receptions and one touchdown last year, as the only returner with any Friday-night familiarity.

Back to tote and catch

the ball out of the backfield will be senior Norrion King, who endured an injury last year to finish as the Falcons' second leading rusher, with a little over 400 yards and two touchdowns. His versatility as a runner creates potential for the type of prolific season he showed glimpses of a year ago.

"He's doing a great job. He can do a little bit of it all, run inside, run outside," Hicks said

Though East Laurens is re-stocking its shelves at the skill positions, the pantry is brimming with returning line talent. Four of last year's five starters are back on the offensive line, including college prospects in the hefty junior Caleb Jackson and high-motor senior Wesley Stanley. Seniors Brandon McWilliams and Justin Ashley, with Chance Oliver back at center for the Black and Gold after playing last year on loan at Trinity, will round out the senior-laden group.

Several will either start, or at a minimum rotate, into the front group on the other side.

"I think that's the strength of our team, our offensive and defensive fronts," Hicks said. "All those guys can play a little bit of both ways, but we've got some young guys too."

Snead returns to anchor the secondary at free safety, though of the three other projected back-end starters, one's a sophomore and the other two are freshmen.

Floyd, roaming at strong safety, will be flanked by corners Hazley and sophomore Jaden Wright.

The linebacking group, similarly, will be filled out by underclassmen and some first-time starters like junior Luis Roman. But junior Logan Clements – set to dou-



EAST LAURENS FALCONS

HEAD COACH: Jesse Hicks (first season; 133-108 career)

OFFENSE: Power spread

DEFENSE: 3-4

2023: 3-8 (1-3 region 2-High A)

FINISH: GHSA Playoffs, Round 1

(lost to Bryan Co.)

REGION: 2-High A

RETURNING STARTERS: 5 offense / 5 defense

KEY LOSSES: ATH/DB Kyan Snead; ATH/DB Terrez Snead; QB Zaylen Boston (Manchester); RB/LB Gavin Dice; WR/DB Dankevious Richardson; OL/DL Marquez Harris

SCHEDULE...

8/16	Johnson Co.
8/23	at Dublin*
8/30	Bleckley Co.*
9/05	at Central Macon*
9/20	Dodge Co.*
9/27	at ACE Charter*
10/04	at Southwest Macon*
10/18	Washington Co.*
10/25	at Jefferson Co.*
11/01	Northeast Macon*

ble as a tight end on offense – will serve as a veteran lead in the middle.

EAST

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Crusaders positioned to compete in year 1 under Lane

By CLAY REYNOLDS
Sports Editor

If you're not aware of his credentials, simply observing new Trinity Christian head coach Bruce Lane at work will leave little wonder as to how he's gained the reputation of a "program flipper."

His resume will tell you all you need to know, but the veteran coach has demonstrated a lot of why his way works since being hired in January, and moving to Dublin full-time by early April.

The style, marked by a laid-back, soft-spoken demeanor, a high level of organization and a humble emphasis on doing small things well, looks and feels a bit different from most. But the results, both in his former jobs and some early ones going into his first season leading the Crusaders, pretty much speak for themselves.

Lane's handiwork, which he equates to that of home renovators on reality TV, has done some wonders for many of the 10 schools where he's worked between Georgia, South Carolina and Texas.

The rehab efforts, over 35 years as a head coach, helped put Monroe Academy (his first head-coaching gig in 1988) and most recent project Bethlehem Christian on the football map, while sustaining some successful traditions at Wilson Hall (S.C.), Augusta Christian and John Milledge Academy. Lane also won region championships in four different places, and a state title in two.

Trinity, a winner in just nine out of 51 games over a five-year dry spell since its last winning season in 2019, knew some work was in order to get things back in competitive shape when it made a change from former head coach Jed Marsh this past off-season.

And who better to call than a program architect with a record of close to 250 wins, and the respect of nearly everyone he's crossed paths with?

His formula for program rebuilding, which includes "no magic bullet," is summed up simply in two steps: Changing climate, in the short-term, then over several seasons, allowing many of those small trends to change the culture.

Lane and the Crusaders have quietly gone about the early steps, and are seeing encouraging signs as his first season approaches.

"We've flipped the climate, and we're working on flipping the culture," he said. "We've inherited a challenging situation, but it's one we're going to embrace."

Things started out at square 1 in the weight room, where multiple players have made progress in their strength and power.

Summer conditioning sessions drew superb attendance, with 24 reaching the top of the Crusaders' evaluation scale by exceeding expectations in their effort and improvement, and the rest were near the top.

"They've really bought into what we've asked them to do," Lane said.

Participation has also gone in a great direction, owing to the influx of a nice-looking ninth grade class and some effective in-building recruitment of new players, plus returnees who sat out the last season or two, that's always pivotal in a transition.

The Crusaders' roster, after finishing up last year with 23 players, had jumped to 37 by the end of summer weeding... even with a couple potential returners who transferred elsewhere in-county.

Eleven out of that number will be seniors, four of whom weren't playing football a year ago, though all will contribute somewhere on the field, and shepherd along the freshmen who project a bright future.

The swell turnout will afford Trinity the numbers needed to run soft scrimmages in practice, and carry a JV squad for the first time in years, giving those underclassmen the luxury of cutting their teeth over a short series of games (up to three are already scheduled, with the po-

tential to play more).

Ironically, this may be the incoming freshmen class, of the last five or so, that will probably have the least need of those training wheels.

It's a big and talented crew, with 16 players total and some man-children in Asher Evans and Tripp Mascaro who've already cracked the regular lineup on other varsity fields of play in their debut as eighth graders. The class, as a whole, turned heads in a once-beaten middle school season last fall.

Lane will be careful as he goes about slowly introducing many of them to full-blown varsity action, though not too much so.

"With our younger kids, we want to make sure we take care of them and not put them in situations that they don't necessarily need to be in as younger players during practice, but we've got several of those freshmen that have really, over the summer, shown that they are going to be vying for some significant playing time," he said. "We're excited about that."

At the start, Trinity's rotation will boil down to about 17 players. Several will be tasked to go both directions, but it's enough overall to give the Crusaders some of the same platoon-ability in their starting spread.

They plan to shape-shift a good bit on both sides of the football, holding pretty close to some identities similar to those of Lane-coached teams in the recent past.

His base defense will adapt to strengths of the opponent, with the lone common denominator an "even" four-man front below varying combinations of defensive backs and linebackers.

The offensive system may vary just as much based on situation, though it'll largely orbit a set of personnel groupings and shotgun-based gap runs heavily resembling core features of Gus Malzahn's attacks at Auburn and Central Florida.

"We're kind of multiple," Lane said. "It's mostly out of the shotgun. We'll jump in the I-formation a little bit based on down and distance, or if you're on a wet night, we may need to be under center a bit more."

Talent at each position group on that side should afford them the ability to strike a nice run-pass balance.

Trinity's aerial attack may well be the most significant surprise for fans compared to last season, when that phase of the offense was mostly in development with virtual newcomer Ben Castro-Poveda at quarterback.

Though learning on the fly, his year – all things considered – was a good one to build on. He rushed and threw for about 350 yards and three touchdowns apiece, though interceptions (9) outnumbering scores in the passing department were a detail to work on improving.

With speed and quickness likely ranking in the top per-

centile of the GIAA, "CP" can do everything the Crusaders need as a runner. But some attention to finer points of his mechanics, under the tutelage of new Trinity QBs coach Rob East, has helped him become more polished as a passer this offseason as well.

Those skills, combined with Trinity's myriad options in the receiving corps and a Lane system that'll put them both in many high-percentage plays, may allow the Crusaders to throw it pretty efficiently.

"CP and Rob have developed a good rapport," Lane said. "They're cleaning up some mechanical issues, looking at reading coverages and understanding progressions.

"Ben is the kind of young man that, if he had no athletic ability, he'd be the kind of kid you wanted on your team. He is that good of a leader. But he is blessed with a lot of athleticism. I think he kind of got thrown into the fire last year a little bit out of necessity, and I think he improved."

Evans, the Crusaders' quarterback of the future, will serve as backup.

The aforementioned receiver room has plenty of seats, and one on the front row was added back for Cruz Giles, a 23-catch, 331-yard, five-touchdown weapon out wide for Trinity's offense in 2022 who's back after a one-year transfer to Eagleville Tennessee.

He'll bring some notable speed and big-play ability to the table, especially as a target in the quick game.

"If he's not our fastest player, he's one of the top 2," Lane said. "He's a playmaker you'd like to see get his hands on the football. He's really good in space."

As for the longer receiver/tight ends whose reach and sure hands will be a strength, look for Trinity to go after all three Barrs brothers – senior Bryson, junior Brooks and freshman Hudson, each 5-foot-11 or taller – in a lot of matchups. Senior Hampton Grosch, who's seen action all throughout high school, returns as a smaller, but fast-moving slot man who can also reel it in.

Senior Carson Shepherd, as a tight end, will also factor in as a passing target. But he, along with senior comebackers Ben Helton and Ben Polhill, will play at skill spots on a rotation basis while carrying a primary load on defense.

Though plenty deep, the corps of wideouts took a hit in depth with the loss of Jag George, another promising freshman, to a broken leg in that will rule him out through season's end.

Junior Wade Register is set to carry the football most often for the Crusaders as tailback, in one of his many roles between the three phases.

The imposing athlete, at 6-foot-2, 220 lbs., has the build of your typical GIAA lineman, but runs with decep-



TRINITY CHRISTIAN CRUSADERS

HEAD COACH: Bruce Lane
(first season; 244-157-1 career)

OFFENSE: Multiple
DEFENSE: 4-man front

2023: 2-9 (0-1 region 6-AA)

FINISH: GIAA Playoffs, first round (lost to Piedmont)

DISTRICT: GIAA 3-AA

RETURNING STARTERS:
6 offense / 5 defense

KEY LOSSES: ATH/DB Boots
Vinson; RB/LB Luc Bennett;
OL/DL Isaias Tolentino;
RB/LB Jaime Dekle (transfer);
LB Evan Williams (transfer);
OL/DL Chance Oliver (transfer)

SCHEDULE...

8/16	Brentwood
8/23	at Gatewood
8/30	Edmund Burke
9/6	at Augusta Prep
9/13	at Windsor
9/20	Thomas Jefferson
9/27	Central Fellowship
10/11	Southland*
10/18	at Southwest Georgia*
10/25	at Robert Toombs*

tive speed on top of the tackle-busting power that jumps right out.

"He's very skilled, and really impressed me on film last year," Lane said. "He runs hard, runs north and south and gets behind the shoulder pads. He's a very physical runner, and people have a hard time tackling him."

But besides him, the position group was on the thin side entering August.

Up front, Trinity will make a point of running behind a couple of seniors who are blessed with prodigious size and strength that will feature on both lines of scrimmage.

Cameron Shepherd, a 6-foot-3, 310-pounder with a dominant physical profile at tackle, is entering his third year as a starter, and off a team-leading four-sack season as a junior.

"He's just done a really good job for us," Lane said.

The 6-foot-4, 210-pound Anthony Frank-Wojci, is equally as high-end a prospect in only his second season playing, with recruitable pass-rushing tools that have drawn plenty of eyeballs at draws.

"I think people are going to be intrigued with him, even though this is only his second year of football," Lane said. "I know he's talented in track and basketball, but down the

road, he might be that guy with his body type, his work ethic and his athleticism, that might could be an FCS or FBS kind of player."

Carter Lee, a returning junior, is also back as a starter at center. Newcomer guard Nathan Sumner, a senior, has also stood out through the summer.

Freshmen Mascaro, Cody Register and Andrew Helton, sophomore Parker Smith and junior Nolan Terry are all players that could rotate in along either line. Carson Shepherd, who'll start at the end opposite AFW, and junior Nolan Terry, an interior tackle, will be seen on the defensive side.

The position group is plenty deep, just heavier on the young players that the Crusaders might come to need "in the dog days of October and beyond."

Wade Register (a triple-digit tackler last season), Sumner, Polhill and Helton are expected to top the depth chart at linebacker. Charlie Maffett, a junior, will see snaps playing in the secondary along with a slew of perhaps a half dozen aforementioned receivers.

Each of the above will also spend time working on special teams, where Lane – a subscriber to the Nick Saban school of thought on the kicking game – emphasizes using his top athletes and treating coverage situations as what they are: an opportunity for the opponent to score.

He also makes a habit of working some segment of it every single day in practice, which adds up to devote at least an hour's work of a week's practice time to repping various aspects that typically come in handy.

"It's definitely a 3-phase game," Lane said. "I don't think you can underestimate the importance of it. I think people do underestimate the importance of the kicking game and being solid there. A good solid kicking game can win you one or two games during the course of a year, all things being equal."

As for the kicking part of the equation, Trinity will be all set with the all-in-one super player Wade Register booting the ball on kickoffs, field goals and punts.

He's shown off his mortar for a leg – easily division 1 material – at college camps throughout the offseason, after averaging 55 yards (a long of 61) on kickoffs, 31 on punts and batting 1,000 on points-after (9-of-9) and field goals (2-for-2, with a long of 45).

His strength and technique, which had him sending kickoffs nearly to the end zone and hanging punts for at least four seconds over the summer, have both gotten better, and will allow Trinity to uncover a lot of "hidden yardage" on special teams.

Younger brother Cody is also in line to snap, with Ev-

ans as the holder, forming a three-man team that should stay together through the end of next season.

In the time between the Crusaders' fall camp and game 1, Lane is hopeful his team has reached a comfort level playing at full speed, and with a competitive demeanor, after placing a late-summer emphasis on developing grit, increasing mental discipline, limiting careless mistakes and "being a tough football player in all situations."

"There are a lot of bells and whistles out there now, but it's still the teams that block the best and tackle the best that are I think the most successful," Lane said. "They also are disciplined, not committing turnovers, and penalizing themselves with false starts. There are physical errors and there are mental errors. That's one of the things, sometimes when athletes become tired, that's when you start seeing some of the mental breakdowns."

The Crusaders will be tested in a big way early on in the season, matching up with traditional power Brentwood then facing last year's AA runner-up Gatewood and champion Edmund Burke back-to-back.

Things level off as the fall moves in the direction of district play, where the schedule increases in size by two games, up from one the past cycle. The league, combining both class A and AA schools for the regular season, includes matchups with some traditionally strong programs that will be almost as tough.

"Our focus this summer hasn't been about a number of wins (for the season), it's been about a number of wins in the moment," Lane said. "And I think that's the thing. We've gotta fight those little battles first. If you win enough of the little battles, you put yourself in position to win the big battle."

He's eager to see how the Crusaders face those challenges, and if the foundation his team's poured a lot into building will hold up.

Though young, Trinity should have what it takes to challenge most on its schedule. But the wherewithal to survive and win the battles coming, is mostly a matter of mental endurance that great teams possess in an ability to compete every play, and put bad ones behind them.

And that's what should prove how quickly the Crusaders, after flipping several aspects of their program, can also flip their record into a winning one this fall.

"Obviously I feel like we're going to be very competitive in every game," Lane said. "The thing that sometimes you face as a young team or a team that's trying to establish or re-establish themselves, is how do we act? Everybody's excited when the band's playing and you're successful, but how do we react to adversity or some type of sudden change on a Friday night?"

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Experienced Raiders anticipating breakthrough

By CLAY REYNOLDS
Sports Editor

The progress was measured in baby steps for two young West Laurens football teams in 2022 and 23.

But head coach Kip Burdette's third, boasting some long-awaited seasoning and savvy, will be graded on a much tougher scale as it looks to turn those strides into leaps and bounds this fall.

After a couple seasons of piecing some small things together, the Raiders will need some bigger pieces of their plan to begin falling into place quickly if they hope to maximize an opportunity to make the jump back to a competitive level.

They were a long way from it while working their way through a lengthy process of transition in years 1 and 2 under Burdette, going a combined 3-17 overall and 0-12 against region competition with improvement coming at a stop-and-go pace.

The learning, growth and discovery took more time than anybody would have preferred, but all of it was building toward the expectation of a year like this one, in which most of the things that were working against West Laurens previously are now going its direction.

This year's Raiders enjoy some strong continuity, with the predominant core of their lineup and coaching staff returning. The roster, overall, is well-rounded, deep at most positions and rich with varsity experience. And the schedule, on the surface, appears much less intimidating in a new classification than the region they leave behind in AAAA.

All will give West Laurens the potential to do much more than just improve its record by another few wins. And Burdette's not shy about shooting high when it comes to setting those goals.

"We've gotta fight for some region wins, and try to find a way to scrap and claw and get in the playoffs," he said.

Encouraging aspects to the offseason were many.

One of the headlines was a big freshman class that joined the program after leading West Laurens Middle School to a runner-up finish in the region last year, as part of a bigger-than-average overall turnout in a cycle already scheduled to provide a boon.

The Raiders will also feature a group of 29 rising juniors they've relied upon increasingly the past couple seasons to help make do with much thinner numbers in the three classes above them.

Plenty of them had to play varsity snaps as freshmen, and still more last fall as sophomores, showing both some glimpses of greatness and signs of inexperience.

But by now, most of those adorable "puppy dogs" have matured into some hounds who'll be big dogs on both sides of the ball this year. And the growing pains, while not entirely a thing of the past, should be much less noticeable as the wave of talented players comes into its own.

"Our numbers are strong. We're still probably a junior-heavy team, but I think we'll have a little bit more of an experienced team than

"we've had the last couple of years," Burdette said. "Some of those juniors are three-year starters, and with 13 seniors, this will be the last small class we have."

A breakout season could in the works for plen who haven't had one already.

Perhaps West's newest junior will be taking over at quarterback in a change that could help create a needed surge on the offensive side of the ball.

The adjustment, which Raider coaches have mulled since trying out the arrangement last season, will slide previous starter Ty Cummings over to running back, and elevate fellow junior Cason Pollock, who they see as a better fit, into the No. 1 spot.

"Cason's got some pretty good raw tools," Burdette said. "Mentally, he's the kind of player you want. He's competitive, and he's got a little bit of moxie about him. Kids all respect him and like him. He throws a good ball, and he's got some tools there. But he's also a coach's kid, so he's gonna have command of the huddle and he's gonna know where everybody's supposed to be, the intelligence and leadership side of things, I think that's where he's really going to make his mark."

The West Laurens attack, just two years ago averaging only nine points per game and last fall putting up a rate of roughly 17, has come along, but still severely lagged behind most of its opponents in scoring.

Big-play touchdowns, along with portions of games they were able to run the ball efficiently, control the clock and get a boost from their defense, helped the Raiders make the modest numbers work at times. But the overall trend was toward stagnation, summed up in their averages of less than five yards per play and only 222 yards (all but 54 rushing) per contest, which pointed to the need for a slight revamp.

Cummings, West's starter since early in his freshman season, was its undisputed No. 1 playmaker, last year holding the team lead in rushing yards (just over 1,000) and co-lead in touchdowns (10, a mark shared with tailback Shannon Adkins). But he was, very consistently, also the only playmaker in many games. He was a danger to house one on any play with his legs, but completed passes at a sub-50 percent rate, making it a challenge to dole out the rock consistently to anyone not accepting direct handoffs.

Teams, as a result, were able to defend him – and the Raiders' read and handoff options in the backfield – aggressively enough to shut them down.

Despite the trade-off of sacrificing mobility and a QB run element, hopes are that Pollock's more efficient passing will do more to benefit an oft-suffocated run game and unlock some parts of the offensive chess board that were previously off-limits to use.

"One of the things I've noticed just from observing, that ball gets distributed around," Burdette said of the offense's

during the season."

The mix of folks, and new staff, is guaranteed to generate a lot of excitement for the future. And Falcon fans might just be surprised just how encouraging the immediate results actually have the potential to be, the team's strong scrimmage showing against West Laurens notwithstanding.

"I think people are going to be pleased with the product," Hicks said. "They're going to be happy with how our kids do things and how they do small things, I think that's very important, being able to do the small things so when it's time for the big things to happen, they'll be able to open some doors for themselves."

The near future, as things take their course, is a day of small things the Falcons aren't despising.



WEST LAURENS RAIDERS

HEAD COACH: Kip Burdette (third season; 3-17 career)

OFFENSE: Spread T

DEFENSE: 3-3 stack

2023: 2-8 (0-6 region 2-AAAA)

FINISH: Missed playoffs

REGION: 3-AAA

RETURNING STARTERS:

6 offense / 7 defense

KEY LOSSES: LB Jordan Spencer (Benedict); ATH/LB Quentin Clark (Indiana); OL/DL Jayden Todd (Florida State); OL/DL Jamir Ussery (Clayton State); ATH/DB Johnny Williams; WR/LB Cam Clark; TE/P Kaden Baggett

SCHEDULE...

8/23 Groves
8/30 North Clayton
9/06 Howard*
9/13 at Cross Creek*
9/20 Harlem*
9/27 at Baldwin*
10/11 Richmond Academy*
10/18 at Hephzibah*
10/25 Aquinas*
11/01 at Westside Augusta*

fresh look this past summer. "We have several people that can touch it that we feel good about. And you put Ty in the slot, he's got a little more of a vertical presence than we've had the last couple of years.... When that happens you kind of feel good about the lineup that you put out there with the kids at skill positions. We feel good about some of those other skill players, too, but you really can't just say hey, this guy's going to touch the ball every time."

Direct snap packages that showcase Cummings' elusiveness and state-caliber track speed on option plays will still be an important facet of the offense, but the majority of his use will now come as a sort of super-athlete.

"Ty will play at every skill position, and he'll still take some snaps too," Burdette said. "He's a really talented ball carrier, really fast, and he's a sub-11 100-meter guy. We're really looking forward to getting him the ball some."

There's certainly more pent-up speed in the Raiders' skill group that's been itching to break loose.

Junior Branden Brooks has likely had the best summer of any of those potential standouts, earning himself a spot in what projects as about a three-man rotation at tailback. And he'll have some of the best ability to leak out into the flat to catch some passes of any at the position.

Tyler Williams, a rising senior, has been a versatile utility back for each of the last two seasons who also projects as a reliable rushing and receiving

option.

Senior Daniel Lisbey, a "Raider to the core," returns as the H-back, or "sniffer," and a primary blocker whose intensity on the field will be as huge as his leadership off of it.

"He's only 175 pounds, but when he blocks somebody, you're getting all 175," Burdette said. "He models the kind of player that we want, he's the perfect example of what we're trying to get out of these kids. He's committed to being the best that he can be."

Zorian Willis (another athletic speedster), Juvon Hill (a strong, sure-handed receiving target) and Adkins (a physical ball-carrier) are additional juniors who plan to play defense full-time with a recurring role on offense.

Adkins, who proved to be an unstoppable force running downhill for a stretch early last season (he finished the year with 523 rushing yards), will have some of the highest upside of any player in the whole bunch.

The Raiders, for the time being, are using him in rotation with multiple others at tailback, so he can remain fresh for a lion's share of reps on D.

"He'll spot play on offense, when we need him in short yardage or we just want a change of pace. If we want to hit them with a sledgehammer a little bit, we'll throw him in there," Burdette said, though he's not ruling out a change to that mentality come crunch time in region play, if featuring Adkins proves to be the Raiders' best bet.

"Later on in season, we'll do what we've gotta do to make it happen," he said.

There's also some great potential on the offensive line, which brings back senior center Rob Gonzales, junior guard Trey Williams and junior tackle Grady Howell with at least a full season of starting experience under their belt. Right tackle Tramel Toliver has the next closest thing, playing first string in half the games last season upon stepping up to replace injured FSU-signee Jayden Todd.

"That's where we're the most experienced, and we're still going to be young," Burdette said.

Senior Hudson Hadden (the expected starter at right guard, and a lone newcomer to the first-team lineup), junior Rhett Bazemore, junior Tristan King and sophomore Jonathan Toney (likely a projectable college prospect down the road) are also strong players who will offer depth.

Defensively, West is looking to establish and maintain some consistency in an identity that's varied widely the past two years, opting to base exclusively in a 3-3 stack going forward.

As with the offense, the ups and downs of 2023 averaged out to some numbers that they'd like to improve significantly. Teams averaged a little over 250 of their 360 yards per game on the

ground, and about 7.6 per carry. A goal of getting off the field on more third downs is one they'll carry over into this season, with an awareness that a key to doing so is giving up less on the first and second plays of the series.

"Down in and down out, we've gotta be better at run defense," Burdette said. "An old coach told me, if you stop 'em on first down, you can kind of call plays for 'em."

Officially, West Laurens returns only seven starters on D, though of the top 11 slated as 11 this season, nine played pretty regular snaps last year.

One of those few exceptions is strong side linebacker Hunter Castellaw, who didn't play his sophomore year after earning regular snaps and one start as a freshman, but is back among a set of impressively-built classmates at the position: Adkins joining in the middle and Jayden Watkins on the weak side.

A wealth of exciting players will roam the secondary.

Hill moves from linebacker to join Willis at safety, where his ball-skills make him a candidate to lead the team in interceptions and break-ups.

"In 7-on-7, he's done a good job," Burdette said. "He's gotten a hand on some balls. He'll make some athletic plays back there."

Juniors Jayce Blash and Jermidous Brown have provided some steady play at corner spots. Senior Johnavious Kellam, a third-year starter who'll play the hybrid position crossing fifth DB with fourth linebacker, has shown makings of a run-buster that will create some big issues for opposing offenses.

West Laurens feels deepest – albeit a touch undersized – on the line, where the chart got fairly thin late last year thanks to injuries. But the group, made up almost exclusively of players who paid their dues in 2022 and '23, should stand to cash in on that experience.

Junior end Ethan Carson-Guyton made the biggest splash for the unit in the pre-season. Jimmie Trussell and Keith Walker (back from a midseason knee injury last fall) will also be joined in the rotation by senior Je'lan Williams, Evan Williams, Jordan Hall and a freshman in Maxx Chafin who will make a strong push for significant playing time at nose tackle with his strength and disruptiveness.

Plenty of athletes, from Willis and Williams to Brooks, have featured in the return game for the Raiders recently. Cummings, now that he's not tied up at quarterback, will also be jumping into that mix on kickoffs and punts.

Junior Clyde Warren returns off an excellent first season as the Raiders' place-kicker. Punting and holding chores will go to Dublin transfer J.D. Hogan, a freshman.

Freshman Duggan Malone, who also kicked and punted in addition to quarterbacking last year's WLMS squad, will help out anywhere needed in the kicking game.

"I think special teams in general is something we really

need to be sharp on this year, because I think it could be the tiebreaker in some of those games," Burdette said.

The pair of ninth graders will also back up Pollock at QB, while also running respective offenses for the Raiders' JV and ninth grade teams, this being the first season in some time that total roster numbers will allow for the program to field two sub-varsity squads.

The ample bodies will also help the Raiders manage snaps for players who could use some additional rest, and get much more out of their preparation with two fairly realistic sets of 11 men that can trade some game-like action during the week.

"One of the benefits of having the numbers the way they've been this summer, we've been able to platoon a little bit more," Burdette said. "We still play players both ways, but the functionality of practices has been a lot better."

A move down in class, and into a region of many unknowns and few familiar rivals, makes the road to the postseason tough to predict, although projections show the Raiders as one of many with a shot to do well in a fairly wide-open 4-AAA, absent any overwhelming favorite.

"I feel good about things are shaping up," Burdette said. "There'll be some good opponents. There'll be a lot of travel... I feel a little better than I did the last couple of years. But we have to earn everything. We're going to have our work cut out for us at some point, for sure."

The Raiders will need some better strokes of luck on their side than they had last fall, when most things that could go wrong, did. And that was probably a reason they couldn't turn the corner much sooner.

Depth and durability now feel like strengths more than weaknesses, and of the multiple other humps they needed to get over the past two years, West Laurens appears to enter 2024 with the horsepower, brainpower and will power needed to top most of them with ease.

The road over the steepest hill, though, is paved with the familiar hallmark of inexperience: the nagging penalties, turnovers and mistakes that can get even the best of teams bogged down, or cause you to blow a tire.

Similar perils could await the Raiders on this year's journey if the same missteps crop up as a theme in close games. But they're hopeful this new team's maturity will result in some poise and discipline that helps them make a good run at it.

"One thing we have to do: We can't be the team to commit errors," Burdette said. "We can't be the team that false starts, off-sides, fumbles and turns the ball over at the wrong time. We have to be sound and solid on special teams and don't beat ourselves. We may run into situations where if we don't beat ourselves, we'll have some chances to win."

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Trojans to take on learning curve, but trusting system, staff to set new starters on right path

By CLAY REYNOLDS
Sports Editor

In a stark contrast to the senior-laden teams who've led them to some memorable seasons in the recent past, the Johnson County Trojans are headed into 2024 with a decidedly more freshman-laden roster.

And out of what portion of their varsity squad isn't actually ninth graders, a majority are still fresh men... sophomores, juniors or seniors who will be playing meaningful snaps on Friday nights for the first time in their careers.

All told, only about five of the Trojans' starters from 2023 return to the fold this year, providing a combined amount of playing experience that will hardly put a dent in the trend of overwhelming newness across the field.

It's a level of turnover and inexperience JoCo has been blessed not to have to deal with in a single off-season for quite some time, though circumstances of this one caused senior losses to hit extra hard this summer.

"We've been spoiled here in a lot of different ways," Trojans head coach Don Norton said. "The last couple of years, those guys had been playing, starting since they were sophomores, so they knew everything. This group here is brand new."

No matter what, a good portion of the depth chart will be populated by players just up from middle school, as true first-years make up over a third of JoCo's 43-man roster, and outnumber the largest class above them on the roster by five.

Even if ample upperclassmen step up to the plate, the Trojans will still find themselves having to thrust a considerable number of ninth graders into the Friday-night spotlight, which is always an unpredictable proposition.

So ready or not, many in this "freshman 15" are guaranteed to play a key role in how the upcoming season goes.

"We're going to start a lot of freshmen, and if they're not starting, they're in second series," Norton said. "There are going to be some growing pains, and we're very well aware of that. Our victories are going to come in some different ways, not just on scoreboards."

If you brought your roster along to JoCo's first scrimmage at Wilcox County Aug. 2 and started putting names with numbers for the first group of 11 on the

field, it'd be possible to get through 10 of them before you hit one that you recognize.

That's partly because the Trojans, in a sort of fake-out, actually ran out their second string for the night's first set of snaps before inserting the bulk of their projected starters later in the first quarter.

All who got into the game, both the youngsters and the not-so-youngsters, proved they can hold their own. Some breakdowns, bad exchanges and freshmen moments also demonstrated what you would expect: That this collection of young players – having practiced together in pads for only a week leading in – still has a lot of work to do on developing its communication, cohesion and chemistry.

But few issues appeared to be things not easily solved by some additional practice, and better command of wrinkles in the offensive and defensive scheme that will eventually become second-nature.

And it might sound a little odd, but JoCo is actually much less concerned with this team's Jimmies and Joes than it is with hammering out those Xs and Os.

"We're really trying to focus on the fundamentals, and take it slow," Norton said. "Our system works, but we're just not able to make some of the easy adjustments that we're used to. It's going to take explanation, teaching andmessing up and learning from it."

The systems he speaks of are time-tested. And they run a lot deeper than plays, formations and style.

Norton describes them more as a means of teaching how to block and tackle, with how they go about that based entirely on what a given year's roster proves to do best.

JoCo's offense, for example, is one you'd likely classify somewhere in the Wing-T/option neighborhood, only because that's the shape it's taken more seasons than not. But every so often, the Trojans have broken into more of a spread passing team, when a particularly gifted arm and set of receivers has come along.

"Some years we're shotgun, with five wides. We've been double tight wing-T," he said. "But our system is still the same, offensively and defensively. We just adjust to the talents of our players."

Though the varsity field may be unfamiliar to Johnson County's newest players, their coaches are by no

means unfamiliar with their strengths and weaknesses.

In fact, Norton and Co. already have a great idea of the feet the Trojans need to put forward on offense and defense to get the most out of this roster, and this season.

"We evaluate all year long, and actually for the past couple of years, watching (players) come through middle school, so we have a pretty good idea of what we're good at," he said. "And we take a lot of time getting input from the kids, so we're doing what they feel comfortable with and can maximize their talents."

In 21 seasons, Norton's seen his share of years with most of the roster returning, and a good many of these rebuilding campaigns as well. And that method of operation has served the Trojans well in all of them.

Over that time span, they've finished right .500 a handful of times, but never had a losing season. In two thirds or more, they've finished with a winning record.

Those trends are something Norton attributes to two things... coaching, and consistency.

"Our whole staff is really good," Norton said. "We've all been together a long time, and most of them played (here). They're all on the wall of fame. They're great role models and representatives of Johnson County and what it takes to be successful. So our kids buy into everything we do, I think, because they know them, they trust them and we've been consistent with what we do and how we do it, and had a little bit of success."

The system, by this point, largely runs itself thanks to the faithful work of JoCo's long-tenured assistant coaches: Defensive coordinator Brett Bishop, D-line and strength coach Devin Cannon and quarterbacks and secondary coach Cordell Johnson, most of whom came up as players for the Trojans and had some stellar careers on the field.

Each also shares their head coach's firm belief in defense as the No. 1 priority of the program.

"They've done a fantastic job implementing our system and keeping it rolling, and have kind of kicked me out of the way," Norton said. "The cool thing at Johnson County is, and Bill (Bonds) told me this years ago, our kids love to play defense. So we kind of hang our hat on that. We say, we do offense because we have to, but we play defense, and that's real-

ly what they like to do here. They just run and hit, and hit and run."

As for the guys doing that running and hitting, look for a lot of new ones to make a name this season in nearly every position group, most notably up front, where the Trojans have shuffled some players from skill positions to help fill needs created by graduation of seven linemen who played on one side or the other, or both, last year.

The lone holdover among a ton of new faces is guard "Twix" Sharber, a third-year starter who'd admittedly be nice to have side-by-side versions of to line up on both the left and right sides.

"I wish he could play all five positions," Norton said. "He's definitely one of our leaders. He knows what to do on the offensive line and the defensive line. He had a fantastic junior season, and we look forward to him having a fantastic senior season."

Junior Zion Wesley, sophomore Aidon Claxton, sophomore Dwayne Abrams, senior Olarte Wilcher and senior J.J. Huff are among the newcomers expected to factor into the remainder of a first-string offensive line that'll comprise the bulk of the rotation on the defensive side, as well.

JoCo will replace each of its top three rushers from last season, wingbacks Benonte Murray and Josh Taylor, and fullback Bendarius Hodges. Luckily, all three of the runners slated to take over their starting slots backed them up last season, and will be ready to hit the ground running.

Wingbacks Tayshaun Norris, a junior, and Cory King, a senior, each picked up about half the number of carries belonging to the top pair, and ran for roughly 300 yards each. Fullback-elect J.D. Carswell, a rising senior, followed with the smallest workload, and a bit over 200 in yardage.

A second-year starter with some exciting potential is quarterback Nathan Turberville, who tied Murray's rushing touchdown lead with 10 scores last year via keepers off the midline play that he began to excel at reading after gaining proficiency running the core play about three games in.

His ability to throw it was valuable as well, to the tune of about 350 yards and six TDs that both stand to increase as the Trojans try to use their passing game as more than just a change of pace.

"He's a very smart kid, super-high IQ," Norton said. "He tells everyone what to do. He's sharp. Does a lot of film study."

Seniors Devero and Xavier Wright, both offensive initiates, will provide Turberville's primary sets of leads at receiver.

JoCo's scattered experience on defense will have its heaviest concentration at linebacker, with Carswell (a returning all-state selection) in the middle alongside fellow junior A.J. Demmons, who's got a nose for the ball.

King, who played last year at outside linebacker, is expected to see most of his action at cornerback.

JOJO
Continued on page 12



JOHNSON COUNTY TROJANS

HEAD COACH: Don Norton
(18th season; 130-58 at JoCo, 137-81 career)

OFFENSE: Wing-T
DEFENSE: 4-4

2023: 8-4 (5-0 region 5-Low A)

FINISH: Region champ;
GHSA playoffs, second round
(lost to Manchester)

REGION: 5-Low A

RETURNING STARTERS:
2.5 offense / 4 defense

KEY LOSSES: ATH/LB Benonte Murray; ATH/LB Josh Taylor; RB/LB Bendarius Hodges; OL/DL Isaiah Moorman; OL/DL Brantley Martin; OL/DL Ashton Davis; OL/DL Matt Bianco

SCHEDULE...

8/16	at East Laurens
8/23	at Montgomery Co.
8/30	Warren Co.
9/06	at Butler
9/13	Treutlen
9/27	Hancock Central*
10/04	4 Twiggs Co.*
10/11	at Wilkinson Co.*
10/25	at Glascock Co.*
11/01	GMC*

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Brown big on building around defense, special teams in designs to put Dodge back in business

By CLAY REYNOLDS
Sports Editor

What separates Dodge County from the South Georgia schools considered "Blue Bloods" in football?

Other than population differences and geographical placement, not a lot, in the opinion of new Indians head coach Phillip Brown, who – in his recent career as an assistant coach – hails from several of those powerhouse programs with long-running traditions.

And having seen from up close a lot of the makings of excellence in places like Thomasville, Moultrie, Adel and Valdosta, he notices a lot of similarities in the football culture of Eastman.

"You look at the community support, and it reminds me a lot of South Georgia," Brown said. "The people in the community are behind you 100 percent. The community support and our booster club reminds me a lot of South Georgia. The kids, too, they also remind me of South Georgia kids. They're hard-nosed, physical and work really hard."

He joins many around in the belief that Dodge has the makings of a potential powerhouse, and to a certain extent, the program's history backs up the thinking.

With a more-than-competitive win rate of 55 percent all-time, the Indians have been a "team to beat" in Middle Georgia more often than not since their program got going in the 1960s.

A first-ever region title in 1976 marked a sort of next step, onto a tier of the area just below rivals Dublin, Swainsboro and Vidalia, who've each been playing football since the heyday of Pop Warner, and boast all-time win totals in the 5 and 600s, and double-digit region titles.

Dodge, several decades younger as a school and about a season and a half out from hitting its 400-win

milestone, has at several points in recent history been right on the edge of a chance to join that category of area powers.

Runs in the late '90s, led by coach John Peacock, then the last 10 seasons, under Rex Hodges and Ken Cofer, produced three region championships each, but fell short of the deep playoff runs (none past the quarterfinals) needed to cement that elite status. At many points, the Indians have been knocking on the door, in need of only more consistency and championships to make the jump.

Brown, who's fairly young and brings a blueprint learned from some coaches who've maintained high standards of success in those major football locales, sees all the potential for Dodge County to reach those heights.

"The kids have done a great job buying into what we want to do here," he said. "It's just one of those things where I feel like if we can get the culture right here, this place, it can be really, really good."

When you make a good one, first impressions can mean a lot.

And Brown's path to Eastman actually originates with a great one the Indians made in an encounter during the 2019 AA state playoffs, when he was an assistant coach at Thomasville.

The Bulldogs, hosting Dodge in the first round, got all they could handle out of region 3-AA's fourth seed, squeaking past by only a touchdown on the front end of their post-season run to the semifinals, where they'd ultimately fall to Dublin.

While the Indians lost the game, their performance likely recruited the man who's now their head coach, convincing Brown Eastman would be a desirable spot to land as a head coach if and when the chance came about.

"Up until the Dublin game, Dodge

was the toughest game we played in the playoffs," he said. "I said, well you know if the time is ever right for me, and the opportunity was there, that might be something I wanted to pursue if it ever came open for a head coach position."

Lo and behold, the school would indeed be the first to extend him an opportunity to lead a program this past December, when the departure of Thomas Smith after one season in charge had the Indians looking for their fourth head coach in five seasons. Brown convinced administrators of a plan he already firmly believed could restore Dodge County's position as an area leader, if not take the Indians even further.

"It's one of those things that I felt like it was a good position," he said. "I knew if I had talent, and I had support, that I had a shot to be successful, and I have that here. That was a big driving proponent."

Since taking the job, Brown has focused on instilling five core values: Hard work, Energy, Accountability, Resilience and Team, which together spell out the word "HEART."

"Ever since I've gotten here, my No. 1 goal was I wanted to make Dodge a program that people can be proud of," he said. "When they walk around and you say, 'Hey, are you from Eastman?', they can proudly say they're a fan of Dodge County, and that's everything from what we do on the field and off the field."

On it, the Indians will be going back to a brand of offensive football similar to their best teams of late: An attack with a finesse appearance, but a power identity.

In a system dialed up by Alabama-transplanted offensive coordinator Montez Shipman, they'll go fast and use the entire field in the passing game, but also plan on being pretty hard-nosed in pounding the rock.

"We're going to be an up-tempo, spread team, but we do want to run the football," Brown said. "When people hear spread, they think you're gonna throw it around everywhere. We want equal balance, but we want to hang our hat on trying to run the football."

The defense – a system mirroring that of Shelton Felton's Valdosta, where Brown coached most recently – will show a variety of looks from their front to the number of DBs, with the 3-4 as only a home base.

"We're very multiple in our fronts and in our coverages, and the kids have done a really good job of adapting to that style of defense," Brown said. "It gives us an opportunity defensively to be able to adjust to a lot of different things, playing that style of defense. We want to be fast and physical. That's one of the big things we hang our hat on."

Brown, who was in charge of the Wildcats' outside linebackers, came up not only coaching on the defensive side of the ball, but also running special teams. And he takes pride in doing what it takes to own the fourth-down and kickoff situations that usually swing close games.

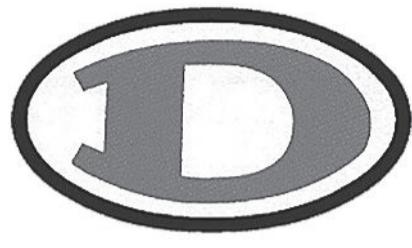
"The third phase of the game is where I cut my teeth at Valdosta, and felt like we did a really good job," Brown said. "I really saw there that it can win you big games, and it can lose you big games. That's why I put a big emphasis on special teams, being organized and detailed in that phase of the game."

In all three, the Indians will rely heavily on a pair of generational athletes: One a senior and Dodge County's top college prospect since Leonard Floyd, and another with a chance to be just as hot a commodity by his senior year.

The first of those, Duke Johnson,

DODGE

Continued on page 14



DODGE COUNTY INDIANS

HEAD COACH: Phillip Brown (first season)

OFFENSE: Spread

DEFENSE: Multiple 3-4

2023: 1-9 (0-6 region 1-AA)

FINISH: Missed playoffs

REGION: 2-High A

RETURNING STARTERS: 5 offense / 4 defense

KEY LOSSES: ATH Zy Williams; WR/DB Ashton Pitts (Culver Stockton); LB Brice McDuffie; TE/DB Jaboree Graham (Peru State); OL/DL Tony Tobler; DL Jerrell James

SCHEDULE...

8/23	at Bleckley Co.*
9/06	at ACE Charter*
9/13	Vidalia
9/20	at East Laurens*
9/27	Southwest*
10/04	at Washington Co.*
10/18	Jefferson Co.*
10/25	at Northeast*
11/01	Dublin*

Royals will rely on key offensive duo to deliver while defense breaks in young lineup, new system

By CLAY REYNOLDS
Sports Editor

Seemingly every offseason in the Von Lassiter era that the Bleckley County Royals have faced some type of critical question, they've come up with a more than satisfactory answer.

Each couple years brings one or two of those defining moments for the program as it undergoes natural cycles of change, or confronts the need for it in order to adapt and improve, when the way it responds to specific challenges will have a direct and significant impact on the coming season, and likely a few beyond it.

For the most part, those watersheds have dealt with routine roster turnover following the loss of major senior classes, like with Bleckley teams of 2020 and 2022 who both turned rebuilds into state quarterfinal runs their first year, and region championship bids the very next.

Last season's squad for the Royals pulled off its own version of that same feat, replacing 17 total starters and several key assistant coaches before proceeding to go 9-3 and win the region for a second time in three years.

No matter how daunting the task or dire the situation, Bleckley has routinely found ways to disprove doubts and exceed expectations. And the Royals finished up last fall with some more of that work cut out as they began making preparations for 2024.

The latest challenge was twofold: refilling a depleted depth chart on defense while simultaneously converting to a brand new system, and also finding ways to forge a stronger sense of camaraderie in the locker room.

Lassiter and the Bleckley coaching staff, once again, have found some fresh solutions that went hand-in-hand during their offseason activities.

"We've had to replace people every year, and we have to go to work doing that in January," Lassiter said. "We have a process we go through. We don't just do it to say we do it. We don't go through the same motions, but we try to find better, more innovative ways. This year, we're really focused on more team-oriented stuff and trying to hold each other accountable and those types of things. Hopefully, it

will help a young team come along a lot faster."

The tactics will work to address a couple of needs, the first an obvious one in the theme of youth and inexperience on the roster that follows another round of senior losses that was tough to take.

Graduations numbered about 18, and included a bunch of vital pieces on both sides of the ball – the defensive starting lineup left particularly desolate by their absence in the spring.

The other was much more subtle: A concern of chemistry, and the need to craft a winning culture in the program extending beyond the football field that was evident late last season as the highs of success also brought some lows when things didn't go as hoped for Bleckley in the second round of the playoffs.

The Royals were visited by Irwin County, and thoroughly defeated by the second-seeded Indians on their home field, 31-0. Some early setbacks and frustration for the home team would snowball into a self-destructive second half that sent the game downhill fast. And as things went south on the field, they did so on the sidelines as well.

In view of the need to train toward winning the mental battles that matter heavily on Friday nights, the Royals are focusing as much this year on building team as they are on building a team.

Over the offseason, they've made a priority of cultivating leadership and working to build bonds between players by setting aside time for off-field team activities giving athletes used to doing football together an opportunity to do a little life, too. And in the middle of the year-round grind, it can be easy to take for granted that players have more things in common than just football.

"When they spend time together away from football, they learn more about each other," Lassiter said. "They learn where they live, who they live with and their family situation. They kind of learn what buttons to push to get each other going in the right direction when you do those things."

"When you get into a game on Friday night and you're playing next to somebody you really care about, that makes it a lot easier to hold people accountable, and it's easy to play harder for somebody if you really trust and love the person."



HEAD COACH: Von Lassiter (8th season; 55-26 at Bleckley, 90-38 career)

OFFENSE: Spread

DEFENSE: 4-2-5

2023: 9-3 (4-0 region 2-High A)
FINISH: Region champion; State playoffs (lost to Irwin Co. in second round)
REGION: 2-High A

RETURNING STARTERS: 5 offense / 4 defense

KEY LOSSES: DB Iverson Baker (Peru State); RB/LB Cam Beck; TE/LB Nazario Johnson; RB/LB Rodriguez Flagg; WR/DB Markeze Brown (Peru State); WR/DB Marcus Newson; LB/TE Jacob Grant

SCHEDULE...

8/17	Rutland (FVSU)
8/23	Dodge Co.*
8/30	at East Laurens*
9/06	Southwest*
9/20	at Washington Co.*
9/27	Jefferson Co.*
10/03	at Northeast*
10/18	Dublin*
10/25	ACE Charter*
10/31	at Central, Macon*

The tactics could also be valuable in bringing some quicker stability to a set of mostly new players doing mostly new things on defense, where the Royals have changed a lot in the way of their personnel, and their scheme.

In a departure from some things it's done mostly the same way on that side of the ball since Lassiter's first year as head coach in 2017, Bleckley will be transitioning its base D from a 3-4 to a 4-2-5 as a new coordinator – Scott Pagano, hired away from Dublin – takes over.

And the wholesale adjustments, for mostly new starters working both to familiarize and prove themselves at various positions, have made things a little unsteady from the summer into the preseason.

The Royals' defensive line – also familiar with principles of playing from an "even" front that they'd align in occasionally during previous years – is in large part an exception to the trend of inexperience.

Returners including junior Tug Pasby, a domineering tackle who caused serious problems for teams in the run game as a nose the past two seasons, plus seniors in Jamary Elvine and projected two-way starter J.B. Blackshear providing important stability.

A clear picture has been slower to come into focus at positions further back, where numerous battles are unfolding along with the preseason.

To now, the Royals' only linebacker to emerge as a sure starter is a freshman, Landry Nobles (son of BC associate head coach Stacy). Others vying for time there are a mix of upper- and underclassmen who haven't yet produced a clear leader.

"We've got just a rotation of a bunch of guys trying to figure out the rest of them," Lassiter said.

Senior Tyrek Mack, a safety in last year's scheme, is set to take over the critical new position of "star," representing a fifth defensive back on the field blending the responsibilities of an outside linebacker, cornerback and safety all into one job.

Besides him, Bleckley will pencil in the experienced senior Nykez Farrow at cornerback and junior Jireh Campbell at safety, then look to a range of other candidates, including junior Jahiyah Blackshear and sophomore Octavius Tate, to compose the remainder of a lineup in which the veterans and newcomers will have a lot of chemistry and confidence to build early.

And just how they decide to parse out playing time may be subject to change by the week early on.

"Every Friday night is going to

kind of be a test and a battle of who can play," Lassiter said. "That's the position that we lost the most at, and we've gotta develop those guys."

Fortunately, a good many more things in the Royals' offensive department are familiar this fall, the foremost of those a tandem of video game-level playmakers that are primed for a massive season leading the attack.

Their names are two that all 12 of last year's opponents will remember: Josh Stanley, a rising junior at running back, and all-state senior Kam'ryn Everett, who's back for a second year starting at quarterback.

Both stepped up, on a squad replacing its biggest producers last fall, and helped electrify both dimensions of the attack, which ended up scoring just one point less total (408) than the previous year, and added three to its average points per game (34).

Everett threw for a massive 1,700 yards and 22 touchdowns with only 10 interceptions and ran 100 times for 646 and nine scores, displaying poise and comfort running it off read options, scrambles outside the pocket and throwing on both the run and traditional drop backs.

"Kam just kind of keeps the ball moving," Lassiter said. "We'll get to third downs, and they cover stuff and he gets out and makes a play. He's just fun to watch when he's going."

Stanley, known affectionately as "Lil' J" led rushers with 1,343 yards and 21 touchdowns, and – in a detail that's actually kind of scary – did it all while playing regular snaps at linebacker and battling a series of nagging injuries that never left him completely alone.

Plans for his second year include some new wrinkles, a few of them unveiled in an Aug. 2 scrimmage at Hawkinsville that brought Stanley out of the backfield on swing action and lined him up out wide as a receiver for some touches on the perimeter. The Royals also intend to use him almost exclusively as an offensive player



Phillip Brown

SCHOOL Dodge County
HOMETOWN Homa, La.
ALMA MATER Southeastern Louisiana

THIS IS MY 1st SEASON

What sport would you coach if you couldn't coach football, and why?
Basketball, a sport he played in high school and might have been exposed to earlier in life than football.

"My grandfather was the basketball coach," Brown said. "I grew up around the sport, and was always at his practices. It was probably my second favorite."

What is the coolest or most challenging opposing stadium you've coached a game in?

Brown came up with two, both experiences from within the past year.

His 1A is the Concrete Palace, at Lowndes High School, where as an assistant coach last year at archrival Valdosta, he got the rare privilege of being in the house for the Winnersville Classic — the rivalry of all rivalries in South Georgia — in front of a sellout crowd of more than 15,000.

As for 1B, it was the "unbelievable atmosphere" of a kickoff classic game in front of a crowd topping 17,000, when the Wildcats traveled last August to play Massillon Washington High School, in Ohio. And it was easy to tell the difference between a season opener there, vs. back home in Georgia.

"It was pretty neat," Brown said. "The crazy thing about it, is that it was August and it's 60 degrees."

What's the most impressive football play you've ever seen, who made it and when?

It's another one dating back to last season at Valdosta, during a matchup with Cook, in which Colorado-committed defensive end Eric Brantley Jr. picked off a screen pass and broke five tackles as he carried it back to the house.

"He was unbelievable," Brown said. "He is the best defensive lineman I've ever seen play high school."

Why did you want to be a football coach?

Like many, Brown entered the profession by following in family footsteps — particularly those his grandfather he already mentioned.

As for choosing football?

"I love what it teaches you," he said. "A lot about life and the opportunity to help young people come together and accomplish something in their life that they want to do. That's my big driving force and why I do this. It's great to win games, and all the accolades that come with it, but I really enjoy helping young people achieve their goals and accomplish things."



Kip Burdette

SCHOOL West Laurens
HOMETOWN Forsyth, Ga.
ALMA MATER Valdosta State

THIS IS MY 3rd SEASON

Who's the best player you ever coached against?

Between stops as an assistant coach at three different Georgia schools, Burdette has run up against some pretty decent ones on opposite sidelines.

Among the names that stand out are Richard LeCounte at Liberty County, Big Kat Bryant and Quay Walker at Crisp, Robert Nkemidiche and Wayne Gallman at Grayson, Otis Reese IV at Lee County and Taylor Heinecke at Collins Hill.

But none of them took over the game in quite the same fashion as Washington County's A.J. Gray when Burdette and Pierce County visited the House of Pain in the state quarterfinals of 2014.

Gray, the eventual Georgia Gatorade Player of the Year, would explode for an unreal 442 rushing yards and eight touchdowns as the No. 1 ranked Golden Hawks hung 62 on the board to clinch a berth in their second of back-to-back semifinals.

"I'd like to forget about that night," Burdette said. "We had nobody in Blackshear, Ga. that wanted to tackle him... He was the type of player who never slowed down, never took any plays off. He carried the ball and ran half a mile, 'bout near, and played every snap at safety. That's impressive."

What is your strangest game-night superstition?

A big gum-chewer, Burdette rarely takes the field for a game without a pack — preferably Five Spearmint or Extra green spearmint — in his pocket. How much of it he's chomping on at any given point usually depends on how things are going.

"I always start out with one piece of gum," he said. "If I need a little change of mojo, I'll throw another piece in, or two pieces. If that doesn't work, I'll spit my gum out and start over. I've pretty much always got gum."

What sport would you coach if you didn't coach football?

It was actually what he coached as an assistant at Mary Persons before taking the West Laurens job, but track and field has always been what Burdette considers his "other sport," even going back to high school, when he ran the quarter mile for the Bulldogs on a team that won the 2004 AA state title.

Why did you want to be a football coach?

To a great extent, the calling simply runs in his family.

Burdette descends from some legendary coaching stock, as the grandson of Georgia's fourth all-time winningest, Mary Persons' Dan Pitts. But he follows more directly in the footsteps of parents who've also spent a lifetime working in high school athletics — father Pat Burdette a longtime football assistant in Forsyth (former head coach at Monticello) and mother Penny Pitts Mitchell a former cheer coach now serving as an associate director of the GHSA.

Besides spending his youth in those many coaching circles, he believes plenty more of the profession rubbed off from others in the same boat who became some of his closest friends in college, and shared similar goals.

Burdette and brother "Dano" — who's currently a strength coach at Newnan High School — roomed at Valdosta State with two other coaches' kids who are now also GHSA head coaches, Tucker Pruitt (Fitzgerald) and Davis "Rooster" Russell (Bremen).

Those influences put very little guesswork into eventual decisions on what to major in, and then pursue as a career.

"I was in a field house my whole life," he said. "I just hung out there, hung out with my dad, hung out with my granddad... The game's so important to you, when you grow up around it like that, that you just want to be around it."



Roderick Cummings

SCHOOL Twigs County
HOMETOWN Macon
ALMA MATER Albany State

THIS IS MY 1st SEASON

What's your favorite offseason hobby?

Cummings is unashamed to admit that he's recently caught the pickleball bug, and plays every opportunity he gets back home in Milledgeville, although unfortunately, the start of football season and school is likely to cut down on his weekly court time for the next few months.

"I try to do it 2-3 times a week," he said. "I don't get a chance to do it as much as I want to. I've got two boys, so I'm trying to get my oldest involved in it."

What is the coolest or most challenging opposing stadium you've coached a game in?

From his playing and coaching days, an easy choice is Ware County's Memo-

Getting to know the Heart of Georgia's head coaches...

Welcome to a virtual meet-and-greet reception for our area's 14 head football coaches, seven of which are headed into a first season at their new school this fall. Since small talk gets old in a hurry, we're breaking the ice by putting them on the spot with some randomly selected questions on various fun football topics, as well as more serious one, "What's your why?" Here's how each of them responded during our preseason interviews:

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What do you consider Twigs County's most unique football or sports tradition?

Though he's still new, Cummings has been made well aware of how big the Cobras do their homecoming celebrations. And he's looking forward to experiencing his first as head coach when his team hosts GMC on Sept. 27.

"It's major, it's just as big as a college homecoming," he said. "It's like people shut down the city. People have bought shirts three months in advance. They are waiting on homecoming here. There's a big fireworks show after the game where they close down the whole practice field. It's amazing here. It's probably their biggest tradition."

Why did you want to be a football coach?

"I just always wanted to give back what my coaches gave to me," Cummings said. "There's nothing like the relationship between teammates in a locker room, nothing like it, and nothing like that player-coach relationship. It goes so much deeper than just playing football, teaching them how to be men. Football is the closest thing to life, and I just always want to make guys and young people that are better people. Sports is the avenue to do it."

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What's the most impressive football play you've ever seen, who made it and when?

If there's anything that embodies the program's deep and long-running tradition of success, it's the Golden Hawks' stadium, whose name, "The House of Pain," kind of says all you need to know about its reputation as an intimidating place to play.

"When you say Washington County, people think back to the mid-to-late 90s, and how they brought the pain," he said.

The subject also brought up the question, what ever happened to the mini-cemetery the school used to have set up in the end zone, with crosses named for opponents marking each win of the season.

Come to find out, the unique tradition is going to be reinstated soon. "It hasn't been done in a while, but we're bringing it back," Edwards said. "We've created a spot for it."

What's the most impressive football play you've ever seen, who made it and when?

Between his experience playing at the high school, college and pro levels of the game, then nearly as long coaching, there are a lot to choose from.

"I've got a bunch of Takeo (Spikes) plays where he's just running across the middle on drag routes and outruns everybody," Edwards said. "And shoot, I've got a lot of them in college and in the pros. That's a tough one."

At the expense of being accused of bias, he circles one involving younger brother Terrence that Golden Hawks fans from the era will easily remember.

It was the 1996 state title game at Americus, when WACO staged a remarkable comeback from a 21-0 deficit at the half to win it... by one.

The difference? Edwards, the holder on what would have been a game-tying

PAT, turned a broken play into a sprint off the left side for a go-ahead two-point conversion. The Hawks held on defense to preserve the lead, and hung on to win their first of back-to-back state crowns.

"It was a semi-botched snap, and he picks it up and runs it in for the win," Edwards said.

Who do you consider your greatest coaching influence?

Since he broke into the profession as a high school head coach, and never served as an assistant, every football mentor he's looked up to since starting out at Arlington Christian School in 2010 are the same coaches who developed him as a player, Ray Goff, Jim Donnan and Rick Tomberlin topping a list that also includes those he played for as early as youth ball.

And he also enjoys picking the brains of former teammates Kirby Smart and Mike Bobo when he gets a chance.

"I draw from all the coaches who've coached me from middle school, all the way to Pete Carroll in the league," Edwards said. "I have pulled something from each of those guys that kind of make me the type of coach I am. It would be remiss of me to just select one."

Why did you want to be a football coach?

He's first to admit that he originally never planned to. Though Edwards' dreams were to play pro football for much longer than he was able — his career cut short by a freak injury — he remained unsure of what was next.

By almost pure happenstance, he signed on to help out the football program as a community mentor in the early years of a short-lived football program at Atlanta-based Arlington Christian. And when the team's coaching situation fell through in 2010, he was approached about the prospect of grabbing a whistle.

"And I just fell in love with it," he said.

What's the biggest upset you've been a part of as a coach?

For Lassiter, it's a three-way tie between a handful of games that carry some special significance.

The most recent came in the playoffs of 2022, when Bleckley, as a third seed, went into Quitman and shocked a fifth-ranked Brooks County in the first round. The Royals caught a key break to go on top late in the close game, as T.J. Mays returned a botched Trojan snap for what would serve as the winning touchdown.

"We had no business beating them whatsoever," he said. "They were loaded with talent, and a real physical team."

Another is perhaps Lassiter's first signature win as head coach of his alma mater shortly after being hired in 2017 — a statement two-touchdown victory over defending region champ Washington County at Shelly Hayes Field.

"That was our first year, when we really were getting going," he said.

The last goes back to 2013, when Lassiter was in his first season at Houston County and the Bears — led by quarterback Jake Fromm — pulled off a historic 27-23 upset of seventh-ranked Warner Robins.

"That was kind of Jake's coming-out party," Lassiter said. "He threw for 300 yards that night, and we beat them for the first time (in school history). That was a lot of fun."

What do you consider Bleckley County's most unique football or sports tradition?

As ordinary an aspect of game nights as it sounds, the team bus rides between their everyday football facilities on campus several blocks away and Shelly Hayes Field (located adjacent to the old high school inside town) are a more modern feature of the experience on Friday nights that he enjoys.

Soaking in the atmosphere while pulling into the stadium, past fans on their way through the gates, and offloading the bus before warmups is a process that's carved out a special place in the routine for both players and coaches as they build up to game time.

"It's kind of unique to be able to bus over to the stadium when most teams

COACH

Continued on page 11

Eagles will emphasize experience, physicality in expected return to region, state contention

By CLAY REYNOLDS
Sports Editor

Looking back, the Brentwood Eagles of 2023 turned out to be a lot younger than they realized early in the season.

Their rebuilt roster had new players all over the depth chart, though few signs of it showed early on, as they jumped out to a 3-1 start (the lone loss a requisite shellacking by John Milledge) that gave all indications they'd simply resume the dominant streak inherited from teams before which, since 2019, had compiled a record of 39-11 and reached the state finals three years in a row.

But the initial results proved to be a touch misleading, and Brentwood was beginning to feel its inexperience by the end of September, when a nasty losing streak hit along with some recurring defensive issues and catastrophic turnovers that sunk its chances in a stretch of key games (two on the road) against rivals George Walton, Briarwood and eventual AA state champ Edmund Burke.

The Eagles would find some answers and win their next two, but saw both the 2-AA region title game at Gatewood and a playoff rematch with Briarwood get away in familiar fashion on the way to a 5-6 finish that – from a look around the youthful lineup – wasn't hard to make sense of.

"We were a really young football team last year, to be honest," Brentwood head coach Adam Lord said. "That's the first time I've experienced playing that many freshmen. Our last game of year, we had four freshmen starting defensively."

Plenty of lessons were learned, for newcomers both at key positions and on the sideline, where Lord was also in his first year running the show after years as an Eagles assistant.

And that growing phase, often a necessary step programs can fast-track but rarely skip outright, is set to pay dividends as soon as this fall, when Brentwood will return a large chunk of last year's team – to the tune of seven or more incumbent starters on each side – that will all have an opportunity to build on the valuable experience.

"We're a year older, and hopefully we're a lot stronger and faster, so our expectations will be a little bit higher," Lord said.

Of the many truths revealed in last season's cycle of ups and downs, one that stood out the most for the Brentwood staff concerned a question of offensive identity that they wrestled with a good bit over their season-long experiment in a shotgun-based hybrid version of the Wing-T offense after years of running it from under center.

Findings concluded that the Eagles, in their nature, are a smashmouth run team that would be unwise to stray too far from the physical roots they found themselves moving back to by the end of the year.

The newer-age system yielded adequate results, but seemed to lack a level of rushing consistency they were counting on.

Passing yardage, from the season before, jumped by about 800 yards, though with an analogous uptick in interceptions, from five to 14, that was a tough trade-off. Rushing, meanwhile, decreased by nearly half from a 2022 total of 3,300 yards to around 1,800.

Brentwood's average of points scored against points given up also fell and increased, respectively, by about five. The numbers, and general feeling, made clear that the Eagles would be best suited putting more of their eggs back in the traditional basket.

"I felt like the Wing-T gave us a little more of a

physical presence up front, and I felt like we had to get back to being a little more physical," Lord said. "Late in the season, we started incorporating and pulling back out of our hat some of the Wing-T stuff, and it felt like our kids are a little bit more comfortable after being in that setup for 23 years."

The multidimensional playmaking ability of then-freshman quarterback Baylor Cobb was the impetus for the schematic transition, which adapted the traditional offense's run concepts into shotgun formations that offer a quarterback more options to throw, and greater ease of getting in position to do so without the complex footwork of dropbacks and rolls from under center – play action-minded characteristics that become a bit tedious in a high-volume passing game.

Brentwood won't get completely away from spreading things out, of course, with plans to continue breaking into the gun on a regular basis to feature the arm of Cobb, who in his rookie season threw for over 1,400 yards and eight touchdowns that they'd love to see him reproduce, minus the large number of picks.

But the Eagles will be going back to where they've lived on offense for much of recent history, and make quick-hitting runs behind a line featuring plenty of size and returning players at four of the five positions into their bread-and-butter.

Cobb, as a matter of fact, is likely to have an important



BRENTWOOD EAGLES

HEAD COACH: Adam Lord
(2nd season, 5-6 career)

OFFENSE: Wing-T
DEFENSE: 3-4

2023: 5-6 (1-1 region 2-AA)
FINISH: GIAA Quarterfinals (lost to Briarwood)

DISTRICT: 4-AA

RETURNING STARTERS:
7 offense / 8 defense

KEY LOSSES: ATH/DB Drew Carter; QB/DB Bryce Williford; OL/DL Cooper Andrews; OL/DL Carson Everett

SCHEDULE...

8/16 at Trinity
8/23 Pinewood
8/30 at GMC
9/6 at Lake Oconee Academy
9/13 at Thomas Jefferson*
9/20 John Milledge
9/27 Briarwood*
10/4 Edmund Burke*
10/18 at Augusta Prep*
10/25 Gatewood*

hand in that rushing action, as well, with some equally intriguing ability as a ball-car-

rier that coaches tried not to use too heavily last year, though he still finished as their second-leading rusher with 304 yards and seven scores.

"Him being young, and being our guy in the system, we didn't run him a whole lot, but I think he's one of our best running backs," Lord said. "He's a year older, and this year, he's going to have to run the ball some."

Brentwood's array of playmaking weapons around Cobb is diverse, with battering fourth-year running back Zach Denton – off a 1,300-yard, 12-touchdown rushing season – as the feature.

The rest of the Eagles' skill set, from the athletic receiver/wings Zion Andrews and Tristan Robinson to physical runners Abe Williams, Thomas Moye and Jones Sheppard, will offer a lot of ways they can attack opposing defenses from their varying formations.

A focus of summer and preseason practices for the Brentwood offensive line has been perfecting the logistics of blocking schemes, which vary slightly between the shotgun and under-center modes of the retooled offense.

The approach will mix some familiar facets of the older system with those of the newer one for multi-year starters Z.J. Scott, a junior, and Gray Waller, a senior, who return to lead the offensive line as tackles having played in both. The younger guys in between, a pair of guards who broke in last season and a brand-new

center, face more of a learning curve.

"Our goal over the summer was to get our kids back kind of acclimated to the fundamentals of the Wing-T, while also refreshing our minds with the things we did really well in the spread," Lord said. "The biggest thing this year is making sure our timing from the shotgun is similar to being under center."

The Eagles' defensive depth chart will be dotted with players whose mileage from last year will make them seem like seasoned vets.

Returners, which occupy

all but three starting posi-

tions, come in the highest

concentration at linebacker,

where Moye (a 2023 all-state

selection), Will Hodges and

Sheppard inside, and Den-

ton, Riley Helton and Jack-

son Bragg outside make up a

quality unit.

It's a similar story along

the three-man front, which

retains from last year four

out of six projected rotation

players.

"Our front seven guys are

going to have a lot of experience," Lord said.

The only position with

major questions is the sec-

ondary, where two of four

posts were open battles go-

ing into the start of fall prac-

ties. The more experienced

Williams, Chase Daniel and

Zyion Andrews will join forces

with three newer players in

Cobb, Robinson and Quez

Collins to hold down the back

end.

Another incoming fresh-

man with high upside is

Brayden Tyson, who stood

out as an eighth grade kick-

er for Brentwood's middle

schoolers last fall and is ex-

pected to shine early as he

assumes the kicking and punting duties.

The Eagles, whose roster still skews to the young side with a 12th grade class of only seven against double digits in every other, are counting on last year's developmental snaps putting their sophomores and juniors in a position to be able to play like they're juniors and seniors this fall.

That experience factor will play into a lot of what they're hoping to get better at, most importantly limiting the turnovers that happened "way too much" a season ago.

That, along with injuries, is likely to be the separating factor among multiple evenly-matched teams in the district title race.

"We've gotta stay healthy," Lord said. "In our league, with limited numbers, I think everybody fights that battle every year."

But potentially the biggest key in Brentwood's regular and postseason success will be how well they can re-establish their ground game, against a slew of opponents on the schedule who each hang their hat on running the ball, and being able to stop it.

Between 2019 and 2022, there was little disputing Brentwood's ownership of the line of scrimmage, and arguably the top rushing attack in AA football. Whether for reasons of experience, scheme or a little of both, the Eagles lost some of that ground in a rebuilding 2023 season. And they're intent on taking back starting this fall.

"We've gotta be more physical," Lord said. "Last year we were a hair bit passive. We still have youth, but we can't use that as a crutch this year."

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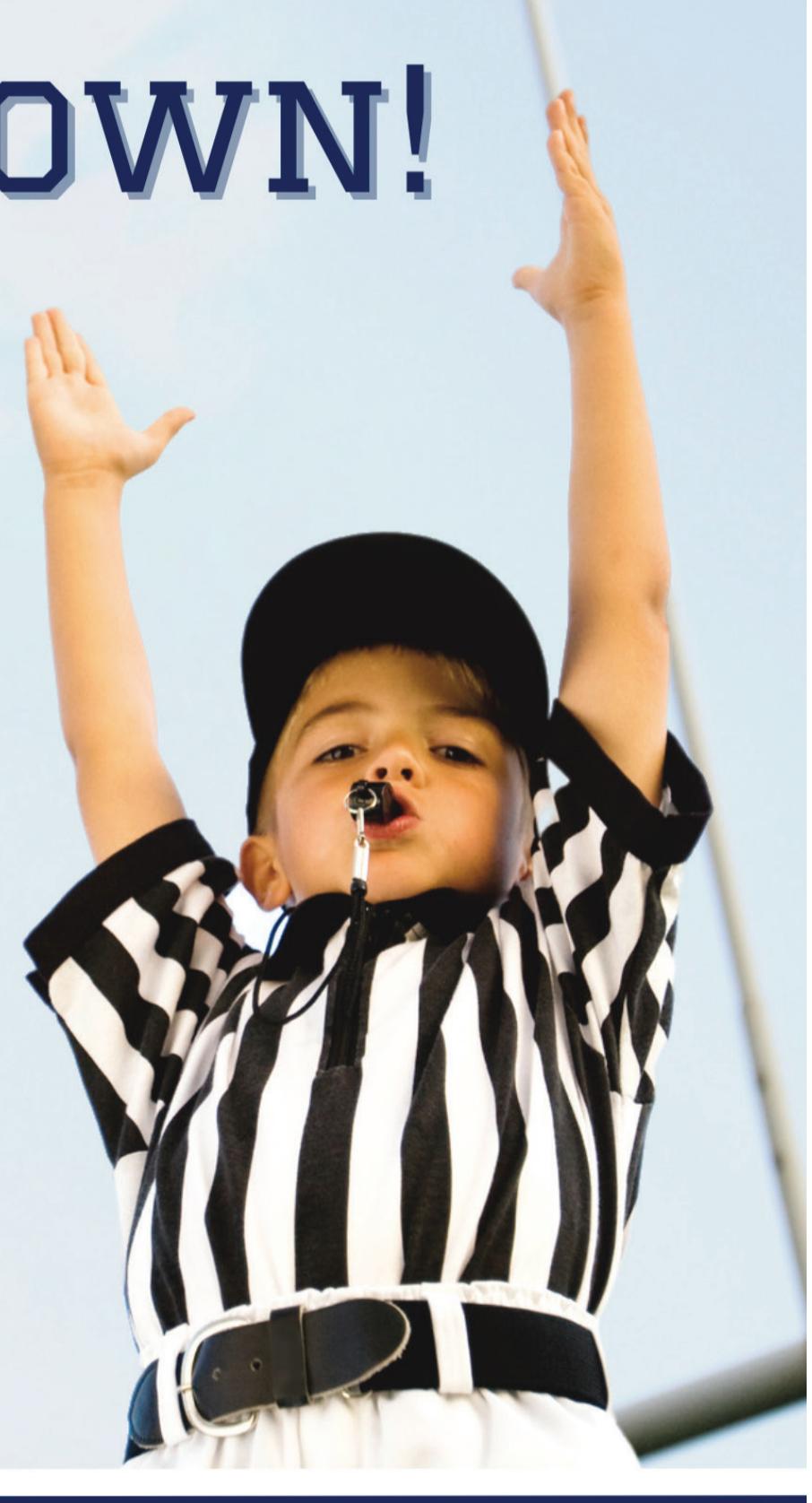
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Shurling serious about keeping Treutlen on track, making more noise in region

By CLAY REYNOLDS
Sports Editor

Despite a second-straight coaching transition this offseason, Treutlen football has good reason to feel it's riding a wave of change for the better into the 2024 season.

In a year under the journeyman Pat Collins, who resigned to take a new job as head coach at Tattnall County, the Vikings made some incremental strides between weeks 1 and 10.

Treutlen took some lumps against a set of bigger, stronger opponents in the first four, but would beat three out of six peers in its remaining games, and win both the final two, edging rival Wheeler County by one before pulling out an eight-point upset of 10th-ranked Telfair County in the finale.

The regular-season finish, putting them at 3-7 overall, was almost enough to help the Vikings crash the playoffs, had they completed another upset bid against Wilcox County earlier in the season that fell just short of the finish line (the Patriots came back from a multi-score deficit to win by three).

The ending, though a bummer, had an encouraging silver lining in that Treutlen played a tight game with every region opponent, and dropped none by a margin greater than 14 points.

That kind of momentum counts for a lot, and incoming head coach Alan Shurling is hoping to channel as much of the inherited steam as he can into this fall, which will bring plenty of opportunities for the Vikings to build on the progress.

"Last year, Treutlen ended the season very well," he said. "People underestimated them, and they surprised them. We've kind of carried that on throughout the offseason. I'm just ready to get out there and surprise people."

Making the playoffs in a larger region, with across-the-board quality equal to 2023, should be sufficient to defy expectations. Though opposing teams – 4-Low A featuring all the same members, and adding back Tri-County rival Montgomery County, which was the Vikings' first win early in the 2023 season – will have a much better idea of what they're getting this time around.

Still, the Vikings' roster returns a decent number of the key oarsmen who last year helped pull the program back afloat after several

seasons of taking on water. And though it may not pace the region in numbers or athletes, the mid-pack collection of talent would appear to have what it needs to put the same kind of pressure on the favorites in this year's region race.

At the helm of the craft will be Shurling, a first-year skipper who fits in with an area-wide trend of young head coaches who are former collegiate players.

A letterman at Central Missouri during the early 2010s, he's worked up and down the state in jobs as an assistant at places like Cedartown, Upson-Lee, Jasper County and South Effingham – all who've had some fairly competitive programs of late.

But the number of different far-flung stops around Georgia probably makes you ask, why Treutlen?

Shurling's not from Soperton, nor has he lived anywhere close by, but it's where both his parents were born and raised, and many of his extended relatives also currently live.

"It was a good way to get back close to family for me," he said of the move, which carried a first career head coaching opportunity as an added bonus.

Shurling's methods lean toward the unorthodox, especially when compared to the decidedly old-school ways of Collins, with whom Shurling shared a friendship long before either became a head coach of the Vikings. And a lot of his new ideas have taken a little bit of time to catch on.

One of those, in particular, is a strength and conditioning philosophy centered around circuit-based weight training, with workouts designed in continuous cycles of exercises, both your garden variety lifts and workouts targeting mobility, explosiveness, agility and power, with no breaks in between.

The techniques may come off as a bit strange, but there's no questioning that Shurling's background in football and training, as a former all-region high schooler and D2 player who maintains a fair amount of the size and muscle he carried as a 6-foot-3, 300-pound lineman for the Mules, lends them a great deal of credibility.

"All kinds of different stuff has been thrown at them," he said. "When I got here, it was completely different from anything these kids were used to. Slowly, we've got-



TREUTLEN VIKINGS

HEAD COACH: Alan Shurling (first season)

OFFENSE: Multiple Wing-T

DEFENSE: 3-5

2023: 3-7 (2-3 region 4-Low A)

FINISH: Missed playoffs

REGION: 4-Low A

RETURNING STARTERS:

6 offense / 6 defense

KEY LOSSES: QB/DB Cooper Brantley; RB/DL Angelo Peebles; LB DeMicah Williams; TE/DE Demeeko Terry; RB/LB Kolby McClendon; OL/DL Zach Glisson; OL/DL Branton Hackle

SCHEDULE...

8/16 Twigg Co.

8/23 at Wilkinson Co.

8/30 Bacon Co.

9/13 at Johnson Co.

9/20 at Wilcox Co.*

10/04 Telfair Co.*

10/11 Montgomery Co.*

10/18 at Dooly Co.*

10/25 at Hawkinsville*

11/01 Wheeler Co.*

ten buy-in to my process and the way I want things done. They'll tell you this is the hardest they've ever worked, and they've actually really enjoyed it and embraced it. They're embracing the grind right now."

His schematic preferences also mix a touch of both the traditional and the exotic.

Offensively, the Vikings will look similar to a year ago, running many under-center Wing-T concepts sim-

ilar to those in Collins' playbook, though Shurling's system, which differs a lot in principle, will also add in some packages that spread the system out into its more hybrid form.

"There's been some carry-over," Shurling said. "But we coach it different. The verbiage is different and the techniques are similar, but learning the verbiage of the offense is way different for them."

"Once they started finally getting a handle, it started clicking on getting the words down and what everything means to them."

The Treutlen defense will work under coordinator Roderick Williams, who was the main new hire Shurling added to the school's existing staff, and base in a 3-5 "stack" that's also on the unusual side, but is gaining popularity for its flexible front and utility against spread offenses.

"We're trying to create havoc with moving defensive linemen and moving linebackers around a lot," Shurling said.

Units on both sides of the ball are set to rely heavily on a handful of key seniors who've played and accomplished a lot in their four years.

The first of those is Rod Fuller, an hoops and track standout with some area-class speed Treutlen's utilized out of its backfield for a couple of years, and on the defensive side for three. He'll play just about "everywhere but QB" on offense, taking plenty of handoffs at running back and also moving out wide in passing situations, where getting him frequent touches will remain a priority.

"Rod's going to be kind of our bell cow. He's going to carry the ball more than anybody, and he's going to have to carry the workload for us," Shurling said. "We've trained him to where he's not coming off the field, he's learned every position."

Overall, the team's best set of wheels and athletic accolades belongs to Jordan Coney, who'll be in his fourth year playing for Treutlen somewhere on the field as he prepares to close out a decorated three-sport career.

More basketball MVP honors and a second-straight state hurdles title were highlights of his junior year that also featured a productive debut for the football Vikings at receiver, after spending his first two

seasons at a variety of positions.

This year, the "big playmaker" is expected to be back at quarterback with an arm and highlight speed opponents will have to account for.

"He gives us a great running ability, and run threat," Shurling said. "He's transitioning to the new spot. He's taken to it really well, and done a real good job of being a game manager for us, where he's making sure people are lined up correctly and leading the offense the way it's supposed to be led."

Kylan Page is a third senior skill guy acquainting to a slightly different home on offense, mainly as a multi-position back. A crisp cutter and consistent hitter, like the above, will also start in the secondary where he intercepted three passes last year.

Treutlen's offensive and defensive lines played a big part its turn of the corner late last fall, but has to replace a considerable amount of its muscle after offseason losses.

The position groups on either side, blessed with some nice size and strength, will resemble each other a lot, with almost every starter being asked to play two-way snaps.

Junior Charvis Givens, at 6-3, 260 lbs., is the one of those who has made some of the most important strides this past offseason.

"He's really talented, and has come a long way," Shurling said. "He's done a really good job for us."

Also back at guard is Jake Brooks, a 2023 all-region selection known best for play in the middle of the Treutlen defense, where the stocky MIKE linebacker has earned himself a fitting nickname, "The Hammer."

Two underclassmen that have also stepped up as defensive leaders are sophomore safety Zan Stokes and junior Johnny Johnson, converted from D-lineman to linebacker in the new scheme.

"He's got a good fit and an eye for the football," Shurling said of Johnson. "He's really good at shedding blocks. He's been a real good surprise."

Besides places here and there up front, the Vikings won't blow a lot of teams away with their size, nor their overall team strength, which is steadily improving but not yet at a level that makes Shurling eager to take on some Dooly Counties,

TREUTLEN

Continued on page 12

WACO needs 'catalysts' to catch fire, changed culture to catch on for young team to take off



WASHINGTON COUNTY GOLDEN HAWKS

HEAD COACH: Robert Edwards (third season; 9-13 at WACO, 85-68 career)

OFFENSE: Spread

DEFENSE: 3-4

2023: 5-6 (4-3 region 4-AA)

FINISH: GHSA Playoffs, Round 1 (lost to Cook)

REGION: 2-High A

RETURNING STARTERS:

6 offense / 5 defense

KEY LOSSES: QB Cam Beasley; WR/DB Ka'Monta Durden (Fort Valley State); OL/DL Marlo East Jr. (Kennesaw State); WR/DB Kam Hall

SCHEDULE...

8/16 Jeff Davis

8/23 at Jefferson Co.*

8/30 Northeast*

9/06 at Dublin*

9/20 Bleckley Co.*

9/27 at Central, Macon*

10/04 Dodge Co.*

10/18 at East Laurens*

10/25 Southwest*

11/01 at ACE Charter*

they've built for the last 3-4 years. Now that we've got these guys who are their third year with us... they're seniors now, so they kind of only know our way."

WACO was in a sort of holding pattern for much of his first two seasons, riding ups and downs to average records, 4-7 in 2022 and 5-6 in 2023, and a fourth seed in the state playoffs both years.

The two teams would also finish without a sort of signature win – the type that cements a feeling of progress and achievement exceeding expectation. Looking back, the Hawks beat everyone they were supposed to, and despite a close call or two, also lost each of the games in which they weren't favored.

While there were signs of improvement along the way, an equal number also pointed to the reality that this was still a team in transition.

And that went for the makeup of WACO's roster just as much as shifting mentalities, with last year also marking a fairly significant changing of the guard between what was left of an established generation of players and a fairly large number of underclassmen breaking in all across the depth chart.

This year's squad will have its own mix of veterans and youth breaking down at about a 50-50 split, but with the difference being that a majority of both now know the lingo of the team's offensive and defensive systems, with a true feel for the grand scheme, and their places in it.

Having those players all arranged in a tighter formation and on the same, clear flight plan should enable the Golden Hawks to climb higher and go farther in the near future.

ture.

"We played a lot of young guys looking forward to a day like this year, and going into next year, so these young guys have a lot of experience," he said. "We need them to step up and play big for us."

That theme will come into play the most for WACO's defense, which was the side of the ball where they were likely the youngest, and seemed to struggle against the best they played in '22 and '23.

A loaded linebacker position group heavy on those young vets will be the focal point on that side of the football, with junior Kam Shaw, senior Jusden Culpepper, junior Cam Battle, senior Antavion Poole and junior Dominic Moss returning as five of the defense's six leading tacklers last year. Edwards describes the group as leaders, and "catalysts."

The Golden Hawks get a lot younger as you move to the secondary, where junior, third-year starter and two-time all-region selection Izavion Durden leads a similar band of young guns – notably freshman Aiden Watts at one of their wide-open safety spots – who've stepped up and shown some impressive signs so far in the offseason.

Most members of WACO's first string on the defensive line are new starters who worked into the rotation as backups last season, but they bring the goods.

Senior Kam Foster, a 6-foot-5, 235-pounder slotted at end, carries some of the most intriguing upside.

"I'm looking for him to step up this year and really become that leader we're looking for on the D-line," Edwards said.

The 260-pound Jaterryon Flonory, a senior promoted from backup, is projected to start on the other

end, with former JV'er Albert Stone in the middle as the nose. Relief for each will also come from the cache of players supporting the Golden Hawks' offensive line across the ball.

"We've got a bunch of new guys in the secondary, so we're hanging our hat on our linebacker play," Edwards said. "We're pretty much going to be the same there as last year, building on that foundation we've set."

In both 2022 and '23, WACO's points allowed were on the high side... 315 the first year, and a slight improvement to 290 total last fall, though a theme of shootout games that stayed out of reach in key region matchups continued.

Turnovers and issues on the offensive end of things were equally to blame, though small mistakes that led to big breakdowns were a source of the team's issues staying in games. Those, they're hoping to cut down on.

"Big plays are the one thing that kind of hurt us really really bad last year," Edwards said. "The defense would play well, but they'd give up three big plays, and that'd be the difference in a game. If we can stop the big play aspect, I think we'll do well."

WACO's chances to compete in those same games, though, was a credit to the big-ticket passing game pairing prolific senior QBs Morgan Jones ('22) and Cam Beasley ('23), both challenging 2,000 yards in passing, with high-flying receiver Ka'Monta Durden the last two seasons.

A third new starter takes over behind center this year, though this time as a junior with two seasons'

WACO

Continued on page 12

COACH

Continued from page 8

have their stadium on campus, and we don't," he said. "I didn't realize how cool that was."

What's the most impressive football play you've ever seen, who made it and when?

For Lassiter, it's the miracle touchdown catch keying a come-from-behind win over Northeast Macon that decided the 2021 region title, in one of several squeakers the Royals pulled out over their magical unbeaten run that would continue through the first round of that year's playoffs.

Trailing 6-2 with under two minutes left in the game, Bleckley drove the field and converted three different fourth downs to keep the chains moving. The last of those was a fourth-and-10 in the red zone with less than 30 seconds left on the clock, when quarterback Eli Mullis chucked a back-footed pass under pressure that somehow found the arms of a double-covered Matthew Bland and got the Royals inside the Northeast 1 for Jahvon Butler's go-ahead touchdown carry on the next play.

It was both an improbable play and an improbable hero in Bland, who to that point in the season was much better known as a punter and baseball player than as a receiver.

"I don't know how many balls he caught all year, but he caught that one," Lassiter said.

Why did you want to be a football coach?

"I don't remember ever not wanting to be," he said.

Lassiter lost his father at a young age, and looked to his youth, middle and high school coaches as father-figures coming up, ultimately choosing a similar path as them.

"I just remember wanting to be like them and wanting to lead people, and then when, I guess in 2005 when I got saved, I wanted that to be a ministry," Lassiter said. "I wanted to let ministry be first, let kids know about Jesus and help them not just be good football players, but be really good people. Some people want to be firemen, some people want to be police, some people military. I wanted to be a football coach since I could ever remember, and I've enjoyed every second of it."


Adam Lord
SCHOOL Brentwood
HOMETOWN Sandersville, Ga.
ALMA MATER Georgia College
THIS IS MY 2nd SEASON

Who's the best player you've ever coached against?

Of the dominant athletes Lord recalls his teams going up against, none were as transcendent as Central Fellowship's Jay-lun Goodrum, whom the Eagles faced in the 2022 state championship game. The receiver/DB, named AA co-player of the year along with his quarterback Jeb Walls in the postseason voting, made some plays that night, and all season, that just left you shaking your head.

"In person, he was more impressive than I had seen on film," Lord said. "As physical as he was, I don't know how he isn't playing D1 football. He's undersized, but he's one of the best athletes I've ever seen."

Goodrum would finish the night with a hand in four touchdowns, and a long punt return that stuck out as the most eye-popping play of all.

"We had three guys standing right there, and I don't think we even touched him," he said. "Three of our better athletes, he split them, and he was gone."

What do you consider Brentwood's most unique football or sports tradition?

Lord points to the strong support the Eagles enjoy annually from their fans, as well as the community as a whole, going back to Sandersville's history as a town that loves its high school athletics.

And that goes as much for basketball, baseball and other sports as it does for football.

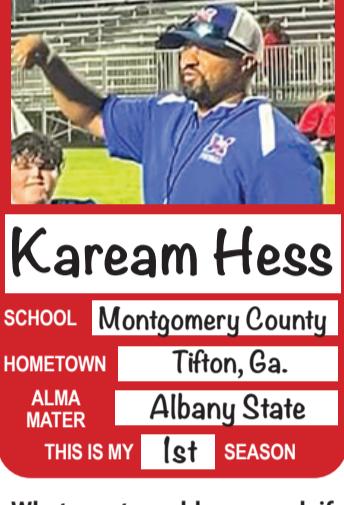
"When we travel, it doesn't matter what sport it is, we have a huge following, and that's something we take pride in," he said.

Why did you want to be a football coach?

At lot like many of the above, Lord was raised around high school sports by his dad, who was the longtime Washington County administrator and a Brentwood coach on the side for almost two and a half decades.

During and just out of college, he dabbled in some coaching — jobs both part- and full-time at the school — while mulling some other career options. And none of them felt quite like where he belonged.

"It's something I felt like I was led to do," Lord said. "I got out to sell cars, and knew it was not what I was supposed to be doing... I just love dealing with kids, and getting to be around my kids at school every day. My dad had a lot to do with it, and I think God put this in my life for a reason."


Kareem Hess
SCHOOL Montgomery County
HOMETOWN Tifton, Ga.
ALMA MATER Albany State
THIS IS MY 1st SEASON

What sport would you coach if you couldn't coach football?

Hess is another to answer track and field, which he coached a good bit in his time at previous schools, and enjoys just for how purely it showcases natural ability, and the work ethic it takes to maximize it.

"Track is what shows you great athletes," he said. "There's nobody out there to save you, it's only you competing against other people. And the work you put in, that's the results you're going to get."

What do you consider MoCo's most unique football tradition?

One through the years that many outside the community don't know about or realize is the Eagles' long-running practice of being led onto the field with the team flag by a player dressed in the jersey number, 55. The exact significance of the number is unclear, though the custom was begun in the 1990s, and has made the uniform and pregame responsibility a unique honor among players.

"That's why a lot of kids want that number," Hess said.

Who's the best player you've ever coached against?

Unequivocally, the answer is Lowndes quarterback Jacurri Brown, whom his Tift County teams crossed paths with twice in region play during 2020 and 2021.

The three-time all-state first teamer, who signed with Miami before transferring to current school UCF, would lead the Vikings to two region titles, the state finals as a sophomore and the state semis his junior year.

"My goodness, he was something special," Hess said.

But there were some doozies out of Lowndes to mention from when he was a player at Tift, too, particularly world-class return man Greg Reid, who'd go on to play at Valdosta State and Florida State.

"He could do it all," he said.

Why did you want to be a football coach?

He's one of many featured here who's highly unsure of where his life would have ended up if not for the opportunity to be part of the game, both living out some big playing dreams growing up and, now, giving back some of what it gave to him to a new generation.

"If you love it, you're going to give it all you've got," Hess said. "Still being around it is great, and my passion for it and my love for it made me want to coach."


Don Norton
SCHOOL Johnson County
HOMETOWN Coral Springs, Fla.
ALMA MATER Georgia Southern
THIS IS MY 21st SEASON

What's your biggest game-night superstition?

Norton, hysterically, doesn't admit he actually has any, though those familiar with JoCo football can likely think up plenty of examples through the years — most memorably two separate home games in which his teams went into the break trailing, and changed uniform pants before returning to much different fortunes in the second half.

"You'll have to ask my coaches," he said. "They'll say it's a superstition, but it's just what I do."

There are some pregame customs Norton and the Trojans have kept as a constant in their routine going back, one of them reciting the three-point mantra that's spelled out on a sign in their locker room right before they head out to take the field.

"We've been saying the exact same thing for 20 years," Norton said. "The three things are communication... I tell them it's a key to success no matter what you do, you've got to communicate. No. 2 is emotion. Whatever it is you do, play with emotion, passion and love. And the third is GATA, from the time the ball's

snapped till the whistle blows. And when we win this game, you'll be glad you did."

What's the craziest trick play you've ever called or had run against you?

As a college special teamer at Georgia Southern, Norton holds a special place for a good fake punt. Multiple times in his career, he's had some success with one called "Snake in the Grass," which he originally ran — and once threw a touchdown pass on — back in college.

The concept, which has been made illegal under recent NFHS rules changes, keeps a sneaky 11th player close to the sidelines — with the appearance of getting some last-second instructions from coaches — that the coverage team may ignore, and fail to cover as they line up.

"The ball is snapped, he takes off and the punter throws it to him," he said.

Norton recalls running it twice as head coach at Treutlen, and at least once more since coming to JoCo. Every time, it "changed the outcome of the game."

What do you consider JoCo's most unique football or sports tradition?

Put simply, it's the sum of the school's rich football history and culture that's embodied in its home stadium.

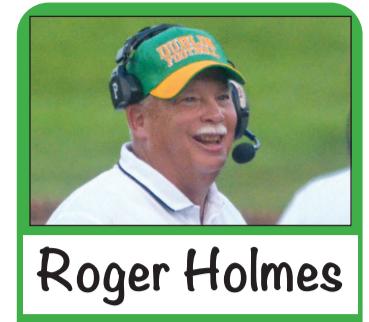
"We play in the Blue Monster, on Herschel Walker Field inside of Herschel Lovett Stadium, and that's a damn good thing," Norton said. "We're on the same grass that a Heisman trophy-winner played on."

Why did you want to be a football coach?

Norton is among the segment of the coaching population who envisioned going into any business but coaching high school football. Matter of fact, his original dream was becoming a law-enforcement agent, "GBI, FBI, Secret Service, military, or something like that."

A couple of key influences during his college years changed that. Playing for Coach Erk Russell and staff at Southern, then meeting Butch Brooks, a Georgia high school coach and college administrator who'd become his father-in-law, were both important factors in why Norton ultimately chose the path.

"They were very influential with why I got into coaching," he said.


Roger Holmes
SCHOOL Dublin
HOMETOWN Westmoreland, Tenn.
ALMA MATER Middle Tennessee
THIS IS MY 34th SEASON

What's the craziest trick play you've ever called?

When it comes to gadget plays that were both exotic and game-changing, few in Holmes' memory compare to the fumblerooski-style fake punt Dublin ran in its 2004 state quarterfinal at Calhoun, sending the lightning-fast Lavarus Dollar "Cadillac-ing down the sideline" on an 81-yard touchdown carry, one of his three on the night.

It turned a fourth down from inside the Dublin 20 into a second of five unanswered touchdowns that led the Irish from 16 points down just out of halftime to the 48-37 upset win to capture a berth in "The Dome" and the state semifinals.

The play was one Holmes and staff had installed in practice the same week, with only modest results. But at the encouragement of special teams coordinator William Barham, Holmes decided to call it on a gamble, which paid off in a big way.

What do you consider Dublin's most unique football tradition?

Though uniform designs have changed every so often for the Irish in his 22 seasons, a consistent feature and signature of their look has been gold helmets.

The look, reminiscent of the Green Bay Packers, was a change from green hats in the color scheme just prior to when Holmes came to Dublin in 2002. And the program's success in the years since then have helped it catch on as an even more iconic look.

Why did you want to be a football coach?

After Holmes' father passed away at age 10, he was taken under the wing by many of his coaches whose mentorship was a big part in his upbringing. And their influence inspired him to want to do the same type of work molding players into young men.

That, along with a childhood love for sports, made it easy to pick a career. And safe to say, it's worked out pretty well.

"I don't know if there's anything else I could have done," he said.


Jesse Hicks
SCHOOL East Laurens
HOMETOWN Augusta, Ga.
ALMA MATER Albany State
THIS IS MY 23rd SEASON

Who's your greatest coaching influence?

Easily, that would be James Mike White, an Albany State assistant-turned-head coach who recruited Hicks as a player, then hired him as a coach. All along the way, he credits White with instilling not just knowledge, but values that have made him who he is today.

"He was no doubt my biggest coaching influence, not just because he recruited me and gave me an opportunity in college ball, but the time he spent teaching me the game of football," he said. "He's not just a coaching influence, but one of my bigger male influences."

What's your favorite offseason hobby?

Hicks, who largely eats, sleeps and breathes football from waking up bright and early at 4:30 each morning, concentrates most of his time on things related to coaching, though when he gets the wild hair, he enjoys diving into a good book or podcast on the subject of

COACH

Continued on page 16

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Here's to a great season for all our area teams!

Cobras confront challenges, work to create continuity with Cummings as new coach

By CLAY REYNOLDS
Sports Editor

However you look at them, there's no avoiding the fact that the Twiggs County Cobras' last eight seasons of football have been, if you'll forgive the pun, some tough slithering.

Between constant coaching changes, administrative turnover and a pandemic that scrubbed its season in 2020, the program has run into snakebit luck at just about every opportunity, struggling mightily to establish any success or consistency since its last winning season and playoff berth in 2016.

The trend goes even further back than that, though the strong season under coach Ashley Harden, going along with a 4-win campaign his only other season in '15, was a much-needed break in the drought stretching all the way to 2010, when Twiggs' steep fall from the status of state power coincided with the end of Dexter Copeland's first term in charge.

Since that point, 10 different head coaches have come through town, and no team besides Harden's pair has posted more than three wins. Irade Perry, from '19 to '22, was the longest tenured coach of any, and one of just four to last longer than a year.

The past six seasons have turned even bleaker, with the Cobras winning a grand total of just four games, and in only two of them scoring more than 74 points.

Last year's squad, led by interim coach Patrick Wray, would stumble to an 0-9 finish as a third out of the last six to go winless.

The repeated cycles of rebuilding, none gaining much traction, have left fans in Jeffersonville largely starved of optimism or hope.

The search for a better direction began anew this past offseason with some new leadership at multiple levels of school administration, leading in March to the hire of a permanent head coach, former Baldwin defensive coordinator Roderick Cummings.

The Macon native, and former Albany State Golden Ram, joins those fellow new hires in a commitment to restoring some long-awaited stability in the Cobras' football building, where a revolving door to the coaching offices has created a virtual absence of consistent expectations, standards or accountability.

Cummings hopes to put all three in place with the help of several newly-hired assistant coaches who, like him, are all-in with Twiggs County, and share a belief that some time and patience with a steady plan will eventually return the program to a healthy, and competitive state.

"I kind of knew it could be good if the right people were in place, and administratively right now, we do have the right people," he said. "I think what's been missing around here is buy-in, guys that are committed to being here, and that's the staff I think we have put together. Everybody's happy to be here at Twiggs, and is going to do a good job."

Jeffersonville's "close-knit" community stood out to Cummings when he considered applying for the opening, not only this summer, but also the last several times, when he decided better of throwing his

name in the mix.

The door, this past year, opened a second time under much different circumstances, with Cummings in search of a next opportunity following the ouster of Jesse Hicks at Baldwin.

Twiggs' close proximity to Milledgeville, and a prior acquaintance with new Twiggs superintendent Mack Bullard, who was a Macon-Bibb County associate superintendent during the same time Cummings was part of Hicks' staff at Central High School, made it a great fit.

"The good thing about it for me was I didn't have to really uproot my family," he said. "It was an opportunity I saw a couple years ago come open, and I said to myself then, maybe it's something to look at because at some point, you have those goals of being a head coach... When it opened up again, I said, 'You know what, it may be something telling me this job is for me.' That's what kind of made me throw my hat in it. It's a wonderful community."

Four of Cummings' assistant coaching hires – including brother Robert – follow him from Baldwin, where the staff of Hicks was the type of well-oiled machine that he hopes to model his on.

"The good part about that is we've been around people that know what work should look like and how it should look," he said. "Our summer program's been that way. Now that we're in practice mode, it's been that way."

Much of Twiggs County's top football talent of late may have been somewhat under-developed, though it's far from a school where cut-above athletes are few and far between.

And if you disagree, Cummings will quickly call your attention to the program's long list of former all-state players, and handful of top recruits not limited to Georgia Tech's Tony Hollings and Michigan State's Darqueze Dennard, who both had lengthy careers in the NFL.

Lately, the main problem has been simply getting those players out for football.

And a nice surge of guys who've turned out after not playing a year ago have brought the Cobras a nice boost in overall numbers.

Among that handful are two or three who Cummings believes are among the "best athletes in the building" who would have easily started in 2023, and will definitely feature in his lineup this fall.

Some may need to catch up a little in experience, but in terms of ability, they'll bring a lot to the table that helps out.

As it is, the Cobras' exceedingly inexperienced lineup brings back a majority of its regular players from last year, who, for the volume of freshmen and sophomore starters that broke in, will still be pretty young across the board.

"The biggest strength for us is that a lot of our kids have played and do have experience playing on Friday nights," Cummings said. "What worries me is also the opposite of that, that we're going to have to play a lot of kids that didn't play as much on Friday nights."

Since even his upperclassmen are starting out fresh in two new playbooks, Cummings has done his



TWIGGS COUNTY COBRAS

HEAD COACH: Roderick Cummings (first season)

OFFENSE: Two-back

DEFENSE: 3-4

2023: 0-9 (0-5 region 5-Low A)

FINISH: Missed playoffs

REGION: 5-Low A

RETURNING STARTERS: 6 offense / 4 defense

KEY LOSSES: WR/DB JaDen Stephens; LB/DB Tykerrion Williams; ATH/LB Amaron Downing; K/LB Ben Walsh; ATH/LB Shamarrion Woodard; OL/DL TaRon Carr; OL/DL Jamal Anderson

SCHEDULE...

8/16	at Treutlen
8/23	Greene Co.
8/30	Portal
9/06	at Wheeler Co.
9/13	Josey
9/27	GMC*
10/04	at Johnson Co.*
10/11	Glascock Co.*
10/25	at Hancock Central*
11/1	at Wilkinson Co.*

best to cut out most of the excess terminology and detail attached to plays in an effort not to overcomplicate the process of learning, and being able to execute schemes right away.

"The biggest thing is us trying to simplify what we do, football-wise, to give them a chance to play a lot better and get a lot faster," he said.

The Cobras' offensive system will lean toward the heavy side, with two running backs – more than likely from a type of I formation or split back set – as a common denominator of most formations they'll line up in.

And don't be surprised if they also go with two tight ends more often than not, as well, with a bounty of size and bodies at positions on the lines of scrimmage that should overflow to the thickest of skill positions.

All those things considered, Cummings expects a smashmouth identity, getting the maximum number of hats going downhill in the run game and also isolating receivers against 1-on-1 coverage for selected passing situations, to be his team's best bet.

In short, Twiggs wants to run to set up the pass.

"The bulk of what we're going to look like is a heavy run team," Cummings said.

The Cobras' stockpile of line talent was abundant last year. And it still will be, despite the graduation

tals to work in their favor as they always have.

"We put a lot of emphasis on (special teams)," Norton said. "Every single day, we do extra point and punt block, and it's won us games."

With all that's changed for JoCo from a personnel standpoint, it may come as a relief that the five key games on their schedule remain exactly the same as they've been the two seasons before this one.

The Trojans ran the table both years, and with three of four opponents in a state of flux following coaching changes, stand a great chance of doing it for a third-straight year if things proceed anywhere close to expectation.

Their toughest matchups will undoubtedly come on the front end against a quality non-region slate headlined for an eighth consecutive season by East Laurens, which JoCo visits in its opener Aug. 16, and for a third-straight year by Warren County.

The Trojans will have until Sept. 27, when they play Hancock Central in their region debut, to get their new-look squad

of a couple really impressive two-way behemoths in TaRon Carr and Jamal Anderson.

"We have probably about 10 linemen who, body-wise, are anywhere from 260 to 280 lbs.," Cummings said.

Out of returners up front, all but one will be underclassmen, with senior Jimmanuel Tarpe as the elder statesman. Standouts among the rest are two new starters for this fall, Jacob Williams and Jaden Jones, sophomores who've indicated a high ceiling.

Both will have to be ready to fill some huge shoes, Jones on both sides, where his prodigious talent will be something the Cobras can't really afford to have out of the game for long.

"We're trying to play him both ways right now, but I'd like to spell him a little bit more," Cummings said. "We want to get a couple more guys up to speed to keep him from having to play so many snaps."

Outside of the lines of scrimmage, where realistic potential exists for a modified platoon at some positions in this particular season, depth issues are part of life at a school the size of Twiggs. And a reality the Cobras are having to come to terms with is a high volume of two-way players, likely about 14 to 15 total.

While there's some potential relief in the development of a few younger prospects, Cummings and staff are looking at the bright side of the challenge: that players who spend time daily working on both positions have a familiarity with the tendencies and mindset of their opponent on the other side.

"You understand what they're trying to do to you, and everybody's hearing the same info," he said.

Twiggs' best all-around football player, in the opinion of Cummings, is likely Daniel Pitts, a senior who'll do a "little bit of everything" from playing wide receiver and defensive back, to returning punts and kickoffs.

Whatever it is on a given play, he'll have an integral role in moving the ball, and stopping the man with it on the other team.

"He's the best receiver we have on the field at times, and probably best runner on field at times," Cummings said. "I think he understands that he's got to carry a lot of that load this year."

Another senior who's offered some valuable leadership on offense is Brandon Davis, who'll suit up at quarterback and carry an important responsibility of making at-the-line checks in and out of plays, while taking literally his assignment to lead the huddle.

And he's an example of the type of player excited to be here that Cummings wants his team to look up to.

"He's always been a smart football kid," he said. "I think the biggest thing, he has been the energy for the program. If music's not playing in the field house, that means Brandon's not here. He brings so much energy. He's a leader who cares about football. That's what kind of being missing around here is that kind of energy."

Davis will also have a reliable senior target in Kamauree Butler, who covers a lot of ground and displays nice reach with hands and a

vertical that'll be a weapon in those 1-on-1s if they can set them up.

"He's got so much ability," Cummings said. "He's a rangy-type kid. He catches the ball well... And he's another kid who can be a great leader. Kids just flock to him."

Davis and Butler will both also start in the secondary.

"We've got a couple of skill guys that are going to be able to catch the ball," Cummings said. "The difference this year, than in past years, is that we've actually got a kid who's going to be able to throw the football."

Defensively, the Cobras will run a similar system to what Cummings employed at Baldwin – a version of the 3-4 with tons of flexibility to become a number of different things based on the team you're defending, and the situation.

One of the looks you'll probably see a lot – given the size spilling over to the defensive line – is the "Bear" front, also known as the 46, that overloads gaps at the point of attack in an effort to stop the run against teams unlikely to put the ball in the air.

The Cobras could find themselves in those types of looks a lot, in a region where his Baldwin colleague Jamoski Ward at Wilco is likely to have throwingest offense among teams that have traditionally hung their hats on running the ball.

"The good thing about this region, it's not a heavy region that throws the ball a lot," Cummings said. "Our front's going to kind of fit what the region's going to be."

The six-team 5-Low A has the makings of a league that's wide open to any long-shot of the four picked to once again finish up behind Johnson and Wilkinson counties in the end-of-year standings.

Twiggs, one of four out of the six programs undergoing a coaching change, isn't a team to write off in the hunt to sneak into the top four and earn a playoff spot.

But realistically, things are liable to take some time to improve.

They'll go to work immediately on trying to halt a 19-game losing skid that dates all the way back to September of 2022, and a more ambitious goal of shaking the eight-year playoff streak.

But before either goal will come into reach, whether sooner or later, a turnaround in attitude and culture are what will have to take place first.

Building better habits, getting "more consistent" about our approach, avoiding the creeping tendency to fall back on old habits and dismissing the notion that some things will never change are points of priority Cummings is stressing for the Cobras in year 1.

A winning tradition like the one Twiggs County would like to revive from its past is built on no other foundation. And a firm one is also never laid by accident.

"The mindset has to change," Cummings said. "The program hasn't had a lot of success, middle school up until now, so if we don't do a good job of changing our mindset, then a lot of times you're going to get the same results. That's been my preaching to them. You've gotta do something different than you've been doing, so the results will change. That's the mindset."

TREUTLEN

Continued from page 10

Hawkinsville and Telfairs that are likely to check both of those boxes twice.

Much like last season, the Vikings will likely have to play with big chips on their shoulders to make up for some potential mismatches in those key games.

"Our toughness and physicality, we've really focused a lot on that during spring and summer camps we went to, getting them to fire off the football," Shurling said. "They've really done a lot better job in their toughness aspect of it."

He's made "relentless effort" a team mantra of sorts in the offseason, knowing full well that that's what Treutlen will rely on to carry it through in a region schedule that again presents nothing to take for granted.

"We talked to them about where we're at, everybody takes y'all for granted as a game," Shurling said. "They're happy to see Treutlen on the schedule right now. You've gotta go out there and earn everything everything you get. Nothing will be handed to you."

By the same token, however, the Vikings are just as firm believers in their ability to do more than simply put some rivals on upset alert, and they head into the fall intent on proving that last season's resurgence was no fluke.

"They've told me this isn't the same Treutlen County anymore," Shurling said. "I'm ready to get out there and show what these kids are capable of. (We hope to) be way better they have been the last couple years."

JOCO

Continued from page 6

Wright, a player who couldn't join the team till late last season, but excelled as an outside backer in the final few games, will fit heavily into their plans out of a front that – as in most years – can bring pressure from just about anywhere.

Norris returns as a striking free safety, and will wear a number carrying some historical significance at the position.

"No. 5 has kind of been a thing for free safeties," Norton said. "We've had some unbelievable free safeties that wear No. 5, and he's one of them."

A couple of Jeremias, Scott at corner and Taylor at linebacker, should bring some of the most noticeable freshman impact to the table early on.

A lot of holes remain to fill on special teams, where punter, kicker and snapper were all wide-open jobs during the summer.

Though, overall, the Trojans

may lack some of the ability to do everything they want to in the kicking game, they still expect execution and sound fundamen-

tales to work in their favor as they always have.

"We put a lot of emphasis on (special teams)," Norton said. "Every single day, we do extra point and punt block, and it's won us games."

With all that's changed for JoCo from a personnel standpoint, it may come as a relief that the five key games on their schedule remain exactly the same as they've been the two seasons before this one.

The Trojans ran the table both years, and with three of four opponents in a state of flux following coaching changes, stand a great chance of doing it for a third-straight year if things proceed anywhere close to expectation.

Tapping into tradition, utilizing young offensive weapons key for Ward in keeping Wilco on rise

By CLAY REYNOLDS
Sports Editor

Did you know that Wilkinson County has not just one, but two former players currently in the NFL?

One is an obvious name, Bud Dupree, who played last season for the Atlanta Falcons and recently signed with the L.A. Chargers.

And he's been no stranger to his hometown, making his way back frequently in the offseason and maintaining more than the expected ties with his alma mater. The school acknowledged as much this past summer with the naming of the Wilco football stadium "Bud Dupree Field" in his honor.

But the Warriors, quietly, have had a second alum and much more unlikely story reach the league recently in Tylan Grable, a 2016 graduate who virtually no one projected seeing drafted this past year... as an offensive tackle.

"Not too many schools in this area can say that in any classification," said Wilkinson County's new head coach, Jamoski Ward.

A much more obvious basketball prospect than a football one, Grable was a multi-time state champion forward who played nothing but quarterback during high school. But he'd change positions after walking on at Jacksonville State, and ride several all-conference caliber seasons there and at UCF to a sixth-round selection by the Buffalo Bills this past April.

Ward points to both athletes his players can now watch on Sundays as great examples of what they, too, have the ability to accomplish at a program that, lately, has been somewhat of a sleeping giant.

"I tell my kids all the time, it doesn't matter where you go to school, if you work hard, you have discipline and you do everything you're supposed to do, you can have a lot of success, and there's no place that's more apparent than Wilkinson County High School."

The school's double-digit state hoops titles easily make basketball its top sport, hands down.

But a glance at the history books shows plenty of excellence over the years for the Warriors on the gridiron as well: Four region titles, almost 300 wins, a dozen and a half playoff appearances and a couple state semifinal runs under winningest head coach James Hagins in the late 2000s.

All of that tradition was one of many reasons Ward considered Wilco, a program he'd observed from afar, an attractive place to eventually coach.

The former Baldwin offensive coordinator, an Albany State alum, was previously a disciple of now-East Laurens head coach Jesse Hicks, assisting the area legend in his three most recent jobs and very nearly a fourth before being picked up by the Warriors for his first head-coaching gig in midsummer.

"Wilkinson County has always been a place I kept up with," Ward said. "They always had a lot of athletes, and they've played pretty good football here over the last 15-20

years. My last two stops were within 20 miles, so I would see how Wilco performed on Friday nights, even though I was in other places."

His offseason was headed in several different directions for Ward before Wilco solidified as a landing spot. Originally, Ward was set to sign on as Hicks' offensive coordinator at East Laurens, before another door in a totally different place opened – and then closed.

This job was an opportunity he only came across later in the process, but proved to be the right fit.

Ward's hire, announced in June, closes out a yearlong transitional period for the program that followed the resignation of Keldrick Burke, to become principal at East Laurens, just before the start of his sixth season in 2023.

Assistant Terrell Holt, elevated to become head coach in the interim, guided Wilco to a 5-5 overall record, and a 4-1 finish in the region that again earned the Warriors a No. 2 playoff seed, though a strong Lincoln County bunch proved too much to handle for them at home in round 1 of the playoffs.

The Warriors, in spite of the turnover, are 12-10 since 2022, on the heels of a Burke-led rebuild that brought them out of a roughly six-year dry spell and put community pride and involvement back on the rise. And they now seem closer than ever to reclaiming some of the success of their glory years that those recent efforts have been building back toward.

Ward is a firm believer that remaining on that trajectory will require continuing to rally support and involvement from fans around the county – something coaches Burke, Hagins and Aaron Geter were all able to do well.

"The first thing I wanted to do was make myself a bridge between the football program and the community," Ward said. "I've gone out to businesses the last couple weeks, shown my face, put schedules in those stakeholders' hands, just to show we've got good kids over here, and a good program going."

And going by preseason projections, there's no reason to think this season will see any decrease in the recent buzz.

But getting from early June to an August 16 season opener has most definitely been a Blue Storm-caliber whirlwind for Ward, whose hire fairly late in the offseason led to a "hectic" turnaround getting staff, programs and new playbooks in place.

"The joke is that in June, I'm doing March stuff and June stuff at the same time," he said. "We brought in two totally different things schematically on offense and defense, and a whole different weight lifting program. So everything has been pretty hasty here over the last couple months."

But he's kept a positive outlook, and was pleasantly surprised – as of late July – with how well everything new had caught on with his players.

"I feel as if the kids have bought in," Ward said. "Some of my team



WILKINSON COUNTY WARRIORS

HEAD COACH: Jamoski Ward
(first season)

OFFENSE: Spread
DEFENSE: 4-2-5

2023: 5-5 (4-1 region 5-Low A)

FINISH: GHSA Playoffs, Round 1 (lost to Lincoln Co.)

REGION: 5-Low A

RETURNING STARTERS:
7 offense / 6 defense

KEY LOSSES: ATH/DB Jeremiah Hill; RB/DB Chaquavion Hall; QB/LB Jaidyn Pennington; QB/DB Garin Adside; OL/LB Dayvyn Boyington; OL/DL Braylin Edwards

SCHEDULE...

8/16	at Wheeler Co.
8/23	Treutlen
8/30	at Jasper Co.
9/6	at Stratford
9/13	ACE Charter
9/27	Glascock Co.*
10/4	at Hancock Central*
10/11	Johnson Co.*
10/25	at GMC*
11/1	Twiggs Co.*

leaders have not missed a day throughout the summer."

In similar style to Ward's multi-receiver pro-style offense at Baldwin, the Warriors are hopeful to spread things out and feature their exciting athletes at multiple skill positions, one in particular who learned a lot as he got his feet wet as a freshman quarterback last year.

Quinterrion Sanford, whom Ward goes back with from his time at Baldwin's Oak Hill Middle, performed well beyond anyone's expectations of a freshman starter as he threw for 600 yards and five touchdowns (intercepted only twice) last fall. And the first-team all-region pick's future in an offense that'll cater heavily to his arm talent looks to be pretty bright.

All-region senior J.T. Hill (whose

25 grabs for 262 yards made him last year's leading producer out wide) and junior Rahiym Thompson (adding eight for 117) will be his top returning targets at receiver, though Myles Cobb, another freshman who broke in a year ago, and the more tight end-ish senior Roo-

both Coats will give the Warriors two additional wideouts who can do a lot.

They'll throw it a pretty good bit, but largely because a more successful passing game will play into success for a ground attack that might be the best thing the Warriors' offense will have going for it.

And they'll feature third-year starting back Terrelle Blount, an all-region pick as both a freshman and sophomore with a team-leading 755 yards and 14 scores last year, in as many ways as possible.

"I think he's the best running back in this area," Ward said. "He's a special kid... The plan is hopefully to kind of spread the box out a little bit and give him more space inside, and kind of run the ball a little more effectively."

Blount and company have a veteran group to run behind up front.

The core of the offensive line features four juniors, three of which played considerable snaps a year ago.

"It's a group," Ward said, "and I'll tell you, my offensive and defensive line guys have been the two groups that have worked the hardest in the weight room. They've really been getting after it and getting stronger."

As they turned the page from a bustling summer to the preseason, a lot of things were far from clicking for the unit as a whole. And Ward recognizes the system, with its newness and unfamiliar intricacies, needs some more time to jell.

But he expects things to come together sooner than later.

"We just need to get our timing down, timing across the board, the quarterback-running back mesh, timing with receivers," Ward said. "A lot of the passing concepts that we're gonna do are totally different from some of the things they've been doing the last couple of years. It's just going to take reps."

To run the defense, Ward brought in a former colleague at Baldwin in Willie Chester, who had most recently been co-defensive coordinator at Greene County – a club Wilco played and had some trouble with the defense of the past two years.

Both agreed on a 4-2-5 scheme that they felt would emphasize the strengths of a roster laden with raw talent and experience on both the front and back ends.

"We're extremely athletic, and I think we're pretty good up front, also," Ward said. "We want to bring pressure at times, be sound, stress running to the football and playing aggressive."

There'll be some overlap between the lines on offense and defense, as a result of depth concerns that are tough to work around at a small school. Wilco will send its share in both directions.

"We're trying to coach up a couple of kids to be able to spare some kids here and there," Ward said. "That's been one of the things I've been harping on with our staff is getting our kids ready. We want a full-game starting type of situation

where we can mix and match and kind of steal reps with kids."

Bookending the line are two good-looking defensive ends. Rising senior Addai Hart, makes his way back from a torn ACL that robbed his junior year.

"He's hungry to get back in it," Ward said. "He's had 100 percent participation in the summer, and is a kid who's emerged as one of our leaders."

Javion Downing, on the other size, is a player built for the basketball court at 6-foot-3, 200 lbs. who'll compete with his size and length.

"Those two guys are going to be able to really set the edge for us," Ward said.

Hill and Cobb, both based in the secondary, pace all returning tacklers from last season. Among other offensive skill guys doing double duty as DBs is a senior, Camari Smith, who Ward feels is underrated.

"We're expecting big things from him," he said.

In between the two at linebacker, they'll need some on-the-job development, with the most underclassmen starting of any space on the entire depth chart.

Fortunately, the experience of other veterans around them should take off a little of the immediate pressure as they learn.

"We're hoping our defensive linemen can take up blocks and keep blockers off those linebackers, and kind of get them a little time to develop. The kids that we've tapped to play there just need a couple reps at that position. That's one thing that we'll be really looking at as we get in pads."

Admittedly, all the quick shakeups have been a lot for the Warriors to wrap their arms around in just a few short months.

But with that hay mostly in the barn, they'll now shift their focus to simply getting in shape to survive the grind of sending so many people both ways in the August heat, which typically does more to separate winners and losers early in the season than execution.

The leadup to a five-game region schedule, which won't start till they host Glascock County on September 27, affords Wilco ample time to get the pieces put together.

A goal would be somehow improving on the 4-1 league record the Warriors have posted in two consecutive years, while also measuring up against teams making up a mighty first half of the schedule that'll include road trips to Wheeler County, Jasper County and Stratford.

The most realistic outcome to the season? Holding serve and winding up right where they've been each of the last two years, in the playoffs with a chance to make some noise, wouldn't be too shabby a year.

A decent start, followed by a healthy run into October, is likely to put them right there.

"We think the outlook of the season can be very successful for us," Ward said.

BLECKLEY

Continued from page 7

The more ground from east to west that Bleckley can convince teams they have to cover, the more room it'll open up for both prolific athletes to erupt for big plays. And it doesn't take long for either electric runner to find a corner, or make a man miss.

And they did both several times each on just the first drive of the scrimmage, flying down the field on a 70-something yard scoring march that is likely a preview of how big a challenge the duo will be for opposing defenses this year.

"They're clicking on all cylinders right now, just carrying over from Summer workouts and things," Lassiter said. "If they stay healthy, they're going to be in really good shape."

Mack, who made 23 catches for 209 yards and three touchdowns in '23, is the top-producing wideout among returners. And the senior figures to be the same type of deep weapon he's been both outside, and in the slot, the past two years in the offense, though he's also burdened with the load of also playing every down on defense, on top of nursing along a strained hammy that

was giving him trouble early in fall practice.

Farrow, Jahiyan Blackshear, junior Torrellio Brimble and sophomore Jonah Kelley have done the majority of first-team receiver work. Junior Connor Cairney and senior Rhett Floyd are out front in a potentially deep group of blocking backs and tight ends.

Among early-season starters, the Royals will make those upperclassmen their first on the field, though they hope by mid-year to develop a pretty deep cycle of skill athletes as several new players with a bright future get their feet wet, and offer some of the above a chance to rest and focus more on playing D.

"That's probably the position we're trying to figure out the most," Lassiter said. "We're bringing a lot of guys that play both ways in those areas now. It'll help us bring young guys along faster, and I'm talking about freshmen that I feel really good about that, hopefully as time goes on, they'll play more and more."

On the offensive line, Bleckley replaces both its right and left tackles, among other 2023 starters that have made it another portion of the past.

"We're kind of young up there, too," Lassiter said. "We're replacing quite a few, but they're coming along pretty well."

Senior tackle T.J. Fountain and junior center John Teston have stood out among players in the group, who are looking for some of the same chemistry the Royals seem to be everywhere else, though most of the questions of position have been answered.

"Those guys have been working really hard," Lassiter said. "Now, we're kind of getting into a pattern of who's playing where, who's going to get the reps where. Now, they're focusing on getting better and improving every week."

The ultra-reliable Ford Childers, an all-state selection last season, will return for his fourth year handling traditional placekicking duties, and a first also doing the punting.

After some years of abundance in overall numbers, turnover going into last season forced the Royals to move away from the overwhelming two-platoon approach they'd taken to lineup construction for most of the past.

And results of their experiment sending a majority of regulars on each side both

ways for the first time ever were mostly positive – after all, what's there to not like about winning nine games and a second region title in three years?

There's little arguing the benefit to having your best 11 players on the field as often as possible, though that comes at the expense of rest and durability, particularly involving an up-tempo offense that may have gone as fast between plays last year as at any point before.

Playing with that wearying pace also demands practicing at it, which was the rub for Bleckley out of a tighter rotation that also prevented putting its full starting 11 on offense and defense against each other in practice.

With a rotation that's not expected to add much to the combined depth of last season, the Royals will find themselves caught between the same rock of preference, and hard place of necessity as they work out the best way to play their cards this fall.

Both ways, that's tough to do. That's where the problem comes in, I think. I never want kids to get out there on a Friday night and be shocked at the speed of the game, because I want them to see it in practice.

"But I've also learned we've got to have the best players on the field. So we're going to do that, keep guys that can play on the field, and give those guys breaks when we can. I'm still torn between that, but it worked out pretty well for us last year, so we're going to continue to do it."

Though recent history will have expectations again set pretty high, prospects for the Royals over what shapes up as a long season are unclear this early on. And a lot of Bleckley's potential is likely to rely on the strides that are made by a newer generation of players stepping in and carrying a hefty load right away.

"We just need to bring along young players," Lassiter said. "We need leadership from the older players to do things right, to show them how they should come along, how they should work, how they should play. We need those senior leaders supporting our coaching staff as far as getting those young guys

where they're supposed to be. "If we stay healthy and continue to improve every week, we'll be fine. If we don't, then we're going to do what some young teams do, and that's not good."

But for those who love quality football competition, and the type of any-given-week mentality that makes the college game so fun to follow, this year has the makings of a pretty entertaining ride for Bleckley as much as any member of the intensely competitive region 2-High A.

The energy, and thrills, of Friday nights in region play – starting up bright and early on Aug. 23 in a rivalry with Dodge County –

Smith slated to pick up where he left off in Alamo; Bulldogs' well-rounded attack should hold its own

By CLAY REYNOLDS
Sports Editor

Sometimes, it takes leaving something behind – a place, situation or opportunity – to come to a real understanding of its personal value.

For Thomas Smith, it was the difficult decision to leave Wheeler County last year that ultimately revealed it was where he truly belonged.

Though it's a small program in a small town, where most of what you have to work with from athletes to resources is naturally limited, the school and coach seemed a great match for one another over the three seasons – an era of stability and considerable success for the program – that they were together.

Just a season away, on a one-year sojourn as head coach at Dodge County, helped him fully appreciate Wheeler County's atmosphere, and the quality of the folks with a hand in creating it.

"We've got a tremendous administration, from Coach (Eli) Dupree to Mr. (William) Bell, Miss (Suzanne) Couey and Dr. (Quent) Floyd. They're just folks you trust," Smith said.

Life doesn't frequently give you chances to hit the undo button, but one came for Smith along with a change of heart that led him back to Alamo shortly after the end of a frustrating first year coaching the Indians.

Dodge, while it was likely some better luck away from a winning record, finished up the injury-plagued season with a 1-9 overall record, going winless in region play and missing the playoffs.

Back at home in Alamo, it was only a modest campaign for the hometown Bulldogs, who were being led for a second time by Britt Ingle – back after kicking off his head coaching career with the program in the '90s.

Wheeler County, in some similar turns of fortune, won three of its first five before stumbling on a streak of bad luck, and five-straight losses by 10 points or fewer, in region play.

Following the season, the already semi-retired Ingle opted to do some similar backtracking in a return to Vidalia, and the assistant coaching job he'd originally left, that had the Bulldogs once again looking for a new head coach.

And Smith, by no means unhappy but also yearning a bit for the surroundings he knew with the Bulldogs, jumped at the opportunity.

"I guess, to be honest, I wasn't really looking to go anywhere to begin with," Smith said. "The Dodge job looked like a good opportunity

for my family. We knew it was going to be a little bit of a rebuild, with no returning offensive linemen that had played. I got there, and it just made me miss the family feel at Wheeler County. When Coach Ingle let me know he was going to be resigning, I just felt it was the Good Lord telling me to get back home."

He's hopeful to resume some work that had the Bulldogs on a real positive trajectory before he left. And in many ways, it's as if he never did.

Save for defensive coordinator Wesley Lowery and D-line coach Calvin Wilcox, new hires who both follow Smith from Dodge, and the addition of Wheeler alumni Jagger Hogue as O-line coach, the staff features most of the same assistants it did in Smith's final year.

The roster, likewise, brings back plenty of his former players from 2022 and prior who were able to pick back up many of his schemes and techniques right away during spring and summer drills.

Smith, a football mind native to the offensive side of the ball, has always run a various and sundry attack that operates from a variety of formations that change based on the year and roster profile.

His last at Dodge was mostly shotgun in formation, but varied wildly in motion, misdirection and personnel shifts that kept defenses on their toes. A year earlier, at Wheeler in 2022, the Bulldogs frequently ran the football from a wishbone set in between wildcat packages and traditional spread formations.

This year's conglomeration will also put together some bits and pieces that bring a few different ideas together into one.

"We're going to have a Wing-T set, and then we'll have a 'gun set, where we're able to spread it a little more," Smith said. "But it's still going to be similar to single-wing principles."

Like it did back in '22, Wheeler is hopeful that keeping some traditional under-center run concepts in their package will help them utilize some outstanding size and depth along an offensive line that's again as talented as you're going to find.

The unit, solid in all three of Smith's years in charge as well as last fall, lost a cornerstone in 2024 grad Walker Bridges, but returns a three-headed monster of seniors K.J. Williams, Jordan Bridges and Aiden Atchley, each starters going back to their sophomore years.

"They've played a lot of football for us," Smith said. "They've got a lot of playing time under their belts."

Openings for two remaining starters have been up for grabs among several younger contenders



WHEELER COUNTY BULLDOGS

HEAD COACH: Thomas Smith
(fourth season; 11-20 at Wheeler,
76-77 career)

OFFENSE: Multiple
DEFENSE: 3-5

2023: 3-7 (0-5 region 4-Low A)

FINISH: Missed playoffs

REGION: 4-Low A

RETURNING STARTERS:

6 offense / 5 defense

KEY LOSSES: OL Walker Bridges;
ATH Jason Culver; ATH/DB Jay
Adams; WR/DB Jeremiah Kincy;
RB/LB Lamarcus Woodard

SCHEDULE...

8/16	Wilkinson Co.
8/23	at Taylor Co.
9/06	Twigs Co.
9/13	at Atkinson Co.
9/20	Dooly Co.*
9/27	at Hawkinsville*
10/04	at Montgomery Co.*
10/18	Telfair Co.*
10/25	Wilcox Co.*
11/01	at Treutlen*

who were set to battle it out during the Bulldogs' last padded camps in July, though signs from throughout the summer indicated to Smith that the unit would be in good position by the start of the season.

Another senior who'll need no reacquainting with his head coach is Alvin Ricks, who by the end of the fall is likely to go down as one of Wheeler County's most productive players in history.

The all-purpose skill guy, in fitting fashion, returned the opening kickoff of his freshman season for a touchdown, and ever since, has only churned out highlight plays, running for quadruple figures in yardage all three varsity seasons up to this point.

As a true back, direct-snap recipient, receiver or returner, he'll no doubt find plenty of different ways to do more of the same this year.

But a few others will bring attri-

butes to the table that complement Ricks' skill set.

For thickly-built junior Justin Culver, that's a great burst on cuts, ability to run to contact and aptitude for break tackles on downhill carries that helps him fit the mold of both a traditional running back, and an open-field athlete with good hands who can line up away from the ball.

Another speedster in junior Senciar Marks brings similar versatility, and potentially best-of-the-bunch speed, that you can use in any application. But he'll work most frequently out wide among a group of receivers who showed during 7-on-7 season that they've got the hops and the hands to win 1-on-1 battles in the air.

Marks, junior Kaysen Troup and senior Quenshawn Glasper – a 6-foot-3 basketball turnout in his first season of football – will come down with more than their share of contested catches.

"With our backfield, teams are going to have to give you a lot of one-on-one coverage, so we're going to definitely try to use some of their height and create some match-up problems," Smith said.

Troup and fellow junior Reco Wooten were also going head-to-head over the summer for a starting quarterback job that became a battle after Wooten suffered a shoulder injury in the spring.

Troup, recalled from his skill spot to handle things early on, performed well enough to earn some strong consideration. And the job will go to whichever of the candidates Smith decides, by game 1, fits best with what they're hoping to do.

"It was really a blessing in disguise, because when we get Reco back, we'll have two guys ready at QB, and it gives us a little bit more freedom," he said.

Wheeler County offenses under Smith have averaged a healthy 23 points per game, and the preseason survey of talent on the roster will give this particular unit an argument for being the most stacked of the four.

But defense, for every one of those past teams, has ended up determining their ultimate playoff destiny. And it probably will for this bunch as well.

The Bulldogs are set to base out of the same 3-5 system that Lowery ran last year at Dodge, and sees as a wave of the future that more and more teams will begin to ride as they discover its unique ways of accounting for the space offenses try to use to their advantage.

"I think that's where the game's headed," Smith said. "There are so many spread offenses, whether it's 3-5 or 3-4, it just allows you to get more athletes on the field. I

felt last year that even though our record wasn't what we wanted it to be, we played really good defense... Defense kept us in a lot of those games."

Wheeler will field a fairly experienced lineup everywhere except the secondary, where Wooten is the only proven starter back in the fold.

Most of its defensive talent will be concentrated to the multifaceted linebacker position that covers a lot of ground, and encompasses your traditional inside and outside players roaming the box to pick up run gaps as well as the hybrid defensive backs, or "spurs" in the Lowery terminology, who can blitz, support the run or play coverage.

Culver, Troup, junior Lane Connell and sophomore Jaden Bridges are among the keystone starters.

"We're expecting our linebacker corps to be our strength on defense," Smith said.

The defensive line position, he feels good about as well. Question marks, at worst, are TBDs drawn at a couple of spots similar to those on the O-line that were left up to padded camp reps to determine clear starters.

If there's one other trend worth pointing out from Smith's first stint at Wheeler County, it's that all three of his teams were squarely in the playoff mix late in the season, though the last in 2022 was the only one to officially make the post-season.

His first had multiple region wins vacated after the fact over an eligibility issue, but would originally match the five-win record of the two teams after it, and came a close loss in the next-to-last week from advancing.

Same for 2021, when a pair of two-point losses, one by three and another by eight were all key in a 3-5 region finish that wasn't quite up to snuff.

The top four in this year's 4-Low A, featuring traditional heavyweights plus an upstart Treutlen and Montgomery County vying for the fixed number of spots, is sure to be a tough group to break into.

But Smith sees his team as one that'll be every bit as in the running if it can hit its stride by the week 5 battle with Dooly County that kicks off the league slate.

"We feel like the region's always been strong, but it's pretty unpredictable," Smith said. "I think there's five or six different teams that have made the playoffs the last couple of years... I think it's one of those regions that, every Friday, you've gotta bring it. The one positive is we're able to get four non-region games, so you sort of get a chance to get issues fixed before you get into region play."

DODGE

Continued from page 7

is committed to Alabama as a defender – maybe to play linebacker, though in honesty, even Kalen DeBoer's staff is likely undecided about where a player with his diversity of strengths will actually end up on the field.

It's been a similar puzzle for Dodge County coaching staffs of the last three years, who on either side of the ball, have used him in different ways by the year. The consensus five-star has played so many different positions, in fact, that it's become a bit of an identity crisis, with fits in so many different roles equaling no true fit at all.

Brown is hopeful to find the right mix, though he also plans to feature Johnson's skills – which trump the average player's about anywhere you put him in – in a variety of ways.

On defense, that'll include assignments at various linebacker positions and some situations playing "the roof" at safety.

Offensively, Brown's thinking coincides a lot with that of the previous Dodge staff, which felt Johnson's competitive height and vertical were best used by having him go after the football as a receiver or tight end... that is, until injuries everywhere ultimately had him back spending a lot of time at quarterback, where he'd played most of his freshman and sophomore seasons.

And even there, he's a pretty darn good player.

"We'll probably have some packages built in for him at quarterback, but that's not the world we want to live in," Brown said. "He's a really good quarterback who can really run the show for us on offense, but Duke can play so many different spots and present matchup problems for people. Tight end, wide receiver, running back... He's smart enough that he can pick up on everything we do at all of those spots."

Sophomore Jeremiah Burns is the second of those names to remember, both this season and the two to follow, for some slippery strides that have gained him plenty of playing time as a back and receiver, as well as some college interest, in just one season of high school action.

"He's not super tall, but his speed is elite," Brown said. "He's a guy we can move around at receiver, at running back, just wherever we feel like we can get him matched up with opportunities to hit big plays. He's one of our home run threats."

Burns will also play in the defensive secondary.

The development of rising sophomore Kain Mincey, who took over the quarterback job very late last season, makes the Indians feel good about utilizing Johnson at other skill positions most of the time. Mincey, at 7-on-7s, has proven he can sling the ball at a good enough clip to make defenses respect his arm, opening things up for the ground attack.

Strong, explosive backs have been a calling card of Dodge County lately, and the Indians will have another of those toting the ball this season in Jamal Smith, a rising junior.

The serviceable athlete, whose ability is keyed by lower body strength derived from squats pushing upwards of 500 lbs., runs with good patience and a nice burst when he steps on the gas, and has potential to shine as a mail-carrier should the Indians see fit to feed him the ball.

Defensively, he'll also show off a talent for shooting gaps and magnetic tackling ability, as a linebacker that can cause problems for teams whether filling holes or creeping around the edge on a blitz.

"He's, pound for pound, the strongest kid on our football team," Brown said. "Look for him to do big things. He's very explosive and also has good hands out of the backfield. He's definitely worked to get where he needs to be in the offseason."

Also look for some big plays out of senior Ralph Howard, who's played almost as many positions as Duke in two seasons as a utility man on both sides of the ball. He's a "coach on the field" who brings the goods athletically, but also boasts the knowledge of the game to get his teammates in the right position, and rarely finds himself out of it.

"He's probably one of the fastest linebackers that I've coached at the high school level," Brown said. "He can get from point A to point B really fast. He does a really good job of knowing the game and

reading offenses."

Howard will be a starting fixture at linebacker, and there make most of the team's defensive calls. Expect him to also pop up at times on offense with a chance to carry, catch or block.

"I really think he's one guy that's highly underrated," Brown said. "A lot of people that played him last year know who he is, because he definitely has some impressive film."

While some dogs return at the skill positions, turnover hasn't been as kind to the Indians on the line of scrimmage, where its present rotations on both offense and defense have "a lot of guys with not a ton of experience."

The position group, in early July, was still a work in progress.

"That's been the biggest part of development that we've tried to focus on," Brown said. "Anybody that really knows football knows you're only going to be as good as those lines of scrimmage. As they go, we go. But we're doing a really good job of bringing those guys along here in the offseason, just trying to develop them and get them ready to play."

Defense is very likely to be the strength of the team. And take some pressure off of the offensive side as it works to figure some things out. But with the talent Dodge will have going that direction, it's unlikely to take long to turn the attack into one that region 2-High A rivals will be doing well to keep under 30 points.

"I think those guys, you

know if they execute at a high level, I think we can be pretty successful," Brown said. "We're building it, it's just day-by-day."

In the new-look league, key games will come quickly, with region action representing nine out of 10 weeks on the schedule.

Dodge County didn't draw the short straw, but will get no warmup game for its region debut as it travels to rival Bleckley County for a tall task to open the season Aug. 23, after opting to take a bye on the traditional "week zero" and pencil in a lone non-region game against Vidalia Sept. 13.

The closer we get to the start of the season, the margin for error gets slimmer, because we start region play our first regular season game," Brown said. "Out of the gate, you've gotta make 'em count... I think our region will get more than four teams in the playoffs. Just looking, I think we have a shot to get six. This region is very, very competitive, with a lot of good football teams and coaches. There really aren't any cupcakes. There's no week off. You've

gotta bring it every week you play somebody."

Hess fueling up Eagles' offense for productive year, but defense will determine their destiny

By CLAY REYNOLDS
Sports Editor

In a way, it's fitting that new Montgomery County head coach Kream Hess shares his last name with one of the nation's major gasoline producers.

In his years coming up as an assistant, the Tifton native has specialized in manufacturing high-octane offense. As a coordinator at both the high school and college levels, Hess drilled some units that consistently pumped out positive yardage, and refined a handful of skill players into league-leading performers.

That offensive acumen over the past few seasons has the 35-year-old's personal stock on the rise, and perhaps the Eagles' as well.

A school rich in top athletes and a coach with a strong record of refining them into high producers seemed like a perfect match when Montgomery County announced its hire of the Turner County offensive coordinator as its next head coach in February.

Hess' brand of high-energy football, combined with the Eagles' collective gas at the skill positions, promises to fuel some renewed excitement on Friday nights at Brogdon Field.

"We've got some big-time ball-players, and we've gotta get the ball in their hands on the perimeter," he said.

Though his offenses haven't made a habit of scoring outside the 20s per game, they've frequently gotten plenty of players heavily involved on moving the football, with at least one per year to break quadruple yardage figures in one or more season categories.

The pattern started out as a player, in a career that earned him induction to Tift County's Athletic Hall of Fame this past year. He ran for over 1,000 yards as a junior and nearly as many over an injury-plagued senior year, with just shy of 30 touchdowns over the two and at one point, a school-record five in a game.

But the big numbers continued to follow him after trading the helmet for a headset.

Early on, calling plays at Division 2 Lincoln University in Missouri at the age of only 26, he guided an attack that broke multiple school rushing records, with running back Hosea Franklin dashing to a program-record 1,359 yards to earn all-conference selection.

A few years later, after a move back to Georgia and a two-year stint coaching receivers for his alma mater of Tift County, Hess was hired to run the offense at Turner County, where the Titans led the region in rushing, with an all-league back Zavaad Bynum going for 1,300-plus, his first season in 2022.

In year 2 with the Titans last fall, he coached a pair of all-state receivers in Kearnin Dawsey and Kaleb Joiner who produced more than 700 yards each, and a 2,400-yard, 26-touchdown passer in Carlton Brannon.

A coaching change at Turner had Hess considering at least a couple of offensive coordinator opportunities at other schools when he got a call

from Montgomery County principal Scott Barrow.

The Eagles' job – in which he follows Don Vandygriff, out after two years and a winless 2023 – was one he'd applied for on a whim and nearly forgotten about before getting an interview, and then job offer "out of the blue."

But the opportunity, his first as a head coach, made a lot of sense, in particular for the school's reputation as a gold mine of great all-around athletes that he got some glimpses of coaching track and field at Turner County, watching from afar in the spring of 2023 as MoCo's boys team motored its way to the second of back-to-back state championships.

The county's wells of athleticism, bubbling for much of the past decade, show no signs of drying up anytime soon. And Hess will have plenty of it to inject into his fast-paced system between several spark plugs at skill positions, most notably at wide receiver where players 1-4 on the depth chart may very well end up comprising the Eagles' 1x100 relay lineup when it's time to lace up the track shoes this coming spring.

But getting things firing on all cylinders will be more than just a turnkey proposition for a squad that averaged only 13 points per game with many of the same athletes last year, and had too many drives sputter with penalties or crash due to turnovers.

The roster will also need some refueling at several positions where top players were lost to graduation and transfer.

Gone via the class of '24 were Marquis Martin, a leading receiver, and versatile swingman Darius Wells. Gunslinging quarterback Joseph Owens, a 1,200-yard passer as a freshman, also transferred back to his native Toombs County.

Hess' philosophy boils down to getting the ball in the hands of play-makers, however the defense dictates.

Philosophically, he emphasizes "spreading the ball around" to as many players as possible, while also wasting little time between plays.

"I'm an up-tempo guy," Hess said. "I like to go fast, and try to keep the ball moving. We want to snap it about every 15-20 seconds if we can."

His scheme borrows a lot of the analytical and read-and-react basis of modern offenses in college and the NFL, with its capacity for real-time adjustments.

At higher levels, the plays that are called from the sideline and those run at the snap usually differ drastically based on what the quarterback observes from the defense after lining up.

Hess, too, places responsibility in the hands of his signal-caller to make changes, and frequently cycle between plays, on "check-with-me's" at the line of scrimmage.

Exactly what play they end up going with, and where they're looking to go with the ball, depends on several variables.

If you load up the box, he'll look to throw outside. Play soft coverage, and he'll look to throw underneath.

ed a similar aptitude for making plays.

"He's gonna have some shoes to fill," Edwards said.

But even in an ideal world, it'd be a lot to ask one man to make up for that much production singlehandedly, which is why WACO will make a point of targeting some complements, not limited to senior L.J. Robinson, to keep its passing game not only productive, but well-rounded.

The right identity may also call for a greater focus on the ground game and play action than there's been in the last couple pass-happy seasons.

"We're going to have to be more balanced at receiver spot, spread it around and try to run the ball really well and make teams defend the run so these guys can get open and have some 1-on-1 matchups, and concepts that'll win for us," Edwards said. "It's going to be an all-around collective effort at the receiver spot."

A strength may be the Hawks' offensive line, which returns four players with varsity starting or rotational reps under their belt who have solidified every job except the

one at left tackle vacated by graduate Vintavious Scott. And the lineup has played confidently

"We're looking for great things out of these guys," Edwards said. "If you're going to have a veteran group coming back, that's where you want it at. That's the staple of the offense. If you've got an O-line that can run block and pass block, that makes everybody's job easier."

Punting and kicking will be senior Christian Rountree, a Brentwood transfer whose powerful leg was a big addition last year.

"We're excited about him," Edwards said. "I think he's going to end up going to college. He's got a great leg and, accuracy. We're going to use that as a weapon to help our offense and defense."

The mettle of young players the Golden Hawks have as critical links in the lineup, as well as the battle-readiness of their new leaders out front, will be tested in the fiery crucible of a region that may well be the most difficult the school's ever played football in.

The new and expanded 2-High A, which will be bust-

ing at the seams with quality players and coaches, brings some well-known area rivals back onto WACO's schedule, but also the all-too-familiar feeling of fighting for your playoff life almost every single Friday.

That wasn't quite the case the past two years competing in 4-AA, where the Golden Hawks both seasons found themselves right in between the region's top and bottom tiers, and were mostly able to fall back on a No. 4 finish that kept their long state playoff streak alive.

With guaranteed berths going only to the region's top 2 this season and others having to fight it out with the rest of the state at-large, getting back for a 17th season later this fall would be no small feat.

"I would say it's a little more challenging, because there are more teams that are very competitive," Edwards said of the region. "Every week, it's gonna be a tough out, so you've gotta come with your A-game. You can't have any slippage. You've gotta come ready to play and prepared every week. That's nine games in a row that you've

gotta really be focused and ready to play. And you've gotta kind of hope no serious injuries happen along the way...

You need all the tools in your bag to play week in and week out in this region."

WACO's composition of talent and experience will be right there with many of its co-contenders. But performing well enough to get past many of them this fall may rely on its offense and defense, upper and underclassmen, players and coaches all working in the same type of harmony Edwards under-

scores as a key to the program taking its next step.

Now with everyone on the right part and singing from the same piece of music, this could be the season that his Golden Hawks really start making some music.

"We should see kind of a shift in how we want things to get done, and creating the identity and the culture I guess you could say that we want here at Washington County," Edwards said. "I think this year will be the turning point to that culture change."



**MONTGOMERY COUNTY
EAGLES**

HEAD COACH: Kream Hess
(first season)

OFFENSE: Spread
DEFENSE: 3-4

2023: 0-10 (0-4 region 3-Low A)

FINISH: Missed playoffs

REGION: 4-Low A

RETURNING STARTERS:

4 offense / 3 defense

KEY LOSSES: QB Joseph Owens
(transfer); RB/LB Darius Wells;
ATH/DB Marquis Martin; OL/DL
Emilio Chavez

SCHEDULE...

8/16	at Baconton Charter
8/23	Johnson Co.
8/30	Atkinson Co.
9/13	at Taylor Co.
9/20	Telfair Co.*
9/27	at Dooly Co.*
10/04	Wheeler Co.*
10/11	at Treutlen*
10/18	Hawkinsville*
11/01	at Wilcox Co.*

Leave fewer defenders near the line than he's got blockers, or pitch two safeties over the top, and the call will usually be a run.

All decisions will boil down to where the Eagles determine, based on a defense's tendencies and press-nap posture, their best personnel or matchup advantage lies.

In short, they venture to take what you give them.

"I like to take advantage of the grass, leverage and numbers," Hess said. "I always try to win with the numbers and take advantage of the numbers."

MoCo took the new offense out for a spin in a home scrimmage with GMC Aug. 2, and hung 33 points (with one of its five touchdowns non-offensive) on the Bulldogs in an impressive first showing of the fall.

It created some chances in space for several who made big plays, including a 50-plus yard touchdown for the Eagles' most productive returning playmaker Jamun Coglin – who finished 2023 as the team's only triple-digit rusher (442 yards and four touchdowns) and next-best receiver (14 grabs for 109 and one score).

The senior sprinter, who makes his mission to "turn and burn" after getting the ball on short passes or sweeps, headlines the list of players Hess wants to find with the ball in space.

MoCo's player profiles on this year's roster overwhelming favor linebacker, which is a strength Hess hopes to make the best use of in a 3-4 system that'll look for smart reads and sound tackling from the position group underneath mostly three- and four-deep coverage shells.

Hopes are that the larger umbrella up top will enable the Eagles to minimize the big plays that plagued them on a routine basis last year, though it'll put a premium on men in the front seven who can fill holes and make stops in front of the marker.

"We've got a lot of linebackers on this team, so we've got to use them," he said. "We're pretty fast, so we're going to try to use that speed we've got, put a lot of guys in the box and try to get to the ball."

McEwen and White, both outside 'backers on D, are the team's best returning tacklers, with 50-plus each last year, and two among many returning players on defense with some quality experience and a lot of upperclass leadership.

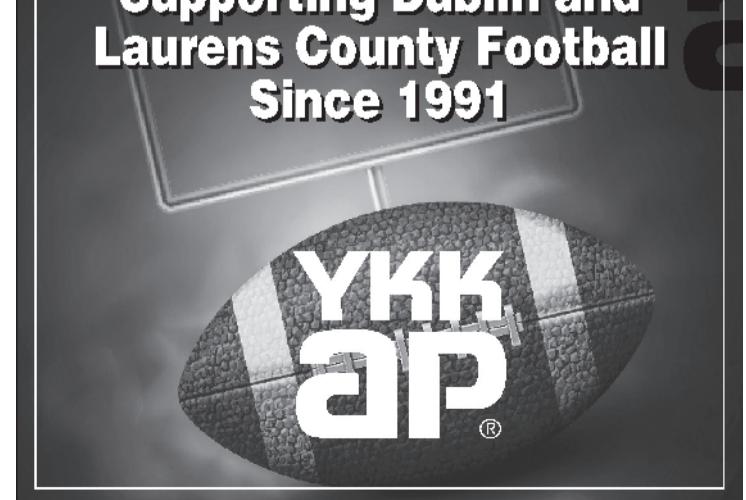
Seniors Davonte Wise, who came back out for football after not playing last year and Elec Waters, and transfer Kenya Tate have bol-

ing at the seams with quality players and coaches, brings some well-known area rivals back onto WACO's schedule, but also the all-too-familiar feeling of fighting for your playoff life almost every single Friday.

That wasn't quite the case the past two years competing in 4-AA, where the Golden Hawks both seasons found themselves right in between the region's top and bottom tiers, and were mostly able to fall back on a No. 4 finish that kept their long state playoff streak alive.

With guaranteed berths going only to the region's top 2 this season and others having to fight it out with the rest of the state at-large, getting back for a 17th season later this fall would be no small feat.

"I'm just trying to get those guys to understand that if we can do this stuff right, and if you get mean and block and get physical, we can make some noise over there," Hess said.



COACH

Continued from page 11

certain history subjects.

"This is going to sound crazy, but I really like to study assassinations, like JFK's," he said. "I can name some people from the grassy knoll, and I just like reading stuff like that. I like to figure out and try to put stuff together, so I really like podcasts and documentaries, and I really like to read."

What's the craziest trick play you've ever called?

His answer is preceded by a caveat: "I hate trick plays," Hicks said with a chuckle. "I'm just a straightforward guy. Now, we've got some in."

Going back, most of his favorite trickery has come out of exotic punt formations that were adopted from the playbook of Ferris State, which have a goal of getting fans and opponents thinking "What in the world are they doing?"

One that's likely familiar to local fans, his Baldwin teams ran against West Laurens in 2020. The formation featured two punters in the backfield, one of them future Georgia Bulldog Javon Bullard, with an array of possible run and pass options out of it depending on whether the fake remained on.

The Raiders, on that night, missed their man on the rush.

"We snap the ball to Javon, and he was going to act as if he was going to punt it, but the guy runs past him," Hicks said. "He let the other guy go in front and he took it right up the sideline for a first down."

Why did you want to be a football coach?

Hicks is adamant that he didn't find the coaching profession, but that it found him.

Early in life, his plans were mostly in line with the guidance of his mother, who was an educator adamant that her kids should go into a different field, like law, which was a path Hicks' sister chose and had success following.

He was headed in the same direction before White called him into his office and helped him realize how much his character and personality attributes made him a perfect fit for coaching.

"Football was not on my radar until Coach White told me, 'You've got a gift, man. You're good at communicating, the guys like you, you're always one of those good teammates, you understand the game.' ... He said, 'I think you've got a niche in this thing, and I think you oughtta coach. And I sort of took him up on that.'

"My gift is the ability to communicate and bond with people, and if we do more of that in education, where we're teaching kids what their gifts are, they'll understand how math, English, science and social studies fits into that gift. Now, you've got somebody that's not working for a profession, they're working for a purpose. It's not a job, it's innate. That's kind of what happened to me with it. It just kind of bit me and I just kind of ran with it."



Alan Shurling

SCHOOL Treutlen
HOMETOWN Barnesville, Ga.
ALMA MATER Central Missouri
THIS IS MY 1st SEASON

What's the most impressive football play you've ever seen, who made it and when?

Shurling is by far not the only person who can ever say he was left speechless by a play of future No. 1 NFL Draft pick Travon Walker at Upson-Lee. However, he did enjoy the luxury of having the otherworldly athlete on his team, as part of the Knights staff when Walker made a stunning grab in the end zone to lift them to a huge win at East Paulding in 2018.

"We were down, we punted with four minutes left in the game, and we got a lucky break and got the ball back," he said. "We threw the ball up there to him, and he just went up there and, one-handed, brought it down and won us the football game."

And if he had to make a list of most impressive plays he's ever seen, Walker would probably have several in the top 10.

"It always goes back to one of his games, just because you get to see how dominant an athlete can be on a football field," Shurling said.

What's the coolest or most challenging opposing stadium you've coached in?

Of places he's been frequently, Mary Persons' Dan Pitts Stadium leads the pack in terms of atmosphere and difficulty of winning.

"That stadium's always packed out,"

Shurling said. "It's got the brick walls, an old-school feel to it, but it's always full. Those were a lot of always high-energy games."

In fact, his assistant coaching record there is a bit of a sore subject, after tight games in multiple visits that saw his team fall short in gut-wrenching fashion.

"One year at Upson-Lee, we threw an interception that they took in to score with like 10 seconds left," Shurling said. "When I was coaching at Lamar County, we were down at halftime and got a quick score, got a turnover, scored again, went for two to tie the game up in third, and then they stopped the game for lightning, and we never restarted. We lost that game because of lightning."

Shurling does have a win over the Bulldogs, though it came as a player at Lamar County in 2006, when the Trojans got the best of MP for the first time in 15 tries, though in their home stadium rather than in Forsyth.

Why did you want to be a football coach?

"Love of the game and love for the kids," he said. "As I was getting done with college, I planned on being a doctor because I wanted to help people. But I got kind of tired of school and still loved the game of football. In reality, I want to help kids out, so instead of being a doctor, I just became a football coach."



Thomas Smith

SCHOOL Wheeler County
HOMETOWN Lyons, Ga.
ALMA MATER Liberty
THIS IS MY 14th SEASON

What's the craziest trick play you've ever called?

The year was 2021, and the Bulldogs were taking on Hawkinsville in search of their first region win. Nearing halftime, they decided to run a double-reverse pass — drawn up by defensive coordinator Will Johnson — that led to a big play, and a key touchdown.

"He brought it up at Sunday meetings, and I was like, that's never going

to work," Smith said. "But we got an opportunity, and he said, hey coach, can we get it? I sort of cringed a little, because I didn't know if it'd be a big play for us or a big play for them... But it hit for us that night."

What do you consider Wheeler County's most unique football or sports tradition?

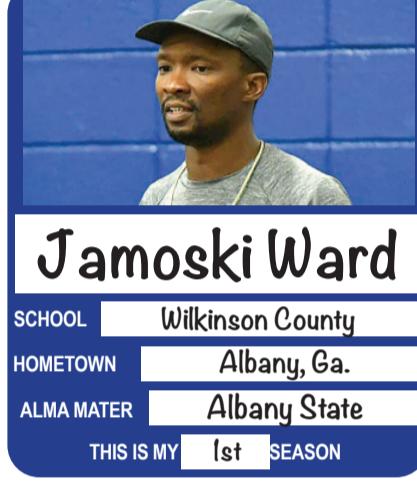
No doubt it's the "family feel" that Smith said originally attracted him to the school, and drew him back after leaving for a year this past offseason. And he cites an example of former players who've taken initiative of returning to give back to their former school and hometown.

"We've had guys that are in college now, or going off to college, come back this offseason and work out with the guys, just be able to give them some knowledge and stuff they might not see as high school kids or see later," he said.

Why did you want to be a football coach?

For Smith, it all started with the significant impact made by his high school coach Mark Stroud.

"I just want to be able to positively impact young men, whether it's them going out and playing college football or, more importantly, the fathers and the husbands they become in the community. It's really a great opportunity."



Jamoski Ward

SCHOOL Wilkinson County
HOMETOWN Albany, Ga.
ALMA MATER Albany State
THIS IS MY 1st SEASON

What do you consider Wilco's most unique football or sports tradition?

When considering the school's "most unique feature," Ward is quick to give props to the Warriors' powerhouse basketball program.

As a teacher of history, he can sense a lot of it when he steps inside the lobby of the Palace — a gym truly built on tradition whose structure inspires a sense of reverence and respect for any student of Middle Georgia sports.

"It's not necessarily the Palace part where you've got the basketball arena, but I think the most unique thing is when you go in the Palace and the pictures of all the state championship teams," Ward said. That thing's a museum, man."

What's the biggest upset you've ever been a part of as a coach?

He's got three from his most recent assistant coaching stint at Baldwin that hold pretty much equal standing, each coming in back-to-back seasons of 2018 and 2019.

Both years the Braves knocked off ranked region rival Burke County during the regular season, by 27 and 14, to overtake the Bears in first place of the standings. The first time around, Baldwin would go on to win it all in region 3-AAAA. The next year, though an earlier loss to Thomson would cost them the outright lead, and Burke would win a three-way tiebreaker to be named region champ, with Baldwin stuck with the shortest straw and the region's third playoff seed.

But as fate would have it, the Braves pulled off perhaps the biggest upset of either season in the first round at seventh-ranked Cairo, which they'd top in a 38-30 thriller at the notorious West Thomas Stadium.

"Knowing the significance of that place, to go in, especially with a pretty young team and to win, that was big for us," Ward said.

Why did you want to be a football coach?

Ward is a believer in football as a unique avenue for making an impact on the lives of youth, which hit home for him at a very young age on the football field.

"I don't think about many teachers, but I think about my football coaches, and I think about what my football coaches instilled in me," he said. "The things I grabbed from the football field, hard work, teamwork, strong work ethic, those are the things I'm wanting to instill into kids."

"I'm fortunate to have been able to coach for 14 years and deal with a lot of kids. I just want them to see that the thing about football for me, it's the sport that most resembles life. I, to this day, don't believe I would have had the success I've had on the personal side if it wasn't for my dad taking me to football practice in 1999 for the first time. And I've been fortunate to be on a football team since 1999. I'm blessed and grateful for it."



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