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Super senior class, 'splosive playmakers have Raiders shooting for special season

By CLAY REYNOLDS
Sports Editor

You can never predict exactly where a season's going to go. But there are years when it's clear that something special is on the way.

For the 2025 West Laurens Raiders, the only question may be how special?

This fall on the Westside definitely has the makings of big things, but potentially some success on par with that of two other teams in recent history who stand out among the program's best ever. Both, in 2014 and 2019, won region championships and reached the state quarterfinals.

West Laurens will be shooting to achieve something similar in scale with a returning squad that has just as much going for it, if not more.

At the heart of the Raiders' character and football identity is a steadfast senior class that's the biggest and deepest so far in the four-year tenure of head coach Kip Burdette, as well as the first he's coached all the way through high school.

The star-studded group, as juniors, helped the Raiders come into their own in a breakout 2024 season that tallied eight wins and broke a two-year playoff drought. And its 21 players, each fully invested in a rebuilding process begun as ninth graders, plan on going out on as high a note as possible in their final year.

"I think they have pretty high expectations of themselves," Burdette said. "They have lofty goals for the season, and rightly so. They've been through a lot as a class. They've definitely taken their lumps and played a lot of ball and earned the opportunities they're going to have."

In addition to a unique collection of talent, the cohort is marked by qualities like work ethic, chemistry and commitment that, going by the stories of former coaches, have measured well above the norm all the way back to their time in middle school.

Burdette has just as many good things to say.

"They take the game pretty seriously," he said. "I don't think there's an amount of work that I can assign that's going to be too much. They don't mind the workload.

"Not only do they not mind work, but they're kind of fun to be around, too. They care about each other."

Among those players, you'll also find several Michael Jordan-esque leaders whose insistence on meeting a standard, and holding everyone to it, has turned them into coaches on the field.

"It's my first class where they ended up taking on the identity of the coaching staff," Burdette continued. "They don't know anything other than your way, so they repeat the same things you repeat, the same things that are important to me are important to them.

"The thing about this group is that the most talented ones are the hardest workers, too. It makes it a little bit easier for the coaching staff to get them to work hard when you don't have any prima donnas."

That quest for greatness is the backdrop for a season that will have West Laurens back in the thick of a competitive region 4-AAA title race. And depending on how things develop, the Raiders should have every shot to make a run at it if they can put their best feet forward in the pivotal games.

Their team is built around a handful of "marquee guys," but none more generational than Ty Cummings, who broke a number of school records (season points, game and season yards, season touchdowns) last season, and should wipe out at least three more in the books this year.

A primary quarterback his first two seasons, the Georgia Southern commit flourished in an all-of-the-above skill role last season that saw him do a little bit of everything.

"He makes my job easy," Burdette said. "He is a hard worker in the weight room. He beats me to the building sometimes. He is just happy to be there. He loves West Laurens football. He is a great kid, and I can't sing his praises enough."

Though he also took handoffs and caught frequent passes, Cummings was at his most dangerous taking direct snaps from a wildcat package, out of which offensive coordinator Gabe Gay got to display a lot of creativity.

Between those, and their standard personnel packages with him as a traditional back, the Raiders plan to build around the very basic stuff in which he excels... simply getting to space and outrunning people.

But plan on seeing a lot of wrinkles that'll continue to keep the region's defenses on their toes.

"We'll definitely have some stuff for Ty to do," Burdette said. "He can do a lot of things and we move him around a lot."

An underrated piece of last year's offensive puzzle was first-year quarterback Cason Pollock, who seemed to improve steadily from game 1 through 11.

The senior has taken plenty of initiative this summer in the progression of not just his own skills, but also the entire passing attack by getting his skill athletes together frequently to throw and catch during their own time on evenings and weekends.

Burdette has seen some improvements in Pollock's field vision, and the caliber of throws – a couple he delivered late in last year's final two games at Baldwin – since last November.

"The kids, they respect him. I think they always pull for him, and I think they want him to be our QB," Burdette said. "I think he's primed to have a big year, and he's starting to do some things to make himself a complete quarterback, not just a ball-conveyor. He can run the ball a little bit, has a good arm and good command of the huddle."

Cummings, and rightly so, is the focal point of the backfield, but has had to carry a lot of West's offensive hopes on his shoulders the past couple seasons.

Classmate Branden Brooks (another trackster who can scoot) was involved in a supporting skill role both years, but will be needed in the biggest way this year to help lighten that load carrying the football.

"I would love to see him kind of get in there, get comfortable and take over some games," Burdette said.

Not to be overlooked down the Raiders' tailback depth chart is Shannon Adkins, a physical downhill runner they reserved last year for short yardage, goal line and red zone situations, who epitomizes pounding the rock.

Sophomore Braylen Robinson, who's developing a feel for everything else involved in the job besides just carrying the ball, will also mix in occasionally.

Senior Evan Holmes is slated to take over for the "tough to replace" Daniel Lisbey at H-back, in the role of a hybrid tight end and lead blocker whose grittiness and smarts are key in the Raiders' run game.

Holmes has played only sporadically the last two years due to complications with a misdiagnosed knee injury. Though it's been properly repaired and healed, his confidence on it is still returning.

"He gives you a little flexibility right there," Burdette said. "He can split out wide, get in the box, run and catch a little bit. It's just going to be a good spot for him. I think you'll see him kind of mature in that position as the season goes along. I'm really pulling for him because of the injuries. He's such a good kid, too."

The rest of a rotation at that position, as well as the true tight end spot up on the line will be a committee of conscripts from the defensive line.

Juvon Hill finished the 2024 season with a team-leading 17 catches for 356 yards and seven touchdowns... all while starting at corner and also helping lead the squad in picks on the defensive side.

He was Pollock's go-to target, and should be again.

Hill has become even more well-rounded as a receiver over the offseason, and impressed at a Georgia Southern 7-on-7 event in June when there was seldom a play, offense or defense, he was not on the field. And many games may be that way for him this fall.

"He claims like he's Travis Hunter or something like that," Burdette said. "He never wants to come off. You have to make him come off."

Besides Hill, last year's receiving corps had some occasional pass catchers, but few who were consistently a threat to gain chunk yardage downfield. But even when relying on remaining athletes to dink and dunk, the Raiders' offense was plenty effective.

Junior Jaden Stanley will begin this season as the official No. 2, but as a likely every-snap defender at cornerback, figures to rotate in and out heavily with others... sophomores Duggan Malone and J.D. Hogan also helping out consistently.

Juniors Jeremy Brownlee and Blayne Becker (a baseball convert back out for football after last playing as a freshman) and senior Jayce Blash will also appear situationally.

The Raiders lost two of their five starters on the offensive front, but appear to be in very good shape between those they have back, and others who spent some time in the show last fall.

The returnees are seniors in Georgia Southern pledge Grady Howell at left tackle, Trey Williams at the adjacent guard and Tramel Tobler, who'll move full-time to center after bouncing between the position and right tackle last season.

Total, the O-line rotation will have about seven players covering the five positions. Incumbents have the left-hand side pretty well solidified. The right has been more of a "musical chairs" rotation.

A virtual lock to play somwehre in the mix – more than likely at right tackle – is 6-foot-6, 268 pound sophomore Jonathan Toney, a definite "big-time player"

"Before it's over with, I think he'll be a power 5 tackle," Burdette said.

Junior Christian Rozier, who filled in for injured starters at times last fall, will also get a solid look. Senior Michael Dasher and sophomore Lane Neal are also in the conversation.

"There's some big ole boys up there," CKB said. "They're unproven, but they've got some potential."

The Raiders are pretty well set in the kicking game for the foreseeable future with both their punter, Hogan, and placekicker, Malone, headed into year 2 as starters at the position.

Though only beginning to scratch the surface of some tremendous athletic potential, the two 10th graders got the job done as freshmen last year. Hogan put 10 punts inside the 20. Malone hit 93 percent of his try kicks and delivered a key field goal for the Raiders to close the first half in the playoffs against Baldwin.

The pair of specialists should take another step forward this fall, Malone with consistent touchbacks not far from reach.

"He's about two ham sandwiches away from kicking it in the end zone," Burdette said. "We're getting a little closer. We're kicking it down there. We just need to beef up a little bit more, and get a little more oomph in that thing."

Howell is back for his third season snapping it long, in a skill Burdette believes has bolstered his recruiting.

"With colleges cutting rosters to 105, that's been a tiebreaker, because he can launch that thing, too," he said.

Hill handled punt returns last year. Hogan and Pollock will again rotate as holder on field goals.

Cummings and Brooks are expected to lead the kick runback group. And last year, sending it anywhere within reach of the former was a questionable strategy. Opponents did it six times, and six too many, at the expense of 286 return yards and a couple of touchdowns.

On defense West's front six was insanely deep last year. And the group lost just two guys... end Je'Lan Williams and hybrid linebacker/end Jordan Hall.

Up front, there are at least seven who will keep a rotation of fresh legs going steady. Seniors Evan Williams, Keith Walker and Ethan Cason-Guyton will make up a first wave of elder statesmen.

WEST LAURENS
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WEST LAURENS RAIDERS

AT A GLANCE...

HEAD COACH: Kip Burdette (4th season; 11-20 career)

OFFENSE: Spread-T
DEFENSE: 3-3 stack

2024: 8-3 (6-2 region 4-AAA)
FINISH: GHSA Playoffs (Lost to Baldwin in first round)

RETURNING STARTERS: 7 offense / 10 defense

KEY LOSSES: DB Johntavious Kellam (Averett); WR/DB Tyler Williams; TE/LB Daniel Lisbey; DL Je'Lan Williams; OL Hudson Hadden; OL Rob Gonzales

PLAYERS TO WATCH: ATH Ty Cummings, Sr. (Georgia Southern); OL Grady Howell, Sr. (Georgia Southern); RB/LB Shannon Adkins, Sr.; RB/DB Branden Brooks, Sr.; WR/DB Juvon Hill, Sr.; QB Cason Pollock, Sr.; DL Ethan Cason-Guyton, Sr.; DB Jayce Blash, Sr.

THE UPSIDES: Offensive weapons, experience and depth on defense
KEY CONCERN: Size up front

SCHEDULE...

8/22	Groves
8/29	North Clayton
9/05	at Howard* ($)
9/12	Cross Creek*
9/19	at Harlem* ($)
9/26	Baldwin* ($)
10/10	at Richmond Academy*
10/17	Hephzibah*
10/24	at Aquinas*
10/31	Westside Augusta* ($)

** – Region 4-AAA*
($) – Pivotal games



CUMMINGS AND GOINGS: Big runs up and down the field by Ty Cummings, this one part of his record-breaking night at Baldwin in the first round of the 2024 playoffs, have been frequent enough in recent years for West Laurens to count on as part of its Friday night routine. The Georgia Southern commit will be surrounded by weapons, but is again likely to carry the Raiders wherever they wind up going as the spearhead of another explosive attack this fall/**DANNY SCARBORO, File**

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ON THE COVER...

A selection of top players, at least one to represent each of the area's 14 schools, are positioned across a visual depiction of the 10 counties that make up the Heart of Georgia. Can you spot them all?

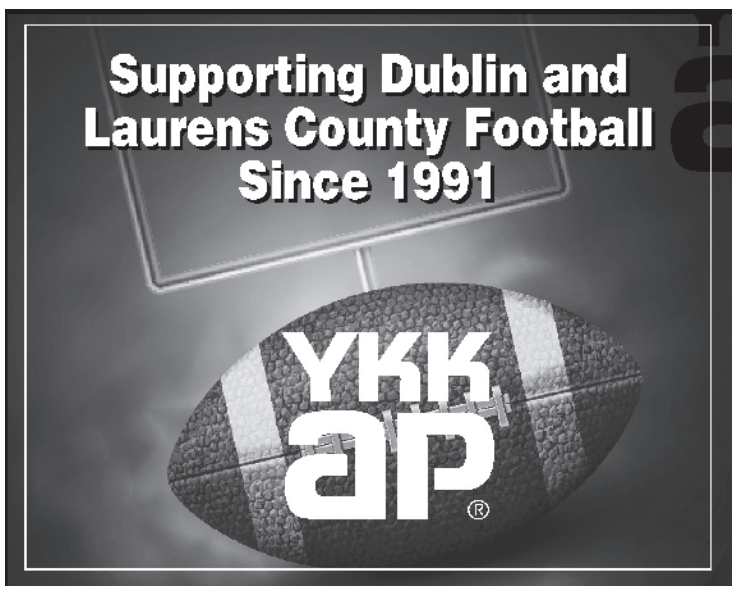
In a counterclockwise spiral, from center: Trinity K **Wade Register** (7) and QB **Asher Evans** (6); West Laurens RB **Ty Cummings**; Dublin DE **Quantavis Lovett**; East Laurens WR **Bryson Hazley**; Treutlen QB **Kavion Peeples**; Johnson County RB **Tayshawn Norris** and QB **Nathan Turberville**; Brentwood QB **Baylor Cobb** and RB **Tristan Robinson** (in a celebration after winning last year's state championship); Washington County QB **Mack May**; Wilkinson County RB **Terrelle Blount**; Twiggs County OL **Rhaje Brown**; Bleckley County DT **Tug Pasby**; Dodge County QB **Kain Mincey**; Wheeler County RB **Alvin Ricks**; Montgomery County OL **Jayden Roberson**.

Graphic composed of GTLN file photos by Horace Austin, Zach Dawson, Lyle Dorman, Danny Scarboro, Jason Vorhees, Clay Reynolds, and special photos courtesy of Wilkinson County High School and Montgomery County Athletics.

EDITOR'S NOTES...

Some historical data in this section was researched using archives of the Georgia High School Football Historians Association, which can be accessed online at **GHSFHA.org**.





Young core crafting new identity, but Crusaders confident they can cash in on elite kicking game

By CLAY REYNOLDS
Sports Editor



TAKING NAMES: Wade Register, with his knack for running through defenders like this one out of Edmund Burke, was such a force carrying the ball in 2024 that many teams had his number by the end of the season. This year, the senior has a mind to make an example of just as many would-be tacklers, and at least a few of last year's opponents who are still on his list. But Trinity expects to be more than a one-man band on offense, with several complementary playmakers in the backfield that should keep him fresh, and defenses from keying on him quite as hard/DANNY SCARBORO, File

Earlier this summer, Trinity players had their physical and mental limits tested as they endured a night of team-building challenges their head coach Bruce Lane calls "The Crucible."

The grueling experience, which he reinvents in slightly different fashion each summer, was made up mostly of competitive conditioning drills that they took on in teams, with some unusual (but not necessarily cruel) consequences for the losers in between.

That part of the exercise, which left most exhausted and wet, will probably the one the Crusaders remember most vividly. But before things got so crazy, it's a much simpler, more intricate task their small groups faced indoors to start the evening – assembling a jigsaw puzzle – that may go down as the most fitting metaphor for their upcoming season.

This young team has a lot of pieces... and several big ones that will no doubt be cornerstones of the roster, centerpieces of their identity or important components of their weekly competitive edge.

But for many of the lesser known quantities, it's unclear of yet where or how they fit.... just like it's too early to see or tell much of what this season has the makings of.

Most of it, for Trinity coaches and athletes, will come down to finding the best use for the pieces that come in their box. And in football, as much as life, there's rarely a big picture on the front of it to help guide you.

"Every year in high school, unless you're at a huge program, you're always going to be trying to find those ingredients," Lane said. "I tell our kids, we're putting a puzzle together. We've got the pieces, we just have to put them in the right places."

There's guesswork in some of the assembly, but little of it around a player who'll likely be a component of everything the Crusaders do.

For senior Wade Register, who's got something to offer every facet of the three phases short of quarterbacking and line play, the only question will be how much or how little to use him in each department.

His biggest upside lies on special teams, where last season he boomed kickoffs at an average of 58 yards a pop (37 to the end zone for touchbacks) and punts at a range of 48 (with 11 stopped inside the 20), converted 31 out of 32 PAT kicks and knocked through seven of 10 field goal attempts, the longest 48.

Register's raw ability, documented by Kohls Kicking in the offseason as among the best in the class, earned multiple college offers – the biggest an opportunity to punt at Georgia that he committed to in June – as well as a coveted invite to play in the Under Armour All-America game.

"Wade, as a kicker and punter, just exploded," Lane said. "I think a lot of that is just the dedication that he and his family put into it, going to a national kicking camp and being rated as the top punter in the nation."

Also a universal fit everywhere else on offense and defense, the 6-foot-2, 220-pounder took versatility to a new level for Trinity with its team lead in rushing (1,152 yards and 12 touchdowns) and tackles (116), along with eight catches (two for touchdowns) and a couple of forced fumbles.

Those are skills the Crusaders will rely on almost as heavily with Register as their No. 1 tailback and inside linebacker, though the secondary roles will also be part of a delicate balance critical to keeping him fresh, healthy and at his best in those kicking duties that, all told, are the most indispensable on Friday nights.

Though that's almost exclusively what he'll be doing at the next level, it should be noted that his well-rounded resumé in football, and other past or present sports (track and soccer included) did a lot for his recruitment.

"Every football coach that came through here... their No. 1 thing is, he's definitely a great punter and kicker, but he's a football player," Lane said. "I think the toughness he displayed as a running back, carrying it 15-16 times a game and making 10 or so tackles a game, along with that, just showed the mental strength you have to have in that position. That will help him be successful."

The fit is considerably less clear-cut for many of the Crusaders' younger players who are still in the process of developing, and discovering where they belong on the field.

And the ultimate landing spot for one of them, rising sophomore Asher Evans, between a number of prospective skill positions had a bit of a domino effect for many of the rest this preseason.

Evans, who reeled in eight passes for two touchdowns along with a team-leading four interceptions as a receiver and DB last year, has long been tabbed as Trinity's quarterback-in-waiting, and was backup to Ben Castro-Poveda in 2024.

The vacant position (which he last played as a middle schooler) was up for grabs in an open competition this summer with senior teammate (and former West Laurens Middle signal caller) Jakob Sahli, but some due diligence on both players has deemed Evans the best option, with Sahli having the most to offer as backup, and a regular running back and wideout.

Those two, along with Register, are largely the only established members of a very new-look skill group this season. The Crusaders graduated each of their top three pass-catchers (all in the double-digits last season), and are moving Evans as the fourth behind center, so the position is almost entirely "up for grabs."

The recent addition of transfer Ja'Marion Ricks, a 6-foot-3, 225-pound junior who was part of a deep tight end room at Dublin, will inject some intriguing size and athleticism into the rotation otherwise made up of returnees including sophomore Hein Schaaf, junior Griffin Lane and seniors Alston Bryan and Charlie Maffett.

Sophomore Tripp Mascaro will also fit into the passing game mix with a move from the line out to tight end, where the Crusaders are hopeful to utilize his "big body and good hands."

It's a totally rebuilt passing game, but showed a lot of progress over the course of June as Trinity took on some elite competition in 7-on-7 tournaments at Georgia Tech and FPD before one in its backyard at the end of the month that – due to multiple starters being out – afforded some valuable reps to the No. 2s and 3s at most positions.

"We held our own, played well and gained some confidence," Lane said. "We feel like from beginning of summer to end of May to where we are in the preseason, that we are probably a little ahead of schedule."

Mason Lane was projected to join Register and Sahli as a third running back.

The offensive line underwent some offseason adjustments, but brings back enough in the way of experience and tools to feel good about.

Last year's center, rising sophomore Cody Register, is slated to shift out to right tackle. Senior Carter Lee is the projected bookend on the left side.

In the middle, sophomore Andrew Helton is fairly solidified as one of two potential guards. The other spot will feature either one of or both juniors Aiden George and Corbin Albritton (a transfer from West Laurens). Senior Nolan Terry, a lineman with some experience and a start or two last season, worked the bulk of the summer at center.

Junior Braden Underwood, who started on the line last year but has also shifted outside to play as more of a tight end and blocking back, is available as a potential stopgap up front "in an emergency-type situation."

With the shifts in personnel, look for some tweaks to the Crusaders' offensive schematics... but less in the what than the how.

In a change from a method of operation for Lane's teams since about 2020, they'll now use less of the "sniffer," a tight end-fullback hybrid near the line on the edge of formations that was popularized by current Florida State offensive coordinator during his time at Auburn, instead gravitating more toward symmetrical formations resembling those of Rich Rodriguez's West Virginia that place both backs at equal depth more of the time.

The methods of attack, from quarterback run and zone reads to highly useful run-pass options, will all be the same, just from a different presentation.

Lane, with brothers Rob and Ben East as his right- and left-hand men running the offense, also plan to take some pages from the book of Georgia Tech offensive coordinator Buster Faulkner with their use of motion, shifts and a variety of formations to keep defenses "in conflict" as they scramble to line up.

But getting back to Jimmies and Joes, Trinity envisions some added versatility from a year ago with the increased RPO threat created by Evans behind center, and hopefully a few opportunities he can also produce with his arm.

"Last year, I think everybody said, Oh, we're going to stop Wade Register, and we stop them," Lane said. "This year, I think we'll be a little bit less one-dimensional."

The Crusaders' defensive staff, with Christian Lane in charge, has spent just as much time in the lab this summer working to tailor things to the specific strengths of this year's roster.

"I think you can't be so caught up on a system that you don't take advantage of the talent you have," Lane said. "Last year, our kids played really well and I feel like we used our talent very well. Last year, and this year, it's a different identity. Some of the things we did last year we probably won't do this year, on both sides of the football.

"It's like going to Golden Corral and the buffet. You pick out what you want this particular year. The system doesn't change, but the system has different options, and you just pull out the things that work for you."

Trinity's main losses on defense are up front, where the serviceable Shepherd twins and physical beast Anthony Frank-Woji leave a huge void.

Mascaro and Cody Register both played snaps at end last season. Trinity is exploring options of using both at the same spot, and potentially moving one inside to tackle, where Lee, George and sophomore Blake Simms are also contenders.

Register, Underwood and Sahli put the Crusaders in a strong position at linebacker.

Evans and Maffett are returning among the four roles in the secondary.

As on offense, many younger players with their chance to earn some time on the field will round out the lineup.

When it comes to roster size, the Crusaders have all the limitations of most of their peers, but within that, there is some depth... and capacity to establish more as the season approaches and progresses.

"With a 28-man roster, you're going to hear some of the same names over and over again," Lane said. "You'd love to have (more), but the reality is the folks we're going to line up against are going to have 27-28 players, too. And it's just a matter of getting our kids coached up, which I feel very confident in our coaching staff, that we'll do that, and getting them in shape."

If there's anything Trinity will be hanging its hat on this fall, it's one of the most fundamental truths in football: The more distance you put between the other team and the end zone, the harder it will be for them to score on you.

Lane believes in the "hidden yardage" that's found in the kicking game, and last year, Trinity created a lot of it solely with the leg of Register. His rate of touchbacks mostly ruled out kick returns, and his punts, in many cases taking the line from one 20 to near the other, also allowed the Crusaders an escape from deep in their own territory.

That's before you even get to how important picking up a reliable three when your drive stalls in plus territory can be to a team's chances of winning a close game.

"I would doubt there's anybody in our league, or at our level anyway, maybe even across the state, that has a better kicking game than what we'll have," he said. "When you're kicking the ball in the end zone on kickoffs, they're starting at the 20 yard line every time. When you make them go 80 yards, the percentages say the further you have to go, the less the possibility of success. We saw that in a couple of games last year where we only had to get to about the 30 yard line to be in a position to score points."

Lane also sees potential this season for a banner year blocking punts, which Trinity did more than half a dozen times in 2024.

The Crusaders' success in the department has a little to do with scheme... and a special teams playbook taking after the tactics of Joe Wessel, a Bobby Bowden-era assistant at FSU, that has been the basis of Lane's aggressive approach to punt defense for years. But it relied equally as much on the tenacity of players like Carson Shepherd, who had a hand in most of them.

"Scheme is part of it, but you have to have people like a Carson Shepherd who are gonna peel their ears back and just go get it," Lane said. "As much as scheme in any phase of the game, when you're talking about trying to go get a punt, it takes somebody who has that type of personality, that goes full speed and it'll

TRINITY
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TRINITY CHRISTIAN CRUSADERS AT A GLANCE...

HEAD COACH: Bruce Lane (2nd season, 250-162-1 career)

OFFENSE: Multiple
DEFENSE: 4-man front

2024: 6-5 (1-2 district 3)
FINISH: GIAA Playoffs (lost to Gatewood in first round)

RETURNING STARTERS: 6 offense / 6 defense

KEY LOSSES: QB/DB Ben Castro-Poveda; WR/DB Cruz Giles; TE/DL Carson Shepherd; OL/DL Cam Shepherd; OL/DL Anthony Frank-Woji

PLAYERS TO WATCH: ATH/K/P Wade Register (Georgia), Sr.; QB/DB Asher Evans, So.; ATH/LB Jakob Sahli, Sr.; TE/DL Tripp Mascaro, So.; WR/DL Jamarion Ricks, So.; OL/DL Cody Register, So.; OL/DL Carter Lee, Sr.

THE UPSIDES: Special teams dominance, offensive versatility
KEY CONCERN: Depth

SCHEDULE...

8/15	at Brentwood
8/22	Gatewood ($)
8/29	at Edmund Burke ($)
9/5	Augusta Prep
9/12	Windsor
9/19	at Thomas Jefferson
9/26	at Central Fellowship
10/10	at Southland* ($)
10/17	Southwest Georgia*
10/24	Robert Toombs* ($)

** – District 6 A/AA*
($) – Pivotal games

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'Committed to the climb': Falcons look to earn their wings, improve consistency along playoff flight plan

By CLAY REYNOLDS
Sports Editor

The East Laurens Falcons did some soaring at several points during 2024, but on a flight pattern that was pretty erratic.

Their roster, armed with some exciting young weapons, showed off a lot of what it could do at every opportunity to open up the throttle.

But with the lively thrust, and few on the team with experience controlling it at several thousand feet, came a tendency to maneuver too hard, slip into stalls and potentially crash. Competitive through halftime in most every game, East Laurens rarely experienced the last of those scenarios.

But the many shootouts, in which the Falcons usually recovered to hold their own, proved the steep, daring trajectory to be a bit more ambitious than they were ready to handle.

Last season, taking off and achieving altitude was the easy part. Maintaining it for a smooth arrival at the destination – much less surviving multiple dogfights with air-superior region powers along the way – was where things got a little bumpy for East's inexperienced crew.

The Falcons are hopeful that a year of added flight time has helped many of the same young aviators master more of the craft as they head just as fearlessly into a new campaign.

"Our theme for this year is 'Committed to the climb,'" said East Laurens head coach Jesse Hicks. "I told the guys, you can't ask for elevation and don't expect a little turbulence as you climb. You just have to learn how to climb and just do it again."

When all was said and done last season, they only ended up just one win away from making the playoffs.

Though the Falcons aren't big on moral victories... and they were by no means satisfied with their record or finish in the region... they also haven't lost sight of the fact that where they landed wasn't all that far from where they were aiming.

A different result came down to some winnable swing games: A six-point loss at ACE, a one-pointer to WACO in which their late lead got away and a toe-stubber at Southwest to close things out.

Things started out in encouraging fashion with a shakedown flight to start the season, though their comeback win to break a long drought against Johnson County could be attributed in part to a late nose-dive by the Trojans. But then the Falcons, in the words of their head coach, "seemed to have gotten satisfied."

They'd make plenty of noise in multiple games to follow, nearly breaking the sound barrier in a frenetic start at Dublin the following week, and trading some similar fire with others who had them a bit outmatched over four quarters.

"We were in a lot of games, and our kids were fighting, but we never really got to that feeling that we wanted to get back to," Hicks said. "(Johnson County) was a big win for us, but I told 'em the other day, you've gotta treat praise like perfume. You've gotta sniff it, you've gotta smell it, but you can't drink it. It's poison. You have to just smell it and keep going... We can't get satisfied. We were 3-7, let's be honest... We were in some, but I think there was some satisfaction to the point where we thought we'd arrived, and we definitely had not."

The lessons should prove valuable for an East Laurens team that's aiming to fly further in 2025 as it continues to capitalize on a wave of young talent that was only beginning to emerge last fall.

But across the roster, some added experience to go along with a lot of promising skill sets, should bode well for hopes of improvement.

Key players who graduated all left some big shoes – Georgia State Panther Ty Snead at both quarterback and safety, super-specialist Carson Smith at kicker, punter and wideout and linemen Brandon McWilliams and Wesley Stanley on both sides of the trenches.

But in total, the impact of graduation amounted to just a small portion of the grand scheme.

And a whole bunch of the players carrying the rest of the load last year were youngsters paying their dues.

"It's gonna sound crazy, but we didn't have a bunch of seniors," Hicks said. "We've got great numbers, and it's well-documented how many of our younger players played as freshmen and sophomores who are now sophomores and juniors who got those reps. I thought that was really important. Experience is always the best teacher, but it's also the best molder of young football players. I think it's going to pay off."

Headlining the squadron of budding top guns are a couple players for whom the sky's the limit in terms of development potential.

Sophomore Major Floyd, who paced wideouts with 23 grabs for 375 yards and a score in 2024, is on track to be "one of top wide receivers in the state of Georgia, just as a 10th grader."

College offers are already starting to trickle in for Floyd, and in even bigger numbers for senior lineman Caleb Jackson, who logged 41 tackles and two sacks, along with a kind of unheard-of two interceptions (one for a touchdown) – as a junior a year back.

At 6-foot-1, 275, he's a pretty formidable athlete at this level of ball, and the Falcons expect to lean on him in a big way at either guard or center – depending on who winds up being the best fit to snap it – on the offensive side, and at a number of spots along their variety of defensive fronts.

Other athletes sharing some of that unreal potential include sophomore Bryson Hazley, who's probably headed for a breakout season at receiver and DB, and classmate Demarcio Holliman, who has been "really looking good" catching balls and blocking out of the slot.

Senior Cayson Wadley and juniors Jaden Wright and Jaden Griffin are also set to be part of the wideout situation. Also keep an eye out for Aveone Wicker, a small, but lively freshman who will be featured in some situations.

"He's extremely fast, extremely quick," Hicks said. "He can lose you, now."

Defenders Logan Clements, a senior, and Jeren Ballard, a sophomore, are leading the way for the Falcons at tight end positions that will see some increased play in the run-friendly personnel packages they plan to use a lot early while feeling out their new identity in the passing game.

Senior Norrion King is back for his third year as a regular ball-carrier, and will be a serviceable one as the Falcons' lead tailback.

"Norrion's definitely gonna be a spark for us," Hicks said. "We want to run the ball, and we think he's going to do a good job."

Sophomore Lagen Mack and junior Jeremiah Rozier will be the primary backups.

Now, who's going to get the ball to those guys?

Presently, three players are vying for the opportunity to follow Ty Snead in the quarterback job, where some big shoes were left behind from his senior season as East's leading rusher, passer and scorer.

As of mid-July, it was younger brother Skyler Snead who was leading the competition.

The rising junior, due to injury issues, hasn't played much football since making the jump from middle to high school, but is in position to break onto the scene for the first time this fall.

"He had an awesome spring, and he's doing real well right now," Hicks said.

But both Jason Giles – an incoming senior who backed up Ty last season – and freshman Zanorrian Ellington – whose tools throwing and running have also been impressive – are potentially capable options as well.

"Right now, I couldn't tell you who our starter would be," Hicks said. "But Sky and (Ellington) have had great offseasons, and have done great during the summer. Jason's just been real steady at what he does."

The "wild card" Ellington, however, will no doubt find a home elsewhere if QB's not the best fit at the moment, with a set of skills that can be useful at "every position on the field, both sides."

"He has a wow factor to him," Hicks said.

EAST LAURENS FALCONS

AT A GLANCE...

HEAD COACH: Jesse Hicks (2nd season, 136-115 career)

OFFENSE: Spread
DEFENSE: Multiple/3-4

2024: 3-7 (2-7 region 2-High A)
FINISH: Missed playoffs

RETURNING STARTERS: 7 offense / 9 defense

KEY LOSSES: QB/DB Ty Snead (Ga. State); WR Kemo Mitchell; WR/K/P Carson Smith; DL Brandon McWilliams; OL/DL Wesley Stanley

PLAYERS TO WATCH: WR/DB Major Floyd, So.; OL/DL Caleb Jackson, Sr.; WR/DB Bryson Hazley, So.; RB/LB Norrion King; TE/LB Logan Clements, Sr.; OL/UTIL Raquis Stanley, Sr.

THE UPSIDES: Firepower at skill positions, increased experience
KEY CONCERN: Consistency and ability to finish in key games

SCHEDULE...

8/15	at Johnson Co.
8/22	Dublin*
8/29	at Bleckley Co.* ($)
9/05	Central Macon*
9/19	at Dodge Co.*
9/26	ACE Charter* ($)
10/03	Southwest Macon* ($)
10/17	at Washington Co.* ($)
10/24	Jefferson Co.*
10/31	at Northeast Macon*

** – Region 2-High A*
($) – Pivotal games



ACTION JACKSON: East Laurens D-linemen Caleb Jackson totes back one of his two interceptions from last season for a pick-six against WACO. The 6-foot-1, 275-pounder has shown over a handful of seasons working in the trenches that he can do a lot more than your average lineman, and the Falcons will be relying on Jackson not only for key blocks and disruptive plays at the point of attack, but also as a source of excitement for a D-line that loves the highlight reel/CLAY REYNOLDS, File

Back on the lines, it's Jackson, senior Raquis Stanley and junior Kayleb Butler who compose the experienced core the Falcons will depend on both directions.

Freshman Jatuan Wright, sophomore Amaree Daniels and junior Travunta Carroll are offensive linemen who've shown the most promise among a much younger wave of players in the trenches who are in the running to earn time on the field.

"I'm really happy with what we're getting from these guys," Hicks said.

Jackson and Butler will be major space eaters in the D-line rotation, with Stanley bringing a scrappy edge and penchant for forcing fumbles, that should create some matchup problems for each other, or other defensive teammates.

"You win football games in the trenches," Hicks said. "Those guys don't get a lot of the limelight, but at the end of the day, if you can move people, you can win on both sides of the ball."

Clements, who finished three shy of Ty Snead's team high in total tackles last year, is back as East's main stopper in the middle of the linebacking corps, and a prospective captain as well.

"He's not just being a good football player, but being a good leader," Hicks said. "He's exactly like you like: a great kid off the field, but he's got a nasty disposition when he plays the position of linebacker."

Rozier, sophomore Jaxten Thomas and senior Luis Roman also return at the position, which is probably the Falcons' most experienced. Mack and Ballard will also be part of the equation on the edges in many of their looks.

In the secondary, Snead's loss at free safety leaves a big hole that will be filled, in part, by Floyd who started alongside as a freshman at strong safety, and demonstrated a knack for covering field, and picking the ball off.

Hazley, the Falcons' co-interceptions leader with Snead and just as exciting a coverage man at corner, will be stepping back to officially take his place in center field.

Holliman and Jaden Wright will play corner. Working in at various spots will be Wicker and sophomore Jamari Harvey. Gary Stockton, a junior kin to Baybay Thomas who's making his way back out for football after a year away, has also caught a few eyes this summer.

"Gary's been a great surprise," Hicks said.

On special teams, Smith's leg talent will be hard to replace. But the Falcons began preparing a succession plan by training Giles as a punt and kickoff man late last season.

"He's matured to be, I think, one of the better kickers in the region, and he punts the ball extremely well," Hicks said.

All the while, he's been challenged by a new turnout in junior John Thang, one of Smith's soccer teammates, who could also be valuable if he can translate his leg strength to the mechanics of football kicking.

On the Falcon coaching staff, East Laurens product Jamie Jackson has joined as a linebackers coach this offseason.

Three other additions are all ironically graduates of Fort Valley State (a rival of Hicks' Albany State), where each were teammates. Emmanuel Boone, who coached last year at Dublin Middle School, will be taking over the offensive line position, and is a coach Hicks sees great potential in as a future coordinator. Two others were recent skill players at Montgomery County, Shaw Robinson and Kris Daniels.

Each of the three, in addition to relating well to a generation only a few years younger, are also still in the shape to do a lot of things on the field they could as high school and college players.

"(They) could probably still play football," Hicks said. "They do a great job of not just giving the information, but actually doing the same drills and showing them what to do."

Schematically, the Falcons will look virtually identical on both offense and defense.

Both second-year coordinators – Andrew Satterwhite on offense and Ryan Selby helming the D – have focused on simplifying their playbook to emphasize quality over quantity... and the handful of things their players will be able to do very well, rather than a lot that's just OK.

"We want our kids to be good at mastering something, so I told our coordinators that if someone said they were going to watch East Laurens football, what would be the one thing they know they would see, that we'd hang our hat on?"

At points last season, he said it felt like the volume of new information players were asked to digest and retain in meetings and practices amounted to opening up a firehose.

This year, though less of the concepts are foreign, Hicks is trying to serve them out in more reasonable portions, while hammering home the importance of "finishing what we do."

"One of the things I want us to do is just get better at the basics, one block at a time," he said. "Sometimes you can give kids too much... We're concentrating on attention to detail with the smaller things, run blocking and tackling, doing a better job of tackling the football in open space, doing a better job of getting off the field on third down, improving efficiency in the red zone and running the ball in general."

And sometimes, "the only way to get a good situation on third down is for your first down situation to be better," Hicks added.

Progress, which has been evident among last year's freshmen who are now sophomores, sophomores who are now juniors and juniors who are now seniors, has been a definite theme over the offseason, with "attention to detail" as the characteristic that seems to have developed the most in the entire cohort over a year's time.

The initiative, in particular, shown by this 12th grade class has made it "one of the better senior groups I've ever had in my coaching career," Hicks said. "All of these guys, they're actually leading by example... They're starting to pay a lot more attention to what they're doing and how they're doing it."

The Falcons' work, in a loaded region 2-High A that amounts to a weekly fight for survival, will be cut out for them once again.

"We play in the SEC of 1A football," Hicks said. "This is a very tough region."

And he wouldn't have it any other way.

In his words, easy wins make for a soft football team, and one ill-prepared for the realities of life.

"So I don't want any easy wins," he said. "Kids've gotta grow from every experience."

Back at his previous coaching stop in Baldwin, Hicks made a point of putting together the toughest non-region slate he could find. Both years here at East, schedule-building takes considerably less legwork with only one free week to work with, but there's little question their set of games will offer a great measuring stick every week.

"You've gotta play playoff football in August and September so your kids are ready when it's the playoffs," Hicks said. "Our region sets you up to be successful. If you can play with the guys in our region, you can play with anybody in the state of Georgia... Your kids are not surprised at anything they're going to see, because they've already been battle-tested."

And he's hopeful many of East's now-experienced fliers will be better able to stay the course, and keep their seatbelts fastened, upon hitting the rough pockets of air that once got them rattled.

"We're going to have to be able to pick ourselves up when things don't go well," Hicks said. "When I first got the job, I looked at film, and we would start out doing great, but then by the time something bad happened, we kind of nose-dived. That's what we can't do."

Once again, the Falcons are clear for takeoff into some volatile skies as they taxi into position for another rollercoaster flight.

But their ever-developing talent, experience and depth, which is still at least a year away from peaking, offers a lot of optimism that some positive things are just over the horizon.

"The future's very bright," Hicks said. "You don't want to jump the gun. I'm not a predictor, but right now, I think we're going to make some noise and these kids are going to turn the corner."

Irish eyes on QB battle, but beef up front, depth across board still big strengths for defending region champs

By CLAY REYNOLDS
Sports Editor

Coming off the loss of a huge and valuable senior class, Dublin is – in no surprise – putting a lot together as it resets with a new roster and revamped lineup for the upcoming season.

But never before have the new pieces fallen into place quite as well as they have for the Irish this summer.

Roger Holmes, who's beginning his 35th season as a head coach and a 24th wearing Green and Gold, has seldom before – if ever – been able to say what he can about how seamlessly his player rotations could fit together if the preseason depth chart holds true.

South of the college level, it's rare that you find teams who run a true two-platoon, with players assigned exclusively to offense or defense.

Most high schools, realistically, shoot for an ideal that tends to be Dublin's working goal in a given season: Build enough depth to where, even though most players will have to see action in each direction, as few as possible have to play starting snaps on both sides of the ball.

And this year, with just three players across the board projected for that double-duty, looks like it'll be as close as the Irish have ever come to achieving a perfect equilibrium.

"That is unique for Dublin," Holmes said, with the caveat that plenty is liable to change. "I'd like it to stay that way, but we haven't put pads on yet."

As it stands, only junior Jamarcus Knight (a running back and safety), senior Quantavis Lovett (playing tight end and defensive end) and junior Travion Bostic (a wingback and corner) are presently expected to have to play a full load of snaps each Friday night, as "committed two-way players that we don't need leaving the field."

The rest of the Irish No. 1s, presumably, will be able to rotate into games as a backup on the opposite side of the football, in an arrangement that will, more often than not, afford them opportunities between trips out to catch their breath and get coached up on the sideline.

Injuries or other unforeseen circumstances tend to alter status quo. And most years, the real practices and games come August will offer better insight into strengths and weaknesses than coaches can gauge in the summer.

"We always do it on paper, but productivity on the field was so significantly different. Hopefully we don't see that significant a difference," Holmes said.

And, in an encouraging sign, the fact that out of 24-25 players populating the two-deep, most are very similar in strength, size and system knowledge, with "not much separating them," seems to foreshadow some depth that will put Dublin in an enviable position.

"The more kids you can play, the better off you're going to be," Holmes said.

The Irish will be going back to the beginning on many things as they break in new starters over about two thirds of the lineup.

With over 70 out for the squad, replacing the talent and production isn't a concern. But getting those fresh players ready to roll, finding out where each best belongs and getting each plugged in properly to the rebooted lineup is a challenge they fully expected to be facing.

Things seem to be coming together at about the pace they should.

"It's gone well," Holmes said of the team's summer session. "There's so much you're trying to get done with a very inexperienced group of guys as you're trying to dot every I and cross every T. But I feel like our young men have upheld the standard of getting in, getting their work in and doing what they're supposed to do."

Most of the core that led last season's region title and state semifinal run has moved on, leaving Dublin to replace a slew of skill athletes that included their third-year starting quarterback, three of four top rushers and both leading pass-catchers on offense, and six of its seven top tacklers on D.

The biggest chunk of players return along the offensive line, which includes the tight end position, though the overhaul has reshuffled most of the returning starters.

There's been a lot to feel out, but the Irish are concerned with little other than the timeline thanks to a well-above average turnout that's put such a weath of tools in their toolbox, it gets a little heavy to tote along at times.

"You're trying to coach every one of them, and it's harder when you are trying to get inexperienced team to jell and find that right combination that fits," Holmes said.

Dublin won't have a ton of seniors, but is set to rely a good bit on the junior class behind them that's stacked with talent and potential, a good bit that was untapped on a senior-dominated 2024 squad.

By far the biggest question mark lies at the quarterback position, where three candidates have been involved in a competitive battle that's had them mixing and matching signal callers constantly throughout the summer.

"Going in with three potential quarterbacks, and trying to have a legit evaluation on who that individual needs to be makes it a lot tougher because you're trying to get all of them reps with the starting group," Holmes said.

Senior Jeff Davis, Dublin's heir apparent and presumptive valedictorian, has backed up Micah O'Neal each of the last three seasons, and has a mastery of the playbook and option game that will make him tough to unseat in the top spot.

"He understands the system and has shown the ability to execute everything in our offense," Holmes said.

Sophomore co-contender Ryland Yates boasts considerably less experience – as a player who didn't begin working at the position until his ninth grade season last fall. But he brings some undeniable arm talent, and a great amount of upside once he can develop more "fluidity" that comes with seasoning.

"He's learning on the go," Holmes said.

A third candidate in Bennett Lake – who transferred back to Dublin this spring after a season on loan to GIAA state runner-up FPD – suffered an ill-timed ankle injury during spring practice that had him shelved through the end of June.

So the rising senior had some catching up to do when he returned, and still a touch limited, following the Fourth. But when Lake can finally play with full confidence on the repaired wheel, Holmes anticipates him holding his own in the battle, and sees realistic potential that he could climb the depth chart and win the job.

Bostic, who toted it 105 times for 866 yards and nine touchdowns in 2024, is Dublin's highest-producing returnee at running back.

But his remaining backfield mates will represent almost exclusively new faces.

Knight, with the help of junior Kye Young and senior Dorian Carcamo, will line up on the opposite side. Freshman Matthew Batts – a star on Dublin Middle School's region champion squad last fall – is one to watch in reserve of Bostic, with an explosive first cut and "cut above" physical presence for a freshman that calls back images of one of Dublin's best ever at the position.

"He reminds me a lot of Brian Wilcher," Holmes said. "If he hits the seam, he hits it at full speed. He's going to have a chance to contribute."

In line for the top job at fullback is junior Dontavious Cannon, another rising talent with an exciting blend of speed and dimensions who'll be "a load to tackle."

"He might be the fastest guy on the team," Holmes said. "When they line up and he gets out in the open, if he pops the trap, or the belly or the midline, it might be our band playing, because he can really get out and go."

He'll be backed up by junior Nazyon Mitchell and an offensive line transplant in Jaydon McRae.

Sophomore Will Wallace, who hauled in six passes at the position in some spot work last fall, is slated to take over as the main wideout, with junior Ja'Karian Jones as understudy.

Lovett serves as the tip of a massive iceberg at the tight end position, where the Irish have several other physical specimens in the mix including junior Zion Porter and sophomore "Will-J" Harris.

"We're pretty deep right there," Holmes said. "All of them have a tight end body, and the physicality we look for."

A retooled offensive front, including three returning starters (though none back in the same position they played last year), will carry on some exciting trends of size and strength that have defined the unit over the last handful of seasons.

The group has "a lot of depth," Holmes said. "Not seasoned depth, but they are good-looking, physical high school offensive linemen."

"They don't shave yet," he added. But they're big."

Returning starters in new places include the junior left guard Jayden O'Neal (who previously worked in the same spot on the right-hand side), junior center Domimarkeyo Walden (in a move from right tackle) and senior right guard Ta'Maj Carswell (transitioning from left tackle).

The group is bookended by relative newcomers in juniors Blake Luecke, on the left, and John Oliver, on the right.

Senior Isiah Redd and juniors Jalen Dardy, Mandarian Stanley, Wi'Tyreon Charleston and junior Deontae Walker form the second string, from left to right.

For the most part, you can flip-flop most of the names from the offensive second string to the first on the defensive side.

An exception is Lovett – Dublin's 2024 leader in sacks and hurries, with six each, and runner-up in tackles for loss with 14 – who'll likely be the next in a long line of college prospects defending off the edge.

Though he's the only man in the entire front seven expected to carry a two-way load, Dublin's tight end depth – along with the defensive backing of junior Patrick Caldwel – should give him ample opportunity to rest up when needed.

Down the line are Dardy (at the opposite end), Stanley and Walker (at tackles), with O-line starters Leucke, Walden and Oliver as respective backups.

It's a similar picture at linebacker, where the all-new lineup slates Porter on the strong side, Harris in the middle and Carcamo at the weak side post. Mitchell, Jayden O'Neal and Yates are slated as twos.

"So in the front seven, barring injury and any changes, there's only one player that's having to go both ways," Holmes said, speaking in late July.

The two remaining ironmen will start in the secondary, Bostic at weak corner and Knight at strong safety, with sophomore Gabe Carcamo and Wallace providing relief.

Young tops the depth chart at strong corner, just above Lake, who's a definite candidate to see significant time once healthy. Jones is working ahead of Batts in the top spot at free safety.

Both Dublin's incumbent kickers are intact: Junior Ethan Spivey and senior Urick Andrews. The past two seasons, the former had charge of free kicks while the latter handled most of the boots from scrimmage, and barring a change in plans, Holmes expects that arrangement to continue.

Davis and Wallace also return to take care of deep-snapping responsibilities. Wallace is scheduled to haul back punts, with Bostic, Knight and Lake slated as prospective kickoff returners.

The Irish will have two new additions to their coaching staff, though only one is an unfamiliar face. Newly-rehired Dublin Middle assistant principal Gary Morton is back from Lamar County to begin his second stint with the program, coaching running backs.

Newcomer Jarius Evans, fresh out of the college ranks as a player and GA coach, will take over for Ronald Bonner (who was hired back by WACO) mentoring the Irish receivers.

Dublin's widespread turnover – at a replacement rate about as high as anyone – has definitely affected its preseason odds of conquering the cutthroat competition in 2-High A for a second-straight year... in talkin' season straw polls that likely have others like Northeast, Dodge and Bleckley as slight favorites at the moment.

Holmes views the lay of the land in the league from behind center, where the Irish are one of a minority of teams whose quarterback situation is TBD.

Though they're not the only team replacing a starter there, most of the rest seem to have a surefire playmaker under center that'll be the focus of their attack.

The passing game potential of Bleckley and Southwest catches his eye. Young signal-callers at East and Northeast will be significant playmaking threats. Well-established starters at Dodge, WACO and ACE are also formidable.

"When you look at everyone in our region, it's just Dublin and Central where the question mark lies at quarterback," Holmes said.

But history holds that the Irish typically solve for variables quite quickly. So if they're able to get their offense humming and defense clicking right quickly, they're likely to field another formidable squad that's got what it needs to contend in the wide-open race.

"Hopefully we've got a good nucleus coming back, and can try to uphold those expectations of Dublin," Holmes said. "(Here), you don't get to rebuild. You've gotta try to figure out to reload."

DUBLIN FIGHTING IRISH

AT A GLANCE...

HEAD COACH: Roger Holmes (24th season, 279-123-1 career)

OFFENSE: Wing-T
DEFENSE: 4-3

2024: 13-1 (9-0 region 2-High A)
FINISH: Region champion; GHSA semifinals (lost to state champion Toombs Co.)

RETURNING STARTERS: 6 offense / 3 defense

KEY LOSSES: RB/LB Willie Batts (FVSU); RB/LB Xavier Bostic; QB/DB Micah O'Neal; OL/DL Antwain Hudson (GMC); DL/TE Brandon Chatman (Sewanee), OL/DL Kemauri McRae, OL/DL Brennan McCloud

PLAYERS TO WATCH: RB/DB Travion Bostic, Jr.; TE/DE Quantavis Lovett, Sr.; RB/DB Jamarcus Knight, Jr.; RB/DL Dontavious Cannon, Jr.; OL/DL Domimarkeyo Walden, Jr.; OL/DL Ta'Maj Carswell, Sr.

THE UPSIDES: Overall depth, reloaded lines of scrimmage
KEY CONCERN: Identifying QB1

SCHEDULE...

8/15	Swainsboro
8/22	at East Laurens*
8/29	Southwest Macon* ($)
9/05	at Washington Co.*
9/19	Jefferson Co.*
10/03	at ACE Charter*
10/10	at Northeast Macon* ($)
10/17	Bleckley Co.* ($)
10/23	at Central, Macon*
10/31	Dodge Co.* ($)

** – Region 2-High A*
($) – Pivotal games



BOTTOM-LINE BUSINESS: Skill athletes do the all-important work of getting the ball downfield and to the end zone, but in Dublin's Wing-T offense, that success starts with the blocking up front. And the Irish, once again this year, will have no lack of size, strength or depth on the offensive line as they welcome back multiple starters (off a unit instrumental in a 655-point effort that went down as the school's third-highest scoring season in history) and add to the ranks with plenty of comparable newcomers. The retooled unit (above) debuted against the formidable front-seven of Jeff Davis, and held its own during a spring scrimmage back in May/CLAY REYNOLDS

TRINITY

Continued from page 3

just be a matter of getting the right person or persons in those key spots."

While going so all-out does leave Trinity vulnerable to fakes, those – so far – haven't proven to be much of an issue.

"We didn't see that very much last year," Lane said. "A couple of times people tried, we ended up stopping it. But you slowed their coverage down, because they have to stay in there, and try and protect."

Of all a season's riddles, the most critical to solve involves neither players nor plays... rather, it's about perfecting the delicate but vital sense of chemistry that seems to be different with every new team.

Lane, who keeps close tabs on the vibes of his team, makes a point of doing his best to build the personality of each player into the program's larger culture, with a sense of "Big team, little me" that serves as a motto.

"We know the temperature in the locker room controls what goes on on the field," he said.

That bond within the team is the glue that keeps those puzzle pieces intact when the pressures of the season threaten to deconstruct their resolve. And it's something you have to hammer home just as much as the fundamentals, playbook and everyone's individual role to make sure they all stick together when things get tough.

"The mental conditioning of our athletes, and the spiritual conditioning, is as important as the physical conditioning," Lane said. "With a younger team, we have tried really hard this summer to be very basic. It's going to be like building blocks, but we've got what I really feel like is a strong foundation coming out of the summer."

JoCo's latest team tasked with keeping Trojan tradition, region title streak, standing strong

By CLAY REYNOLDS
Sports Editor

At Johnson County, players – some of them stars – come and go.

But through the years, its focus has stayed on the single blue star the Trojans wear on their helmets, representing the program's well-established traditions in culture and style of play that have all been steady for decades, and seem to transcend high school football's cycles of ebbs and flows.

And when those things stay consistent, the year-to-year questions about personnel and player development don't ever loom quite as large.

"You can watch film from five years, 10 years ago, and it's the same thing," said Johnson County head coach Don Norton. "We run a system here, We do what we believe in and what works here. It might not work everywhere, but it works here. When one kid goes out, we've got another one to replace him. We tell them all the time, if you take your hand out of the bucket of water, it doesn't take long to fill up."

Any enduring trend, by nature, invites resistance from forces of change, and is in many ways defined by what it overcomes.

So it's somewhat apropos that tradition – in a different sense – will be such a focus of this 60th season of Johnson County football, following recent renovations to Herschel Walker Field that have preserved and refreshed many characteristics of its home field whose continuation into future generations was called into question last year by Hurricane Helene.

This year's Trojans, carrying a mantle just as heavy, face some stiff challenges of their own as they look to sustain both their recent tradition of success – in the form of active streaks of seven-straight winning seasons and three consecutive region titles – along with the larger one of the program's entire history.

One of the biggest is the theme of inexperience on a roster (with only about nine of its 42 members belonging to the junior and senior classes) that's set to rely pretty heavily on its younger ranks.

While encouraging in a long-term outlook, the prospect is a somewhat dicey one for the near future.

"What's exciting about the young kids is they're glad to get their shot, but you don't know if they're going to be good or not," Norton said. "Every play's going to be an adventure, because they don't have the experience. So we don't know."

The good news: Each of those newcomers are a product of a middle school program under the direction of Tramayne Young that's had them well versed in the ins and outs of the Trojans' playbook since they were in sixth grade.

"We always got someone ready, who should understand the system," Norton said.

Another of the major questions revolves around how well Johnson County can continue to control the line of scrimmage, with a group up front that's much more average in its size profile than teams of late that have all been fairly stout.

Though the Trojans' recent physical blessings at the offensive and defensive line positions may have run their course for the time being, the players stepping up there will keep with a much longer-running tradition of of scrappiness that Norton often prefers in the demeanor of his guys in the trenches.

"This is a smaller group," he said. "We're not that big, but Johnson County kids rarely are very big. We've had our run with some big kids, but we're not real tall and we're not real heavy. We just like to be quick and smart, competitive."

Though the roster, overall, is defined by a "lot of youth," each of the Trojans' upperclassmen will be leaned upon in a big way.

Quarterback Nathan Turberville, entering his third year pulling the trigger behind center, returns as a reliable manager of the backfield and, when the situation calls for it, a capable passer, too.

As a junior, he completed 39 percent of throws for 420 yards and a couple touchdowns, and also rushed for eight scores.

"He does a good job running our offense," Norton said, adding that he's hopeful the Trojans can develop some better efficiency on both ends of the passing dimension as the season goes.

Tayshawn Norris and Cory King join Ziion Wesley in a triumvirate of top returning tacklers on D.

Norris is a safety who picked off four passes, and scored 11 times as either a rusher, receiver or returner. King, who had 37 tackles, six for loss, and interception and a sack, was a corner. Wesley, whose 48 stops in 2024 make him the Trojans' top returning tackler, is the MIKE linebacker.

All three will help give JoCo's defense some teeth, and contribute at their various skill positions on offense.

King and Wesley, who had the team's top two rushing totals (a combined 1,400 yards and 12 touchdowns) last season, will fit a little differently into a reconfigured backfield, with Norris now working a good bit more as a receiver.

Matthew Connell projects as the lone senior among the offensive and defensive line groups, and Will Peeples is back helping out on special teams.

There aren't many more juniors.

The class consists mostly of skill guys Jacaden Webb, Dre Hudson and Jamir Wadley, and line-of-scrimmage anchors Dewayne Abrams and Matt McCoy.

So a lot will fall to the 10th and ninth grades where athletes are numerous, but few of them yet proven.

But make no mistake, both classes look to be pretty deep and talented, in both athletic ability and the all-important intangibles.

"We're excited about the leadership we have with our upperclassmen, but we're really excited about the young group, too," Norton said.

"They're competitive kids," he added. "Johnson County kids are always competitive. They love football."

As 10th graders go, look for Jeremiah Taylor to make a significant impact right away, at the fullback position that's traditionally been JoCo's most productive.

Sophomore Cedrick Bridges – who played significant snaps both ways as a freshman – has emerged as an early leader on the lines of scrimmage.

Freshman Kelsey Waters, sophomore Tailyn Norris and sophomore Zacorian Graddy help round out a collection of backs Norton is excited about.

And there's also a bright future for backup QB Chance Wombles.

On the coaching staff, the Trojans will be breaking in a new defensive coordinator, with promoted assistant Devin Cannon now in charge of the unit and its reputation for toughness.

As a backfill, JoCo also hired to the staff a former player in Landry Thompson, whose homecoming to Wrightsville follows a year or two working as a graduate assistant under Clay Helton at Georgia Southern. And Norton considers him a rising star.

Altogether, it's a team with lots of potential that will probably need

JOCO
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JOHNSON COUNTY TROJANS

AT A GLANCE...

HEAD COACH: Don Norton (19th season, 146-84)

OFFENSE: Multiple
DEFENSE: 4-4

2024: 9-3 (5-0 region 5-Low A)
FINISH: Region champion; GHSA Playoffs (lost to Clinch Co. in second round)

RETURNING STARTERS: 5 offense / 5 defense

KEY LOSSES: WR/DB Xavier Wright; RB/LB J.D. Carswell; OL/DL Twix Sharber; OL/DL J.J. Huff

PLAYERS TO WATCH: ATH/DB Tayshawn Norris, Sr.; RB/LB Cory King, Sr.; QB Nathan Turberville, Sr.; RB/LB Ziion Wesley, Sr.; OL/DL Dewayne Abrams, Sr.; RB/LB Jeremiah Taylor, So.; OL/DL Cedrick Bridges, So.

THE UPSIDES: Ground attack, defense
KEY CONCERN: Inexperience

SCHEDULE...

8/15	East Laurens
8/22	Montgomery Co.
8/29	at Warren Co. ($)
9/05	Butler
9/12	at Treutlen ($)
9/26	Hancock Central* ($)
10/03	Twiggs Co.*
10/10	Wilkinson Co.* ($)
10/24	Glascock Co.*
10/31	GMC*

** – Region 5-Low A*
($) – Pivotal games



PASS AT YOUR OWN RISK: Linebacker Cory King (6) and DB Jeremiah Scott (23), with a play on the ball against Treutlen, combined for three of JoCo's 11 interceptions and six out of 12 pass break-ups last season. The pair, along with lead interceptor Tayshawn Norris, will lead the Trojans' traditionally strong air defenses once again/DANNY SCARBORO

WEST LAURENS

Continued from page 2

ECG, having made one of the biggest jumps in size, could be on track for a prolific season.

"Ethan's really kind of put on some weight," Burdette said. "He really looks like a formidable defensive end. He can run and be physical. He's the strongest kid on our team, pound-for-pound."

A second layer is led by senior Jemarie Trussell and sophomore Maxx Chafin.

Just as last year, there's no real hierarchy at the position, where the rotation of players will be fluid over the course of the night.

"This is like 1A and 1B, it's not like you've just got three starters and three backups," Burdette said.

Juniors Rashod Dixon, at nose, and Evan Ellis, at end, have also earned a shot to see the field for any residual snaps. Since most of the above tend to skew toward a leaner, quicker player profile, the Raiders also have several offensive linemen, Toney, Howell, Rozier and others, on call to potentially cross over "if we need a little beef" in some hold-the-line situations.

West is even deeper at linebacker, where all five of its main men – alternating between three slots – return: Shannon Adkins, by far the top tackler (his assists and solos totaling in the triple digits), runs the show from the middle, flanked by a rotation of seniors Jayden Watkins and Hunter Castellaw (who were leading tacklers No. 2 and 3) and juniors Leroy Mack and Justin Blash (neither very far behind).

Each of the five had their share of highlights and huge games last season.

"That's a pretty deep group," Burdette said. "They've all kind of got their expertise, their fortés. Some are better pass rushers, some are better run-stoppers. But they've got a lot of experience."

Blash, whom Baldwin had no answer for in the season's final two games, took away the team's most improved player award as he wrapped the 2024 campaign with two sacks, four tackles for loss and five hurries, and is a defender the Raiders are especially excited about this year and next.

"He's extremely fast and physical," Burdette said. "He's a little undersized, but he can run so good. That's why we put him in to rush the passer sometimes. When it's him, one-on-one with a tackle, he's just like a blur."

The "dog" position – which serves as a tweener between linebacker and DB – is the only spot where the Raiders technically lost a starter in Johntavious Kellam (who was regrettably injured for their final game in the playoffs).

"We hurt a little bit without him, but we ran 11 underclassmen out there to play on defense against Baldwin in the first round," Burdette said. "That's kind of a cool deal, that at every level of the defense you have someone returning."

Senior Zorian Willis is expected to step in, with Hogan splitting time behind him, and also at safety helping out incumbents Jayce Blash (who matched Hill's five interceptions almost pick-for-pick last year) and Jermidous Brown.

When it comes to utility, Hogan will probably end up as the player who wears the largest number of hats across all three phases.

"He can do it all," Burdette said.

Sophomore Nicholas Hester, who has a "chance to be really good," will be another young name in the experienced mix there.

Hill and Stanley, both off outstanding seasons, will hold down the corner positions, with junior Tra'Shawn Carswell and sophomore Steven Odum backing up.

"If we got into a tight, we could definitely move a safety over there, just to get our best 11 out there," Burdette said.

The Raiders' coaching staff saw some routine turnover, but its core remains intact. A biggest loss was likely O-line coach J.D. Carter, who was hired away by Toombs County.

Two other established assistants who are head coaches in other sports are stepping back this year, Izell Stephens entirely to focus on basketball and newly-promoted Raider baseball skipper Parker Gordon to a more limited role helping out the sub-varsity teams.

Both additions were local ones... Jordan Green, who's worked previous stints at both county and city schools in the recent past, was hired back from Hawkinsville. Beloved WLMS assistant Jacob Floyd (in a massive loss for the radio booth upstairs) was tapped to take over as tight ends coach.

None of the three phases are replacing any major components of their 2024 success, so each should be in position for some major leaps forward.

West Laurens, offensively, had some consistent big-play potential, and showed no lack of big-play ability in either dimension. Besides being slowed down by penalties and mistakes in certain spots, establishing the run against the region's best defenses proved to be the only stubborn roadblock.

Defensively, the Raiders forced a lot of turnovers and were quite stingy on fourth downs. But the unit is definitely eager to take a step closer to dominance.

"We won games several different ways, but we didn't necessarily play a complete game," Burdette said.

In region play, they combined with Aquinas to set a home single-game scoring record, in a win that ultimately hinged on turnovers, but came out on the wrong end of some defensive struggles against Harlem and Westside.

The two most pivotal games – a win to close the regular season and rematch loss in the first round of the playoffs at Baldwin – proved to have a little of everything.

West Laurens played well enough to win both, but had a potential game-winning field goal blocked after the Braves made a goal-line stand in the final seconds.

Barring some unexpected developments, the teams to beat, and what's required to get the best of them, will remain mostly the same.

"I think we've got a lot of the same things we did last year, and probably seven or eight games that we need to do them in all of them," Burdette said. "Win the turnover margin, not beat ourselves. We almost completely eliminated the stupid penalties last year. Continue to play smart football. Our kicking game was much improved, and then I anticipate us being better on both sides of the ball and continuing to improve."

The hump in the season will come right at the heart of the schedule, when the Raiders go to defending champ Harlem, then host Baldwin back-to-back in weeks 5 and 6... of course, barring another Hurricane that last year scrambled the schedule in a changeup that turned out to benefit the team right after an introspective first loss to the Bulldogs.

"We had some things to figure out after the Harlem game, and we did," Burdette said. "We figured them out and really went on a tear, two weeks off, came back after that break and we were almost like a new team."

The Raiders' momentum, carrying over from that strong finish, is unmistakable heading into the fall.

They'll go to war with several great teams, and have to be able to do what it takes to once again "find a way to win games" against the best. For members of this senior class, whose hearts are set on making history, finding that way will be less a matter of "what" as it is "why."

"They want to be a team that leaves a legacy behind," Burdette said. "If you're around West Laurens, everybody wants to talk about the 2019 season and how good that team was. It was a really good ball club, because I was on the wrong end of it one night. I want everybody, (after) this senior class, to talk about the 2025 team and them leaving a legacy... I want them to have a season they can be proud of that they can tell their kids and grandkids about.

"I'm excited about seeing them grow, and seeing how their story kind of ends."

Almost everyone back from Eagles' championship run; Experienced lineup, explosive offense eyeing repeat

By CLAY REYNOLDS
Sports Editor

Coming off their 2024 AA state title, the Brentwood Eagles are certain of two things on their way into a defending campaign: That they have a team with a legitimate shot of winning it all again, but also just how hard that'll be to do for a second season in a row.

The first part is just about a no-brainer, considering how few starters the team is slated to replace.

Two-way workhorse Zach Denton was likely the most irreplaceable of the seven seniors who graduated with state title rings on two different fingers, leaving the Eagles with the vast majority of their championship core intact for another run.

While AA has plenty of worthy contenders, Brentwood – for the moment – is concerned primarily with itself as this season's potential toughest opponent.

Maintaining a championship mindset – mainly by resolving to take no part of last year's success for granted – appears to be the biggest obstacle to a repeat, especially now that anonymity, as a defending champ, is no longer a luxury the Eagles enjoy.

"We spend a lot of time talking about having a bullseye on your back," said Brentwood head coach Adam Lord. "I don't think it's a secret to anybody that this team should be good. We've gotta understand that we're not going to sneak up on anybody on Friday nights. We're going to have to be at our best every Friday in order to have a chance to win. And you've got to practice that way. You can't just go through the motions Monday through Thursday and expect to show up and win."

Brentwood seemed to play with that kind of point to prove most nights in their 2024 campaign, but especially in a state championship game at Paulson Stadium they entered as a slight underdog to top seed Southwest Georgia.

Defying expectations they'd be pushed around, the Eagles measured up in physicality to the hard-nosed Warriors, and prevailed 28-6 to collect their fourth state championship in program history.

Lord describes the victory, equal parts statement and storybook, as a "surreal" experience whose full magnitude took a while to set in.

But he didn't let the mountaintop moment affect a sense of perspective – shaped by the similar once-beaten title run he was part of as an assistant for the Eagles back in 2021 – on the fortuity of any championship season.

"I had a special group of guys and a special group of seniors that really invested a lot of time and energy into the season," he said. "We were just very lucky to stay healthy and have good leadership along the way. We played well at the right time... Winning the big one is hard to do, it really is. A lot of things have to go your way."

That's put him in a unique position to set the vision for a brand new season, in which the stars may... or may not... align in a manner that gives his team a similar opportunity.

"The hardest thing to do is kind of flush it and move on," Lord said. "You spend a good while celebrating, but now we're at a point where that's done. It's a new team, a new identity and new goals. We're excited to see what we can accomplish this year."

This slightly new-look flock of Eagles, with its noticeably unassuming attitude, doesn't appear to be one that's resting on any laurels.



FULLY INVOLVED: Brentwood went all-in early on in last year's AA state championship game as it rolled out this hook-and-ladder play to spring Tristan Robinson (1) 48 yards to the end zone, off a give-and-go from Abe Williams (20), for the early lead. Robinson would rush for 141 yards and two more touchdowns, but the rest of the game's headlines belonged to the Eagles' defense, which answered the call to keep SGA's physical, slow-burning ground game at bay. They allowed just one touchdown, and doused the Warriors' hopes of chipping away with three fourth-down stops/JASON VORHEES, File

Lord considered himself "very impressed" with the team's demeanor over the offseason, for what that judgment is worth this early in the game.

As with any season, August practices and a season-opening duel with Trinity stand to give a better indication of what they're really made of.

"Right now, the chemistry is good, but you really kind of find those things out, in my opinion, when things aren't so great," he said. "In the heat of battle, and when things aren't going your way, is when you find out what kind of chemistry you've got."

As they've cycled through their summer priorities – playing with tempo and toughness right up there among those – developing those all-important intangibles have been a recurring theme.

"I think as we wind down the summer, it's important that we continue to talk about chemistry, continue to talk about toughness and commitment," Lord said. "This is a long season, and being tough when it's hot is hard to do. Our motto right now is, when it's too tough for everybody else, it's just right for us. That's kind of what we're going with.

"It's important that every day, we talk about picking our teammates up, because it's hard to get 40 guys to show up every day with a great attitude to work through the summer. The more guys we have pulling in that direction, the better off we're going to be."

All that being said, the Eagles have everything they had going for them last season, and more.

The vast majority of their lineup is returning with two and three years of playing experience, including most of the big dogs on either side of the ball.

Absurd as it might sound, Lord also considers this team's overall speed a slight tick higher than last year's.

If there are question marks, they'd be up front at line positions where six of Brentwood's seven graduates belonged.

"Anytime you lose offensive linemen, you just have to understand that it's going to take time to build that chemistry up front, which is really important," Lord said. "But I do think the quicker we can get those guys all on the same page, the better we're going to be. We've got a chance to be as good as we were last year."

Returning starters still abound. A "physical, strong" senior in Z.J. Scott "checks a lot of the boxes" at right tackle. Both guards, Will Hodges at left and Cordy Francis at right, are also back as linchpins in the Wing-T blocking scheme.

"Both those guys did a phenomenal job last year," Lord said. "I'm excited they're back."

A handful are vying for the right to step in at center and left tackle, where the live blows of preseason practice promised to identify favorites among players who mostly split snaps over the summer.

"Until we really see these guys strap on some pads, and who can handle the physicality side of that, we really haven't nailed down that guy yet at either position," Lord said.

Many of the same will be involved in what's traditionally a fluid rotation on the defensive line, though the nearly 100 percent turnover at the position brings up many of the same questions about not only which players will start, but how many can play.

"That's been our philosophy, to play more guys up front, wear you down and be a little faster. This year, we're going to have a lot of new guys," Lord said. "One of our concerns is depth up front, and finding guys we think can do it. But until we put on pads and get pushed on a little bit, we don't know."

In contrast to the remainder of the defensive lineup, which is a virtual carbon copy of last season's, D-line will be the position group where the Eagles likely differ the most in their prevailing identity from 2024.

"We're going to have to create some depth," Lord said. "We may be smaller, but my hopes are we're going to be faster."

Behind the line, there's not much to replace from an attack that scored exactly 500 points, a little over 41 per game, to come just 20 shy of Brentwood's 2019 program record (a casualty of Hurricane Helene, which wiped out one game of a potential 10 in the regular season).

The Eagles balanced out their whopping 3,600 yards and 51 touchdowns on the ground with a healthy 1,100 and 17 scores through the air. And QB Baylor Cobb, tossing it at 59 percent efficiency, was picked off just once.

Those numbers, as outrageous as they would be to take for granted, are plenty realistic for this fall.

But Lord's focus is on many of the finer details.

"I don't know that that's a target for us, but we just want to be efficient, we want no negative plays, we want no turnovers," he said. "There's the things we stress."

The backfield returns intact minus Denton, who will admittedly be about as tough a playmaker to replace as there is.

Lord plans on looking to Cobb, his third-year signal caller, to provide some of the electricity lost on the ground.

"The last two years, we've been conservative in the run game with him, but after losing Denton, who was a very integral part of this offense and school for a long time, we're gonna have to have some people step up," he said. "I think he'll be one of the key pieces to fill that void."

Besides that, there's not much the Eagles don't have back at their disposal.

The electric big-play threat will again be Tristan Robinson, who figures to take Denton's place as the go-to rusher off a thousand-yard freshman season.

"I think he's going to be one of the best running backs in the state," Lord said. "He's a high-profile guy, very elusive, and he's worked his tail off in the weight room. He's a very explosive kid and the third-strongest kid on the team as a sophomore. I think he's going to be a handful to tackle this year."

Co-backs Abe Williams and Jones Sheppard, both juniors, will keep him fresh.

The above will join senior wideouts Zyion Andrews and Grady Boutelle as pass targets. And look for all-state selection Riley Helton, a senior, and Jackson Bragg, a rising junior, to get their share of looks from a tight end position that both, physically, fill out very well.

"Both those guys are athletic. Both those guys can run and catch the football, and you'll see them do that on Friday," Lord said.

Junior Quez Collins, "probably our most electrifying kid," will play across the board, with more elite speed that can easily get lost in a backfield with so much of it everywhere you look.

"He's a guy we've gotta find a way to get touches during the game," Lord said. "He's the fastest guy on the field most nights. "

The Eagles, without a doubt, have a shot to do many of the same eye-popping things this fall, if they can be as crisp and polished.

"I think it's going to come down to figuring out how to spread the ball around and just limiting turnovers," Lord said. "Last year, we did a phenomenal job of not putting the ball on the ground. That's something we talk about and focus on. We want to spread it around and hopefully score a lot."

It's kind of scary the all boxes they check: Speed, size, experience and a class of 11 seniors who are not only seasoned football players, but locker room leaders who have been a part of some peaks and valleys recently, and are more than familiar with what it takes to be elite.

It's all stuff you love to have going for you on the front end of a season.

But for last year's Eagles, it was all that, and plenty of factors they couldn't necessarily control that were the most vital in how things turned out.

To duplicate that success, Brentwood will probably need just as many of the same things to go their way down the stretch.

"It's hard to win," Lord said. "I'll just say that. It's hard staying healthy, but the fact that we have some depth, a lot of returners who understand the process, has gotta be a huge advantage. Our schedule's tough again. Early in the year, we're going to be at home, but late in the year we're on the road and we're going to play some really good teams on the road again. We're going to have to be prepared to go play them with whatever we've got, healthy or not healthy.

"At this point, we're ahead of the game where we normally are, and a lot of that just speaks to the experience of this team."

BRENTWOOD EAGLES

AT A GLANCE...

HEAD COACH: Adam Lord (3rd season, 16-7 career)

OFFENSE: Wing-T
DEFENSE: 3-4

2024: 11-1 (4-0 district 4)
FINISH: GIAA AA State Champions (def. Southwest Georgia Academy 28-6)

RETURNING STARTERS: 8 offense / 8 defense

KEY LOSSES: RB/LB Zach Denton; OL/DL Brittan Haines; OL/DL Thatcher Andrews

PLAYERS TO WATCH: QB/DB Baylor Cobb, Jr.; ATH/DB Tristan Robinson, So.; ATH/DB Quez Collins, Jr.; WR/DB Zyion Andrews, Sr.; RB/DB Abe Williams, Sr.; OL/DL Cordy Francis, Sr.; OL/DL Z.J. Scott, Sr.; TE/LB Riley Helton, Sr.; TE/LB Jackson Bragg, Sr.

THE UPSIDES: Explosiveness on offense, experience returning off of '24 championship squad
KEY CONCERN: Rebuilding depth on defensive line

SCHEDULE...

8/15	Trinity
8/22	at Pinewood
8/29	GMC
9/5	Lake Oconee Academy
9/12	Thomas Jefferson*
9/19	at John Milledge ($)
9/26	at Briarwood* ($)
10/3	at Edmund Burke* ($)
10/17	Augusta Prep*
10/24	at Gatewood* ($)

** – District 6-A/AA*
($) – Pivotal games

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Indians point to prolific playmakers, plucky personality as pillars of team intending to improve on '24 turnaround

By CLAY REYNOLDS
Sports Editor

Looking back, Dodge County proved a lot in a massive turnaround its first season under a new head coach last fall.

The Indians, in the process of completely reversing their 1-9 record from the previous year, went toe-to-toe with the best.

They started out by reeling off eight wins in a row to move within reach of the region title, and into a conversation they expect to put themselves in on a yearly basis, before advancing in the playoffs for the first time in four seasons with an opening-round victory over Chattooga.

Though the nine wins gave them a lot to be proud of, it's the three losses – each coming against fellow ranked teams in the last four of the 12 games – that stuck with coaches and players this offseason.

They've spent plenty of time thinking over all that went well, but probably more than that on what didn't.

And those hard lessons have done a lot to dictate the focus of their offseason, and goals of doing everything possible to take the next step this coming year.

"As soon as we lost the playoff game to Worth County, on the ride home, I'm sitting there thinking, how do we get better? What are the things we need to try to look at in the offseason to improve?" said second-year Dodge County head coach Phillip Brown. "We're going to be a different team. Every year, you have a new team. The biggest thing is just finding those pieces and finding where they fit."

That process started with reinforcing the foundational principles that Brown believes underlie sustained success in high school football, which each seemed to kick in for the Indians last year.

"We set the standard with our five pillars: hard work, energy, accountability, resilience and team," Brown said. "But now, we want to chase those standards day-in and day-out. Because that's what we believe in, and our kids have seen proof of it. Throughout last season, they showed up in every game."

Coaches also took a hard look at the roster, with no question off-limits about potential tweaks that could be beneficial, even in spots with little turnover where last year's results might not necessarily indicate a need.

"We've got some guys we've moved around to different positions, because we think that gives us the best chance to be successful," Brown said. "I always like the summers, because that's really where we start diving deep into our personnel and finding out who can be what. We play a lot of guys in the summertime, and we're just trying to figure out what's the right fit."

Who are some of those players to look for in a revamped role?

One to definitely watch is Jamal Smith, who was projected as the Indians' top tailback last fall, but couldn't shake some bad luck with injuries after sustaining a high ankle sprain that knocked him out for four games, then suffering a torn ACL almost as soon as he made it back to the field.

But when healthy, the 5-foot-8, 164-pound senior has a lot to offer on both sides of the ball.

For his primary position, he'll be moving to inside linebacker to aid in filling a void left by the graduation of several reliable tacklers.

"He's also still running the football for us, obviously, because he possesses some really good skills," Brown said. "But for a guy we didn't have their last year and kicked over to that spot, he's been impressive."

Senior Jeremiah Carr moved around a good bit in the defensive secondary after playing mostly corner last fall. After an initial look at safety, he's settled in as the Indians' "star," which is an outside linebacker in their base defense, but more of a coverage DB in other arrangements. He'll also bolster the team's depth at wide receiver.

"He's been a pleasant surprise," Brown said. "He knows our defense from top to bottom, the calls and checks, and has done a really good job."

Many names you know, or heard just a bit last season, will make an impact in similar places on the field.

Junior athlete Jerimiah Burns, like the Alabama-bound Duke Johnson, was kind of positionless for all the many things he could do at an elite level, most visibly returning kickoffs for six different touchdowns. He scored the same number of times on a team-high 484 receiving yards, and once as a rusher, showing off some blinding speed that can be a weapon anywhere.

Officially, his position is receiver, though expect to see plenty of other applications that are limited only by the number of things the Indians do on offense.

Burns is also projected to play more consistently on defense in the secondary, as one of multiple players who will be tasked with helping make up for the nearly 300 tackles (plus nearly 30 for loss and 14 sacks) that were accounted for by Johnson, Ralph Howard and Saquan Walker at the top of last year's defensive stat sheet.

Carr and Junior Cam Hughes, who joins Smith on the interior, will have a more direct hand in filling that tall order.

"Those guys, even before I got here, were just playmakers," Brown said. "Defensively, we're going to have to do some things a little different than what we did with them, because we could do a lot less and get more... We're going to have to do a lot more schematically, but the defense has done a great job, in the summer, of retaining all the scheme that we've put in and applying it on the field."

The rest of a strong junior class, including many of Dodge's other returning playmakers, sets the Indians up for plenty excitement over the next two seasons.

DODGE COUNTY INDIANS

AT A GLANCE...

HEAD COACH: Phillip Brown (2nd season)

OFFENSE: Spread
DEFENSE: Multiple 3-4

2024: 9-3 (7-2 region 2-High A)
FINISH: GHSA playoffs (lost to Worth Co. in second round)

RETURNING STARTERS:
7 offense / 7 defense

KEY LOSSES: ATH Duke Johnson (Alabama); WR/DB J.J. Dean; RB/LB Ralph Howard; OL/DL Jordan Jenkins; LB Saquan Walker

PLAYERS TO WATCH: ATH/DB Jerimiah Burns, Jr.; QB Kain Mincey, Jr.; RB/LB Jamal Smith, Jr.; LB Landon Sheffield, Sr.; WR/DB Jeremiah Carr; OL/DL Keyzan Harris Jr.; OL/DL Dorian Hughes, Jr.; LB Cam Hughes, Jr.; WR/DB Jauriel Bray, Jr.

THE UPSIDES: Potent passing game, jam-up junior class
KEY CONCERN: Reinventing the middle of defense, minus Duke

SCHEDULE...

8/22	Bleckley Co.* ($)
8/29	at Central Macon*
9/05	ACE Charter*
9/12	at Vidalia
9/19	East Laurens*
9/26	at Southwest Macon*
10/03	Washington Co.* ($)
10/17	at Jefferson Co.*
10/24	Northeast Macon* ($)
10/31	at Dublin* ($)

** – Region 2-High A*
($) – Pivotal games

One of its biggest breakout players last season was quarterback Kain Mincey, who threw for an impressive 1,200 yards and 15 touchdowns, and also ran four times for six. His command of the position, and care for the football with only four interceptions, was no small part in the 32 points per game that made last year Dodge's most productive on offense since 2017.

Among other steps to polish his game this spring and summer, Mincey – along with offensive coordinator Montez Shipman – got the rare opportunity in June to attend the Manning Passing Academy in Thibodeaux, La., where both were able to learn from some of the college game's best signal callers in the country, and a number of big-name coaches like Jon Gruden.

"We felt like that was important for him to get that opportunity to learn some things that would help improve his game," Brown said.

Classmate Jauriel Bray, behind Burns at receiver, was Dodge's next most consistent pass target (with 16 grabs for three touchdowns) last year, and a region honorable mention. He'll once again be a feature in the passing game, but like the above, see some increased work on defense at corner, where his 6-foot-1 height and length should be valuable.

Up front, two more juniors including the "physical, big, athletic" Keyzan Harris at offensive guard and two-way tackle Dorian Hughes will be relied upon heavily.

Sophomore defensive end James Branch, who rolled up 34 tackles and six for loss as a freshman last year, is another line-of-scrimmage player the Indians are excited about seeing develop.

"He's made a lot of improvement," Brown said. "We're looking forward to him having a big year."

For what guesswork may be involved in how the Indians can best play their cards, the building blocks of championship-contending teams have never been a mystery.

The big first step taken by last year's team had a lot to do with the first four of Brown's five pillars, summed up in a sense of overwhelming initiative that was taken by a senior class whose engagement is make-or-break for a new head coach in his introductory year.

They had some uncommon talent as well, but jumped on board more wholeheartedly than your typical group of players adjusting to their third coaching change in as many seasons.

"I thought our kids really did a great job of buying into the culture," Brown said. "I'll forever say it, whether I'm here one year or 10 more years, the success we have while I'm here will be built off the senior class we had this past year. We didn't have a lot of them, but those guys were really just on fire for everything we put in front of them. They took it and ran with it. They're the ones that built the foundation for what we're doing here, and then that just trickled down to everybody else on the team."

The fifth one was represented by a sense of winning chemistry, unmistakable somewhere in the psyche of the team as it reeled off the streak of early wins, and several by just a fingernail.

"That helped us a lot last year," he added. "There were close games at the end, and we found a way to win because we played together."

It also manifested in resilience late against a pair of worthy state semifinalists in the last two games of the regular season.

The Indians fell behind early, but bounced back to make it a game in the second half of a losing cause against Northeast. The following week, they gave eventual champ Dublin as much as it could handle, though they ultimately weren't able to hold back the 50-point Irish tide for four full quarters

Region 2-High A, this year, is likely to wind up with an entirely different landscape by November, but Dodge has every expectation of an equal grind – physical and mental – in getting through the weekly tests that project to be just as brutal.

The Indians plan on being one of the major contenders again, but they can't take any of last year's results for a given.

"We had the toughest region in our classification," Brown said. "There are no gimmies. If you didn't come to play, you got beat. I still feel that way coming into this year."

"I can go through every team and name the positives. There are so many good teams. You've just really gotta come with your A game every Friday night, every moment you're playing somebody, because we kind of learned down the stretch in those last two, Dublin game, that if you have a bad quarter, you'll look up and you're down two scores. The margin for error is very slim."

They've once again got a squad with talent to give the best in the region trouble, and maybe one complete enough to win it.

But back to the last of those five pillars... team. It's definitely not the least of the things they'll need to have going just as much in their direction to have a similar caliber of season, and make the anticipated jump.

"It's a lot to do with us just continuing to build our togetherness, the camaraderie amongst our team," Brown said. "The football season is a journey. It's a long, long journey. I tell our kids all the time, you've gotta love what you do and love the people you do it with. We try to build a culture here where we play for each other, we love each other and we're not afraid to say that. That's the biggest thing is constantly getting these guys to build together, because we're going to face a lot of tough challenges throughout the season. I feel like if we can stick together, we'll have a chance to be successful."



A TIGHT-KNIT TRIBE: The chemistry was real for a Dodge County team intent on leaving its mark that found a way to pull through late in multiple close games last season. Indians' head coach Phillip Brown is looking for just as strong a sense of desire and drive to develop within the group of players who will lead them in pursuit of some new but similar goals this year/CLAY REYNOLDS, File



Defensive development pivotal in young, but high-powered Wilco squad reaching potential

By CLAY REYNOLDS
Sports Editor



BIG SEASON AHEAD?: Quenterrion Sanford threw for over 2,000 yards last fall, and his head coach Jamoski Ward hasn't been shy in setting out some huge expectations for his junior season running a Wilco offense that'll have playmakers everywhere/SPECIAL PHOTO, Wilkinson County High School

For a few years now, Wilkinson County has been a program on the precipice.

And while ways for the Warriors to get past that point, and into the elite territory of a potential region championship or deep playoff run, are hard to predict, there's one thing they know for sure going into 2025... This year should be a big one for their offense.

Wilco is returning all its top producers: a talented quarterback, several electric wideouts and a three-year running back who's been an exciting game-changer since his freshman season, along with a considerable number of veteran blockers in front of them.

All the pieces are in place for a high-scoring and potentially memorable season on that side of the ball. But the Warriors will also need it to be both those things, because they'll be rebuilding things pretty substantially on the other, so it's likely they'll need to offset those question marks on defense with exclamation points on the scoreboard.

"We're really going to have to score some points to bridge the gap for our defense, in case it takes some time for our defense to come along, with so many young guys on that side of the ball," said Wilco head coach Jamoski Ward. "Offense is gonna have to keep us in some games early, and hopefully by region time, our defense is firing on all cylinders."

The Warriors scored just above 26 points per game a year ago, though Ward and his team agree "it should've been higher."

Their execution wasn't as seamless as it could have been due to the fact that the team was only just learning the ropes of a new system that had to be installed in a rush after Ward's hire midway through the summer.

"All of last year, we were in catch-up mode, from game 1 to game 10," Ward said. "This offseason, we've been able to idle everything back, talk about the system and teach the guys some football, and we think it's going to pay dividends for us in the fall."

His wide-open, pass-more philosophy was also entirely foreign to a group of players that, for all of recent memory, had run a Wing-T based system. From their skill athletes to their guys on the line, the flow, rhythm, timing and feel of things is now much more familiar.

"I think all those guys have a better football IQ when you talk about the spread," Ward said. "The spread was something they had never done before."

The trigger man, Quinterrion Sanford, will be in his third year starting as a junior, off a 2,000-yard passing season.

His two leading wideouts, senior Myles Cobb and junior Rahiym Thompkins, accounted for nearly 1,200 yards and 10 scores of that total.

Senior Terrelle Blount, an over 2,000-yard career gainer and 30-plus touchdown scorer on the ground, has also led the Warriors in rushing for three years straight.

The veteran O-line that's back to lay the groundwork for the whole deal looks just as stacked.

Four out of its five starters from the Miller County playoff game remain intact, including junior Victor Peacock and senior Justus Bass. Replacing the lone graduate is a two-way player who had also started a handful of games on the O-line earlier in the season.

"That fifth offensive lineman was a kid that got significant reps last year," Ward said.

Other names to listen out for on the offensive side include junior Makhi Johnson, a "very explosive kid" who's transitioning from a backup running back role (where he broke several long runs last year) to wide receiver.

"It's a new position for him," Ward said. "He's been practicing it since June, but we really expect some big things from him."

All told, it's a loaded deck with a lot of big plays and winning hands in the cards.

And Ward is betting a lot on his dealer Sanford, whose checks and decisions on when to hold 'em and fold 'em could significantly up the ante.

"I'm expecting an all-state type season from him, with all the weapons he has coming back, and what we have coming back up front," he said. "He's very important."

Despite a new punter, kicker and long snapper they're breaking in, Blount's exciting return skills on punts and kickoffs will do a lot to give Wilco a possible edge on special teams.

Wilco is likely to need that along with several offensive touchdowns as its ace in the hole early in the season as a young lineup on the other side of the ball gains footing.

"It's kind of the reverse of last year, when we had the young guys on offense and the defense gave us time to get everything together," Ward said.

The Warriors, in their defensive scheme, will look "a little more odd," which in the football jargon doesn't mean peculiar style of play, but rather refers to situations where they'll line up with three or five players up on the line of scrimmage, rather than the four that was mostly standard in a strict 4-2-5 arrangement last year.

That look, however, will still be part of a multiple base.

You'll see plenty of the aforementioned players working at positions that are mostly new to each on defense.

Out of the main position groups, Ward probably feels best about his linebackers, who will be led by the established Amare Todd (a freshman starter last season) and Cobb (last year's leading tackler, though now working outside vs. in).

"I'm expecting big seasons from them," Ward said.

The secondary is in decent shape thanks to an abundance of excess offensive skill talent that's available to train and play exclusively on defense.

But the projected starters there are also pretty young, with freshman Davarie Walker and sophomore Damarion Justice as first-timers at both corner positions.

Wilco will lean on Thompkins as a returning safety to "keep the secondary together, and give those guys time to develop."

The most uncertainty lies up front on the defensive line, where the losses of Chandler Sinkfield, Addai Hart and Jai'veion Downing hit particularly hard. And the Warriors, there, are working primarily with two-way players also dialed in on the O-line to fill the gaps.

"That's a big question mark for us right now," Ward said.

The progression and depth of that unit will probably loom as Wilco's biggest question down the stretch of the season.

"We did a lot of things in the summer, OTAs and padded camps, to get them ready for the physicality," Ward said. "The old adage is true, you win games up

WILCO
Continued on page 15

WILKINSON COUNTY WARRIORS

AT A GLANCE...

HEAD COACH: Jamoski Ward (2nd season)

OFFENSE: Spread
DEFENSE: Multiple

2024: 6-5 (4-1 region 5-Low A)
FINISH: GHSA Playoffs (lost to Miller Co. in first round)

RETURNING STARTERS: 8 offense / 4 defense

KEY LOSSES: WR/DB J.T. Hill; OL/DL Jai'veion Downing; OL/DL Addai Hart; WR/DB CaMari Smith; TE/LB Roosevelt Coats; OL/DL Chandler Sinkfield

PLAYERS TO WATCH: RB/DB Terrelle Blount, Sr.; WR/DB Myles Cobb, Sr.; WR/DB Rahiym Thompkins, Jr.; OL/DL Victor Peacock, Jr.; QB/DB Quenterrion Sanford, Jr.; OL/DL Justus Bass, Sr.; RB/LB Amare Todd, So.

THE UPSIDES: High-octane offense, proven playmakers
KEY CONCERN: Defensive inexperience

SCHEDULE...

8/15	Wheeler Co.
8/22	at Treutlen ($)
8/29	Jasper Co.
9/05	Stratford
9/12	at ACE Charter
9/26	at Glascock Co.* ($)
10/03	Hancock Central*
10/10	at Johnson Co.* ($)
10/24	GMC*
10/31	at Twiggs Co.* ($)

** – Region 5-Low A*
($) – Pivotal games



Morale, strength, depth all on rise, but Vikings need kick in confidence to put playoff drought in danger

By LOGAN REYNOLDS
GTLN Staff Reporter



PEANUT GALLERY: The upcoming season could be one to watch for Za'Kian "Peanut" Tobler (5), who came out of his shell early as a sophomore and made a significant impact for Treutlen on both sides of the ball last year, but particularly as a linebacker with 54 tackles, two sacks, an interception and a forced fumble. The Vikings plan to lean on him hard defensively, but are likely to give him some additional cracks at running back, where he also picked up a little over 300 yards and scored twice on a handful of carries/DANNY SCARBORO

Confidence and trust is difficult to build, but not impossible, and Alan Shurling has become very familiar with building confidence.

Before taking the Treutlen head coaching position in 2024, Shurling served as an offensive coordinator for one year at Cedartown High School and two years at South Effingham High School, as well as an assistant coach at Jasper County High School for two years, Lamar County High School for two years and Upson-Lee High School for three. Most of his time in these positions was spent focused on offense, though he worked on a defensive line during one year at Upson-Lee.

Shurling took on the helm for the Vikings as a chance to move closer to his extended relatives who live in Soperton. In the transition, he gained an appreciation for staff sizes.

Past schools had much larger coaching staffs, allowing for greater delegation of tasks between them. However, Treutlen is a smaller school with a smaller staff, only five other coaches, meaning Shurling has had many more operational tasks to manage on top of his coaching duties.

"I just go from overseeing the office and now overseeing really the day-to-day operation," said Shurling. "So, from, I guess, personnel-wise, I'm really managing the same amount of people, it's just more to do now."

In addition, Shurling faced a morale issue with the players now under his stewardship. The Vikings have not made the playoffs since 2009, only coming close in 2016, and had just come off a 3-7 record with two region wins.

"When I got here, you could see – I want to say the kids weren't defeated, I want to say that," said Shurling. "They were more, you could tell they were looking just for somebody to grab hold to."

Shurling sought to rebuild that morale by ensuring his players knew he believed in them and their capabilities.

"They were really just wanting somebody to come in and say, 'Hey, I believe in you guys, I'm going to be in these trenches with you every day, and we're going to get to work,' and that's what I've done," said Shurling. "I mean, I'm here every day, every chance I can, I'm in the weight room with them."

According to Shurling, this effort has paid off, with the players gaining trust in their coach and in themselves.

Recovery for the Vikings' record would not happen overnight, nor over the course of one season. In 2024, Shurling matched his predecessor's record of 3-7, also with two region wins.

When he arrived, the team was not very serious about weight room training, but now strength and conditioning is a major focus of the offseason. According to Shurling, this indicates a shift in culture and mindset among his players staff has worked to cultivate.

"They're starting to enjoy going into the weight room and all that, so it's really just been about building a culture of where there's a buy-in of, 'Hey, we're going to work hard, and not just the players, but the coaches are going to work hard,'" he said.

Shurling hopes to convert this enthusiasm for the weight room into in-game success and reach the playoffs year after year, rather than the playoffs acting as a "once in a generation type thing."

The weight room training also serves to address the Vikings lack of physical strength, which coaching staff determined lost them the one or two touchdowns needed to stop multiple blowout games.

After the 2024 offseason, the team had three players who could powerlift 225 pounds. After the 2025 offseason, 11 players can lift the same amount.

In addition, much of the 2024 offseason was spent getting the players on the same page as Shurling in regards to strategy. Now the players know what Shurling is trying to accomplish, so much of the 2025 offseason was spent practicing fundamentals and conditioning.

The Vikings will once again run a multiple Wing-T offense and a 3-5 defense, but both sides were simplified to allow the players to play faster. Simplified strategies also allow for substitutes to more easily swap in during games, allowing for players to rest and maintain energy throughout.

"Just trying to get more people involved as well," said Shurling. "Not just relying on 11 or 12 kids, but relying on 20 kids now."

The school did lose some major playmakers, including running back Roderick Fuller, quarterback Kylan Page and "big playmaker" Jordan Coney, but new playmakers have stepped into those roles.

Peyton Miller will serve as the team's new running back, and Shurling expects Miller to surpass Fuller's 2024 performance. Kavion Peeples became the new quarterback, as well as a leader among the players.

"He's not just a quarterback," said Shurling. "He's learned how to be a vocal leader."

Charvis Givens, Tyrone Jones and Peanut Tobler will also bring a great degree of strength to the

TREUTLEN
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TREUTLEN VIKINGS

AT A GLANCE...

HEAD COACH: Alan Shurling (2nd season)

OFFENSE: Multiple Wing-T
DEFENSE: 3-5

2024: 3-7 (2-4 region 4-Low A)
FINISH: Missed playoffs

RETURNING STARTERS: 7 offense / 7 defense

KEY LOSSES: ATH/DB Jordan Coney; ATH/DB Kylan Page; RB/LB Rod Fuller; OL/LB Jake Brooks

PLAYERS TO WATCH: ATH/LB "Peanut" Tobler, Jr.; QB/DB Kavion Peeples, Sr.; OL/DL Charvis Givens, Sr.; RB/DB Peyton Miller, Jr.; OL/DL Tyrone Jones, Sr.; RB/LB Caleb Powell, Jr.

THE UPSIDES: Improved strength, depth
KEY CONCERN: Building confidence

SCHEDULE...

8/15	at Twiggs Co.
8/22	Wilkinson Co.
8/29	at Bacon Co.
9/12	Johnson Co.
9/19	Wilcox Co.* ($)
10/03	at Telfair Co.*
10/10	Montgomery Co.* ($)
10/17	Dooly Co.*
10/24	Hawkinsville* ($)
10/31	at Wheeler Co.* ($)

** – Region 4-Low A*
($) – Pivotal games

WACO in 'wait and see' mode, but if key players step up, Hawks could be hard to handle again

By CLAY REYNOLDS
Sports Editor



CLOSING OUT STRONG: Kam Shaw's interception was one of three in the second half that helped WACO finish off ACE Charter to clinch an outright playoff berth in its last game of the regular season. The impressive finish, in a major rebound from their rough start to the year, saw the Golden Hawks win five out of their last six before the postseason. Hopes are high that the strong late-season momentum, along with accompanying trends in physical play at the line of scrimmage and stingy defense, will carry over into 2025/MARK S. POWELL, File

On the verge of a new season, the Washington County Golden Hawks are at what head coach Robert Edwards describes as a "wait-and-see moment."

Though they had a promising summer, a lot of unanswered questions loom.

And they're counting on a preseason scrimmage against Putnam County (which was still to come at press time, but will have already taken place by the publication of this preview) to help determine a more definitive hierarchy of players at positions of turnover, and reveal a clearer picture of what and whom they'll be able to depend on in several really big games early in the year.

"We've got a mixture of old and new, then we've got some old that didn't have a lot of experience," Edwards said. "You never know how a guy's going to react until he gets under the Friday night lights. Practice is practice, but when you get under the lights, it's a different game. Nerves can get the best of you."

Getting things on the right track from the start will have a lot to do with those newer links in the chain, as an early gauntlet of matchups puts their team makeup to the test right away. But the Hawks have little apprehension about where their season is ultimately headed, because it'll be in the trusted hands of some steady upperclassmen already molded by a year or more of varsity training.

The keys to the offense, and moreover the team, will belong to Mack May, who will be the first returning starter Edwards has had at quarterback since taking over.

Last year, the rising senior guided WACO through a transition season on that side of the football with flying colors, tossing for 1,674 yards and 12 touchdowns as a seamless conductor of its quick-hit passing game.

He'll have the charge of doing much of that over again with a largely fresh cast of teammates at the skill positions, but goals of achieving some similar success and cutting back on turnovers.

"I'm expecting a lot out of Mack," Edwards said. "He's been in the program all four years. He started when I started, so we came in together. I'm expecting him to take charge of the offense, make the easy throws and make the tough throws look easy. I'm expecting a great year from him."

Under Edwards, the Golden Hawks have been decidedly pass-balanced in their breakdown, with numbers through the air that have outpaced – by either a little or a lot – their total on the ground all three years.

Contingent on how a fresh offensive identity shapes up, this season could see a reversal of that trend.

Don't look for the difference to be drastic, but WACO does intend to use the run to set up the pass a little bit more this season as it relies on two very effective ball-carriers – one familiar and the other new to the Friday-night scene – that should be strong producers.

"We want to run the ball well," Edwards said.

The adaptable Rekevious Swint, who had 475 yards and five touchdowns last season along with 14 receptions in the screen game, will slide in to replace Jusden Culpepper as the new No. 1.

Splitting carries, and providing a change of pace from Swint's bruising, downhill style, will be a new name to definitely watch in sophomore Kamajae Johnson.

"We're looking for him to do really good things," Edwards said. "He has the explosion and speed to take it to the house. He's a big play waiting to happen."

A reason for underselling the passing game: The receiving corps is one great big unknown entering the season, following the graduation of four out of May's five targets with double-digit catches in 2024. Swint is the only one who returns.

"He's working with a group of new receivers, so it's going to be really important for him to build confidence in those receivers, because he lost all his threats from last year," Edwards said.

Senior Izavion Durden and Kam Shaw both got some limited play out wide or as tight ends last year, and are among the unproven names who've helped play "receiver by committee" so far. The

WACO
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WASHINGTON COUNTY GOLDEN HAWKS

AT A GLANCE...

HEAD COACH: Robert Edwards (4th season, 91-73 career)

OFFENSE: Spread
DEFENSE: 3-4

2024: 6-5 (6-3 region 2-High A)
FINISH: GHSA Playoffs (lost to Jeff Davis in first round)

RETURNING STARTERS: 5 offense / 6 defense

KEY LOSSES: RB/LB Jusden Culpepper (Mississippi Valley); TE/DE Kam Foster; K/P Christian Rountree (Andrew); WR Jaden Jackson (Central Georgia Tech); WR/DB Javyn Watkins

PLAYERS TO WATCH: QB Mack May, Sr.; RB/LB Rekevious Swint, Sr.; WR/DB Aiden Watts, So.; WR/LB Kam Shaw, Sr.; OL/DL Javyn Brooks, Sr.; OL/DL Zorian Reeves, Sr.

THE UPSIDES: Reliable running backs, physicality up front
KEY CONCERN: Uncertainty at several key positions

SCHEDULE...

8/15	at Jeff Davis ($)
8/22	Jefferson Co.*
8/29	at Northeast Macon*
9/05	Dublin* ($)
9/19	at Bleckley Co.* ($)
9/26	Central Macon*
10/03	at Dodge Co.* ($)
10/17	East Laurens*
10/23	at Southwest Macon*
10/31	ACE Charter*

** – Region 2-High A*
($) – Pivotal games

Royals rolling with new QB, multiple unknowns, but should have chops to contend in region race

By CLAY REYNOLDS
Sports Editor

Last season, as it played out, was nothing close to what Bleckley County would normally consider a playoff-caliber year.

At 4-6 overall, the Royals wrapped up their regular schedule in the bottom half of the 10-team 2-High A standings, but thanks to the GHSA's new postseason selection process, advanced to the state tournament as the last among three of the region's at-large qualifiers (for the 28th overall seed in the bracket). And they wound up having some postseason success right on par with what the program has made into a recent tradition.

The finish, at two games below .500 for the first time in eight seasons under head coach Von Lassiter, didn't look fantastic on paper... especially in comparison to the top-10 billing with which Bleckley started the season.

But thanks to a couple of their best performances in the games that mattered most – a first-round blasting of fifth-seeded region champ Social Circle and just as strong a second-round showing at 12th seed and eventual semifinalist Fitzgerald that came minutes away from clinching a third state quarterfinal berth in five years – it turned out nearly as well as the Royals could have hoped in the end run.

On top of underscoring the age-old truth that it's not how you start, it's how you finish, it was a great lesson in why a quality, battle-tested team always deserves a fighting chance.

"It was really crazy," Lassiter said. "That was the worst record we've had in a long time, but nobody remembers that. Everybody talks about the great year we had going to the second round of the playoffs. Of course, we know the deal, but people forget about that. What I like about the power rankings is the fact that you've always got a shot. You're never out until the end, and kids have got something to work for every single week.

"That's what we've got to understand in this region. You've just gotta keep playing, go to the next game, the next practice and continue to work to get better every single week, because you never know where you're going to find yourself."

Bleckley is out to do that again this fall, although some earlier wins to put it in a stronger position come playoff time would certainly be welcome.

After another round of roster turnover, the 2025 season offers the Royals little they can be sure of other than the same... a chance to get better over the course of the season as long as they stay after it.

In a region as stacked as 2-High A, whose schedule should honestly come with a warning label, a shot to compete is about all you're guaranteed anyway.

There's plenty of potential, and perhaps some significant upside if things come together.

But some major unknowns linger at spots in Bleckley's reconfigured lineup that remain a work in progress. And though the Royals have plenty of options at those positions of concern, many of them still have a lot to prove before the season begins.

"I think there's a lot of team chemistry everywhere, but there are a lot of real inexperienced guys that are in spots they haven't been in," Lassiter said. "There are some real nervous spots there. It's one of those years you think you've got some experience, but you look around and you've still got new guys out there. I kind of feel good about the way guys are practicing and the way we've kind of clicked together. But they've still gotta get under the lights and figure it out, and that's what's going to happen real soon."

The spotlight, in two early games away from Cochran, will be trained squarely on some fresh starters working the lines of scrimmage, and both of Bleckley's all-important outside linebacker posts.

On the O-line, it'll be at least two first timers joining seniors John Teston and Brysen Rogers, returning starters at center and tackle, and junior Damon Allen, who saw a bit of action last fall, in a rotation that's been somewhat unsettled through some ups and downs over the summer.

"We're still kind of figuring that out," he said. "As soon as it gets solid for a little bit, something'll pop up and we'll have to move guys around. But those guys work hard, they're a good group and I look forward to them kind of settling in."

As for the defensive front, the nose tackle position definitely won't be a question mark, with fourth year starter "Tug" Pasby back as a disruptive force in the middle that's given opponents problems his entire career.

"It's gonna take two people to block him," Lassiter said.

The search for some bookends on the D-line is still a puzzle, although hopes are that Pasby's ability to jam the middle and eat space – which helps create tackling and sack opportunities for those around him – can take some pressure off developing teammates at the adjacent positions where most of the viable upperclass candidates to play are two-way options like Rogers and junior Jason Balthrope.

"I think we're deep there, but we're young and deep, so those guys have gotta get some experience and continue to get better every week," Lassiter said.

Both outside 'backer spots, flanking reliable incumbents in junior Landry Nobles and senior Patrick Roberts, remain very up for grabs.

"We're still rotating those guys through," Lassiter said.

For one other area of uncertainty, add special teams and multiple positions where the all-region leg of Ford Childers – a fixture for four seasons – will have to be replaced by a committee of junior Jonah Kelley and freshman Dylan Lamb, who are both in contention to claim kicking and/or punting duties.

Around positions where the Royals are set, there's a great deal of excitement.

Plenty of it comes at quarterback, where the program has, nearly without fail, replaced one top player with another in a steady line of succession going back to Lassiter's first year in charge.

Next up to follow the electric dual-threat Kam Everett is junior Brody Fleming, who as backup the last two years, proved himself a capable successor when called upon to step in at points in 11 different games, with responsibility for about 500 passing yards, eight touchdowns and just two interceptions.

It'll be a contrast in skill sets to his predecessor, who was more of a wheeler-dealer on RPOs with some elite speed defenses had to respect. While his wheels aren't shabby in comparison, Fleming (a cousin to one of the best QBs to ever play for Lassiter in Georgia great Jake Fromm) seems to have the makeup of more of a pocket-based passer.

"He's got a lot of reps, as far as the last couple of years, but this'll be his first time being the guy," Lassiter said. "I have a lot of confidence that he's going to do really, really well. He's a really good player, really good leader. We're excited to see him run the show on Friday nights."

The Royals' featured weapon will again be senior Josh Stanley, whose studly talent with the ball fit into their attack as a top-gaining rusher in 2023, and a mismatch magnet at wideout early last fall. But even though he was spared the every-down pounding of the running back position, and moved to an offense-only role after playing two-way snaps at linebacker, the pesky injury bug that had nagged him as a sophomore still caught back up and took an even greater toll.

Fingers are crossed this season can be his healthiest so far, in an offensive function that will look similar, though over considerably fewer snaps in favor of a spot back on defense where Bleckley figures to need him even more.

"He's going to be a hybrid player, all over the place," Lassiter said. "But a lot more on defense. That's going to limit his reps on offense."

Looking back, his limited but valuable impact on that side of the ball from two years ago was something Bleckley definitely missed last season.

"We're finally getting him in the right spot," Lassiter added. "He'll play a lot of free safety this year, where he can kind of move along and make plays... Hopefully he'll stay healthy and have a good year."

By all indications, the Royals will continue to be defined by big-play balance on the offensive side of the ball, with juniors Zyion Love and Deondrez Robertson returning in a running back platoon after combining for about 600 yards and nine touchdowns in support of the graduated Dequavis Benjamin last fall.

"They've been really good this summer, so I'm excited about those guys," Lassiter said.

Juniors Kelvin Sneed and Octavius Tate and senior Connor Cairney step in to fill some outsize shoes in the rest of the receiver and tight end corps.

"Those guys all got quality reps toward the end of last year, and that kind of carried over into the spring and summer," Lassiter said.

Stability in the defensive secondary – with Stanley and Jireh Campbell intact at safety and Jihiyan Blackshear, Eric Burns and Tate (a lone junior among seniors) replacing some outstanding grads at corner – will represent a strength.

That goes just as much for the coaches' box, where the Royals will have a fourth new defensive coordinator in as many years, but are turning to a longtime assistant in Kagan McClain whose trusted system and coaching style won't be too unfamiliar.

He'll take Bleckley back to running the 3-4 base that was a standby for the Royals every year prior to last year's short-lived experiment with the 4-2-5, as well as in his time as an assistant and head coach over multiple standard-setting defenses at West Laurens.

"He has the same kind of mindset that I do," Lassiter said. "We want to be simple and we want to play fast, and we've gotta be physical. He coaches that way, wants to be sound. The first thing is you've got to line up, and don't put yourself in bad situations based off your alignment. Kagan's always done a good job of doing that."

Despite all the newness, the defensive unit has given every indication it's right where it needs to be as the season approaches.

"Those guys have really played hard, run to the ball, learned the new defensive stuff and figured it out pretty well," Lassiter said. "I feel comfortable with them knowing what to do. We've just got to tackle and be physical."

Toughness lingers as potentially the biggest variable in the Royals holding up to the grind that's ahead, between the heat of weather in August and that of the region competition, which will come hot and heavy in week 2 as they travel in hopes of avenging a loss to rival Dodge County.

"We've got to continue to get in shape, with the volume of what's about to happen," Lassiter said. "We've got to put pads on and be physical and be able to handle that with our bodies, and being able to endure that for three to four days at a time, and not just two days of a padded camp, and then it's over for a while. Those are the things we're looking for. We've got to figure out how to perform when things aren't going our way."

Last season's losses – six out of the seven (including in the playoffs to Fitzgerald) by less than a score – turned out to be a great tutorial in responding to those setbacks.

All told, they were down far more than they were up in 2024, but all that mattered was what happened after the sixth time they climbed back to their feet to keep going.

Later this fall, similar situations in a brutal region are less a matter of if, but of when.

"It's just kind of something you can draw on when things get tough, and you're down," Lassiter said. "You understand that you've always got a shot, and you've always got to continue to play, because with the power rankings, you don't know where you're going to end up."

BLECKLEY COUNTY ROYALS

AT A GLANCE...

HEAD COACH: Von Lassiter (9th season, 95-45 career)

OFFENSE: Spread
DEFENSE: 3-4

2024: 5-7 (3-6 region 2-High A)
FINISH: GHSA Playoffs (lost to Fitzgerald in second round)

RETURNING STARTERS:
4 offense / 4 defense

KEY LOSSES: QB Kam Everett; WR/DB Nykez Farrow; WR/DB Tyrek Mack; RB/DB D.Q. Benjamin; DL Amarian Burns; K/P Ford Childers; OL/DL J.B. Blackshear; DL Jamaury Elvine; OL/DL T.J. Fountain

PLAYERS TO WATCH: DL Tug Pasby, Sr.; ATH/DB Josh Stanley, Sr.; QB Brody Fleming, Jr.; TE/LB Landry Nobles, So.; TE/LB Patrick Roberts, Sr.; WR/DB Jireh Campbell, Sr.; WR/DB Jahiyan Blackshear, Sr. WR/DB Octavius Tate, Jr.; OL/DL Brysen Rogers, Jr.

THE UPSIDES: Offensive options, promise at pending positions on lines, defense
KEY CONCERN: Widespread inexperience

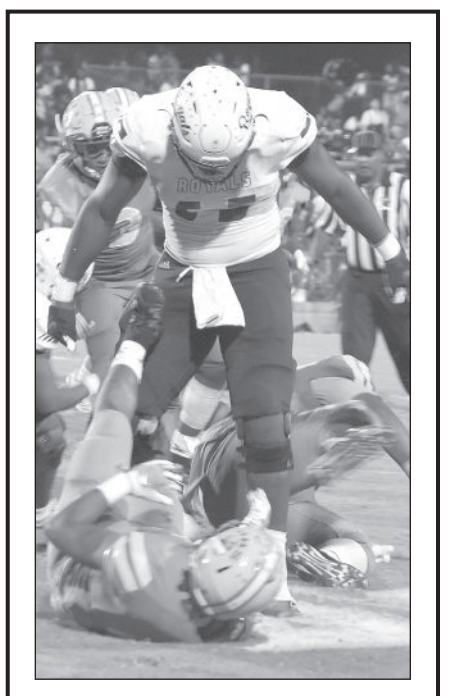
SCHEDULE...

8/14 Rutland (Bibb County Kickoff Classic, Macon)
8/22 at Dodge Co.* ($)
8/29 East Laurens*
9/04 at Southwest Macon* ($)
9/19 Washington Co.* ($)
9/26 at Jefferson Co.*
10/03 Northeast Macon*
10/17 at Dublin*
10/24 at ACE Charter* ($)
10/31 Central Macon*

** – Region 2-High A*
($) – Pivotal games



MORE THAN ENOUGH: The Royals will have minimal experience returning on defense, but are content with the new options they have available around several all-region caliber returning starters like safety Jireh Campbell (shown on a tackle vs. Dublin), who was their third-leading tackler last season/HORACE AUSTIN, File



BC ROYALTY...

Bleckley County has taken steps to cement the towering legacy of one of its all-time greats with the retirement of the No. 65 jersey of Amarius Mims, a move made official earlier this year. The standout tackle, shown during a game his junior season of 2019, went on from Cochran to take part in a pair of national titles at the University of Georgia before his 18th overall NFL draft selection by the Cincinnati Bengals in 2024. A banner commemorating Mims' career and local roots is already in place at Shelly Hayes Field, but the school is hopeful to bring him back home for a more formal recognition sometime in the near future, head coach Von Lassiter said/FILE



Big-time ball carriers, battle-tested D will make Bulldogs a team to beat

By LOGAN REYNOLDS
GTLN Staff Reporter

In a sense, Thomas Smith has made variety his trademark, employing a diverse range of strategies and tactics over his coaching career.

Smith began as head coach of the Wheeler County Bulldogs in 2020, ending his first season with a 1-9 record. However, five of those losses were due to forfeits stemming from player eligibility issues.

He then followed up with a 5-5 record in 2021 and a 5-6 record in 2022, bringing the Bulldogs to the first round of playoffs.

Smith transferred to Dodge County for the 2023 season, hoping the move would be a better opportunity for his family, but went 1-9 in a single season as the Indians' head coach.

When Wheeler's head coach position reopened, Smith came back to retake the helm, and picked up about where he left off.

"I'm just glad to be back here," he said. "We've got tremendous support from our administration."

Upon Smith's return, the Bulldogs saw major success again, going 7-4 with a 4-2 region record last fall. The team made it to the playoffs, though they lost to Jenkins County in the first round.

But the season got off to an awkward start after quarterback Reco Wooten was injured in July, and much of what the team had practiced over the summer was reliant on him.

Though their first game against Wilkinson County ended as a 34-20 loss, the Bulldogs quickly rebounded by moving into a wildcat set they relied on for the rest of the year.

With the return of their QB this fall, Smith aims to go back to a multiple approach to avoid an over-reliance on one player.



RECO CASE: A healthy Reco Wooten, who's shown checking one down on a short sprint-out at the Jimmy Fields 7-on-7 event during June, promises a more stable passing dimension to add to Wheeler County's already-established ground game. Though head coach Thomas Smith masterminded a record season on offense last year without a healthy QB, the Bulldogs are confident a passing threat will be good for business as they try to expand their reach this season/**CLAY REYNOLDS, File**

"Last year, wildcat-wise, I mean, it was a lot of direct snap, and we'll still have that aspect of it in our game, but just being able to be more multiple, being able to throw the ball when we want to, should help out," he said.

Smith's diverse scheme comes from tailoring offenses to fit his player's strengths and weaknesses each year.

"I think you have to just sort of adapt your scheme to what your team does best," he said. "I think we always try to carry our core principles of being physical, toughness, being disciplined, but I think scheme-wise you have to adapt it to what your kids are able to do best."

Last year, the Bulldogs focused on a technique style of defense due to having bigger linemen who could take up and defend much more space. Their defense this year will be more aggressive out of the same 3-5 base, featuring more slanting and forward motion, due to the more athletic builds of linemen.

"They're more of the athletic guys that you're wanting to attack instead of just sitting in spots," Smith said.

Wheeler County still has bigger players who will see action against "downhill running teams."

Regardless, Smith's goal on defense is always the same: force opponents to drive the field and lock them out of big plays.

The Bulldogs lost defensive end J.T. Gillis, but their entire secondary lineup returned, and Smith noted the group had a good offseason.

Many linebackers also return, some in similar positions to last year such as Jaden Bridges, but many will have their placements changed, such as Lane Connell, Laith Davis and Malik Madison, who will be taking over as stack linebackers.

Sencear Marks will also assume the "spur" position, while contributing on offense as both a running back and wide receiver.

"He was an all-region guy last year that we're counting on a lot out of this year as well," Smith said.

Offensively, Smith is looking to control the tempo of the game through ball security, and feature the multitude of athletes in the backfield.

Running backs Alvin Ricks and Justin Culver are both highly regarded for their playmaking abilities, and the tandem, which Smith described as a "pretty good one-two punch running the football," will be the go-to ball-carriers.

Wheeler County had some holes to fill following the departure of some key players on the

WHEELER
Continued on page 15

WHEELER COUNTY BULLDOGS

AT A GLANCE...

HEAD COACH: Thomas Smith (5th season, 83-81 career)

OFFENSE: Multiple
DEFENSE: 3-5

2024: 7-4 (4-2 region 4-Low A)
FINISH: GHSA playoffs (lost to Jenkins Co. in first round)

RETURNING STARTERS: 6 offense / 8 defense

KEY LOSSES: WR/DB Quenshawn Glasper; TE/DL E J.T. Gillis; OL/DL Jordan Bridges (Andrew); OL/DL K.J. Williams (Capital)

PLAYERS TO WATCH: RB/DB Alvin Ricks, Sr.; RB/LB Justin Culver, Sr. ATH/DB Sencear Marks, Sr.; QB Reco Wooten, Sr.; TE/LB Lane Connell, Sr.; OL/DL Trey Williams, So.; LB Laith Davis, Sr.; OL/DL Luke Smith, Jr.; OL/LB Jackson Scott, So.

THE UPSIDES: Loaded running back room, defensive experience
KEY CONCERN: Limiting unforced errors in critical situations/games

SCHEDULE...

8/15	at Wilkinson Co. ($)
8/22	Taylor Co.
9/05	at Twiggs Co.
9/12	Atkinson Co.
9/19	at Dooly Co.*
9/26	Hawkinsville* ($)
10/03	Montgomery Co.*
10/17	at Telfair Co.* ($)
10/24	at Wilcox Co.* ($)
10/31	Treutlen*

** – Region 4-Low A*
($) – Pivotal games

Eagles expect shot to reenter playoff hunt if they can eliminate small errors in big games

By LOGAN REYNOLDS
GTLN Staff Reporter

Kareem Hess took over as Montgomery County head coach right on the heels of a low point for the school, performance-wise.

During the 2023-2024 football season, the Eagles went 0-10 during a second and final season under Coach Don Vandygriff. However, Hess did not feel any tension or pressure when assuming the position last season.

"I believe, y'know, Coach did the best with what he had," he said.

Hess did not originally plan to become head coach. Instead, the Albany State graduate served primarily in lower level coaching positions, first at his alma mater of Tift County before moving to Missouri.

There, Hess served as a running backs coach before landing another coaching position at Lincoln University in Missouri. After six years, he returned to Georgia to live closer to family.

Hess was working in Turner County when he began sending out applications for offensive coordinator positions in the surrounding counties.

"And I was actually about to take one of them," he said. "Then I got a call from Dr. (Scott) Barrow, who was the principal at the time, right before I was [about] to call the other people who sent a job to go be the offensive coordinator."

After a "great interview" with Barrow, Hess was offered the job.

According to Hess, Vandygriff had three coaches to assist him, not nearly enough support staff to properly train and coach the players to the degree they needed. Meanwhile, Hess has seven assistant coaches, enough that each coach can focus on their tasks without being stretched too thin with things like office management.

"I think, you know, being able to have a lot of guys to coach those individual positions and put guys in different positions, because we're all on the same page and now we come all together in one group, you know, it looks good," he said.



LOCKED IN: Montgomery County's defense is focused on becoming more sound after some small breakdowns led to big plays in too many situations last season. The Eagles made a strong first impression as they shut out GMC 13-0 in their first scrimmage Aug. 1/**SPECIAL PHOTO, Montgomery County Athletics**

If one were to look solely at the scores from the 2024 season, Hess' first year was only a slight improvement, ending with a 3-7 record. However, Hess believes the true story of the Eagles' season is in the material observations rather than the numbers.

Many of Hess' players last season were first-time starters, which led to many games where the team made several small mistakes that lost them games.

"It's little stuff here and there, and we gave up plays that we probably shouldn't have [given] up," he said. "We had some false starts and some games that kind of beat ourselves."

The problem, according to Hess, was not the team's skills; he praised his athletes for having great offense, defense and speed. Instead, the issue was a lack of discipline to avoid those small mistakes.

In addition, as their opponents capitalized on those mistakes, Hess' team's morale would falter in the second halves, leading to poorer performances. One of Hess' goals for the season is to teach his players to stay positive despite the situation.

"Refs are going to make bad calls, teams are going to get big plays," says Hess. "We've just got to get past that."

However, despite those shortcomings, Hess believes they performed far better than the scores suggest. In his mind, there was never a game in which the Eagles were completely outmatched.

This season, the Eagles will refocus on last season's strategies, out of a spread offense and a 3-4 defense, as many players from last season will be returning.

"Everybody's returning on offense," Hess said. "Everybody's returning on defense."

Defense is a big focus this year, as Hess wants to stop opponents from running the ball as much as they did in the past. According to Hess, the Eagles were very good against the pass, with only three completed against them per game, but opponents were still able to run the ball well.

The team lost three linebackers with the departure of Eric White, Davonte Wise and Elec Waters, but younger players were already behind them ready to step into those roles.

On the offensive side, the Eagles lost wide receiver Jamun Coglin, who was named region athlete of the year, and quarterback Jayden Harris.

The team's focus will be getting the ball into the hands of their wide receiver, Jaquez Kelly, a playmaker Hess says can convert a pass into a 90-yard run.

Running the ball is also a big emphasis, and will be a core of Hess' offense as MoCo looks to capitalize on its wealth of size, strength and experience along the offensive line.

Among a number of impressive players, 6-foot-6, 310-pound sophomore Torion Smith will stand out in the rotation of linemen on both sides of the ball.

Hess also wants to control possession well enough to ensure the defense has time to rest on the sidelines.

Many players will be playing on both offense and defense, such as Elijah McEwen, who will act as a linebacker and a running back.

"He's a stud on both sides of the ball for us," says Hess.

One of the Eagles' biggest challenges will be adjusting to their opponents' formats, as they are a spread team playing against a region with a heavy Wing-T bias. However, Hess believes that discipline will pull them through, and that their size on the defensive line will help create the space playmakers need to succeed.

"That's the main thing," says Hess. "Run the ball, and we'll take our shots when we take our shots, and we['ve] got to make the plays when we make the plays."

Hess' endeavor for consistency will likely continue into next season unimpeded, as MoCo's current lineup is mostly juniors and freshmen who will return for at least one more season. As for now, the Eagles are aiming to get back to the playoffs for the first time since 2022.

"Everybody wants to make the playoff, try to make a push, because, I mean, at the end of the day, we all play for something," Hess said. "So everybody's going to give what they got and everything they got to win these games."

He doesn't have any particular focus on a single game this season. To him, the region is filled with tough competitors, and each requires the same level of attention.

"All are our key games," says Hess. "We['ve] got to win all of them."

MONTGOMERY COUNTY EAGLES

AT A GLANCE...

HEAD COACH: Kareem Hess (2nd season)

OFFENSE: Spread
DEFENSE: 3-4

2024: 3-7 (1-5 region 4-Low A)
FINISH: Missed playoffs

RETURNING STARTERS: 8 offense / 7 defense

KEY LOSSES: QB/DB Jayden Harris; ATH/DB Jamun Coglin; WR/DB Jordyn Patterson; LB Davonte Wise; WR/LB Eric White; OL/LB Elec Waters; OL/DL Charles Rogers; OL/DL Seth Carelock

PLAYERS TO WATCH: WR/DB Jaquez Kelly, Jr.; RB/LB Elijah McEwen, Jr.; QB Rilynn Dees, Fr.; LB Jai Grissom, Jr.; RB/LB Keegan Mills, Fr.; OL/DL Jayden Roberson, Sr.; OL/DL Torion Smith, So.; DB Zaden Waller, Jr.; WR/DB Kameron Henderson, Jr.; TE/DL Haze Thigpen, Sr.; OL/DL Chez Rivera, Sr.

THE UPSIDES: More explosive passing potential, line depth
KEY CONCERN: Cutting down on big plays/turnovers

SCHEDULE...

8/15	Baconton Charter
8/22	at Johnson Co.
8/29	at Atkinson Co.
9/12	Taylor Co.
9/19	at Telfair Co.*
9/26	Dooly Co.* ($)
10/03	at Wheeler Co.* ($)
10/10	at Treutlen* ($)
10/17	at Hawkinsville* ($)
10/31	Wilcox Co.*

** – Region 4-Low A*
($) – Pivotal games

Cobras hope offseason tackling work, gains in weight and locker rooms will put them in striking distance

By CLAY REYNOLDS
Sports Editor

In a rebuilding process, some of the most meaningful changes that alter the trajectory of a football program don't take place until in between a coach's first and second year in charge.

The biggest one head coach Roderick Cummings and the Twiggs County Cobras have focused on this offseason is better preparing themselves for the physical battles they know are in store for their defense this fall.

After many of those got the best of them during his first go-round, they've spent a ton of time this offseason working to not only get stronger in the weight room, but also to improve their tackling... as much as was possible within the state's summer contact and equipment restrictions.

"Our problem, going back to last season, we could move the ball at times, but then defensively, it wasn't that we were not lined up right, but it was a physical brand of football we weren't ready for," Cummings said. "We've put a definite emphasis on tackling, taking correct angles, breaking down, wrapping up, keeping eyes in the correct place, having hands in the right place, working down the line of scrimmage. We've done so much of that in offseason and summer, and the kids are now understanding what it looks like to tackle somebody.

"You take for granted that everybody understands the correct way to finish on guys. A lot of times, when you come in later (as a head coach), you forget those little things like how much emphasis you've got to put on drill work, on just tackling and being physical, and we've done a great job of that."

Going back to what Cummings and his staff worked to establish in year 1, many are things that simply come along with time. Those seem to be improving headed into year 2, with familiarity as one of the biggest ingredients that was missing.

"Summer's actually gone a lot smoother," he said. "When you've been here for a year, the kids definitely have a chance to know what your expectations are and the things we know we need to accomplish to get better."

As a program, the Cobras have gotten much more consistent in their strength and conditioning.

"That's the thing that will go a long way this year," Cummings said. "A whole year in the weight room, some of our kids never lifted weights, and now they've done it for a whole year. Embracing the pain, embracing the work."

A detail many first-year coaches can take for granted? Relationships and trust. Those both required a lot of attention and patience to build at a school where the head coach's office, over most of the last decade, has been a revolving door.

When this staff first arrived last summer, building rapport was difficult mainly because players were naturally a little guarded as they scoped out whether or not it was wise to confide in members of a third football staff in as many years.

Now, more than 12 months later, there are some much stronger bonds in place.

"At times last year, it was as if they were kind of trying to smell who we are, what kind of personality we're going to have. Now, they kind of already know, and that continuity has been tremendous," Cummings said.

"The flood gates seem like they're opening with the communication between coaches and players. They definitely know we care about them, that we're here and we want them to improve. It really has grown."

Twiggs is hopeful those positive steps off the field will lead to some strides this year on it for a returning roster with a healthy amount to build on.

Last season's 2-8 wasn't a great-looking record, but did tie that of the Cobras' best season since their last playoff appearance in 2016.

After a rough start, they got some things working by week 3, and would grab back-to-back wins on either side of the hurricane, over Josey and GMC, to open region play 1-0.

But against the rest of the schedule, there was a clear gap that they're at work to continue making up.

Twiggs lost only the standard number of seniors, but among them were some high-impact players including two of its top wideouts and defensive backs, an anchor on both sides of the line and a lot of depth at linebacker. Receiving and tackling production took the biggest hit.

TWIGGS COUNTY COBRAS

AT A GLANCE...

HEAD COACH: Roderick Cummings (second season)

OFFENSE: 2-back
DEFENSE: 3-4

2024: 2-8 (1-4 region 5-Low A)
FINISH: Missed playoffs

RETURNING STARTERS:
6 offense / 8 defense

KEY LOSSES: WR/DB Daniel Pitts; WR/DB Kamauree Butler; QB/DB Brandon Davis; OL/DL Jimmanuel Tharpe; OL/DL Xavian Sampson

PLAYERS TO WATCH: ATH/DB Harold Crawford III, Sr.; WR/DB Demontrez Brown, Jr; WR/DB Koby Stephens, Sr.; OL/DL Jaden Jones, Jr.; QB/DB Jeremy Stanley, Fr.; WR/LB Jamarcus Stephens, Jr.; OL/DL Jacob Williams, Jr.; OL/DL Jacorey Washington, Jr.

THE UPSIDES: Continuity on lines of scrimmage, young skill talent
KEY CONCERN: Better physicality and tackling in a run-heavy region

SCHEDULE...

8/15	Treutlen
8/22	at Greene Co.
8/29	at Portal
9/05	Wheeler Co.
9/12	at Josey
9/26	GMC* ($)
10/03	at Johnson Co.*
10/10	at Glascock Co.* ($)
10/24	Hancock Central* ($)
10/31	Wilkinson Co.* ($)

** – Region 5-Low A*
($) – Pivotal games



A LOT ON THE LINE: Both lines of scrimmage, where Twiggs County will have a good bit of size and experience back this fall, will play a vital role in the Cobras' aspirations to both run the ball and stop the run more consistently/SPECIAL PHOTO

So a lot will fall to the handful of players the Cobras have in position to step up and deliver in those areas.

Their single biggest go-to on both sides of the ball will be Harold Crawford III, who's pegged as their No. 1 back and corner.

The senior had last year's lead in rushing, but was also a big factor catching the ball out of the backfield on screens and short, high-percentage routes that Twiggs hopes can be just as effective as handoffs.

"If we're going to be good in the run game, all of it starts with him," Cummings said. "80 percent of our offense will probably run through him."

At quarterback, they feel good about going with a true freshman in Jeremy Stanley, albeit a pretty good-looking one, at 6-foot-2.

As the son of a coach, he's got a great football mind. His godfather is also Twiggs great and NFL DB Darqueze Dennard.

"We're gonna give the reins of the offense to him," Cummings said. "He throws a good ball. He's a smart, intelligent kid, and communicates well."

Demontrez Brown, "probably our fastest kid, probably our most productive kid in the passing game," will be his main target and a also a defensive difference-maker.

Look for an impact from freshman Isaiah Paschal, who's impressed with his "intangibles, quickness and great hands" this summer.

"He's a hardworking kid," Cummings said. "The good thing about him is he'll be able to play multiple positions. He's got running back ability, but he can also get in the receiving game because he catches the ball so well."

There's some youth sprinkled in among returning fixtures on the offensive line. But the new lineup at the position has settled in well this summer around left guard Jaden Jones (fresh off a GACA all-star game appearance), Rhaje Brown and center Jacob Williams

Cam Davis, who spent some time filling in this summer for Williams over the ball, is also a newcomer who will fit somewhere along the offensive front. Junior Jacory Washington also saw a lot of action on both lines of scrimmage last season.

Last year, the Cobras' first intentions were to play a tight, heavy, ground-and-pound style of football. But as the season unfolded, they would realize they had a lot more at the receiver position than originally expected, and wound up using a much higher number of three-wide packages.

This year's core offense should bear a greater resemblance to that original vision, with a generous helping of two-back, two tight end packages and still some, but less of, the shotgun.

Going forward, everything will start with being able to move the ball on the ground behind a high concentration of returning blockers up front.

And dishing out some of the physicality Twiggs has been working to develop on the D-line this summer was just as much a priority on the opposite side.

"We've definitely got to be able to run the ball better," Cummings said. "We want to be able to try to get the ball in our playmakers' hands. We'll run a lot of screen stuff and a lot of hitch routes. But the key to being better is we're going to have to run the ball."

Defensively, every position will share players with its counterpart on offense, with the exception of linebacker, where the Cobras had some rare depth in an eight-man rotation last season.

Though they lost about half that number, young up-and-comers behind returning starters – two of their top returning tacklers in senior Koby Stephens and junior Jamarcus Stephens who will be key – should give the defensive unit something it can build around.

"Being such a small school, the bodies are more important than anything," Cummings said. "When you don't have that, a lot of times, you're mixing and matching."

Ephriam Hernandez is a freshman specialist who'll handle much of the kicking game behind a returning snapper in Williams.

How reliable that new operation can be, as Hernandez translates the prac-

TWIGGS
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WACO

Continued from page 10

rest are young newcomers whom Edwards declined to name until more is known.

"I'm waiting on that one or two guys to step up in that receiving group to take on that role as being the lead guy," Edwards said. "As of right now, we're going to see what happens going into this first preseason game, and see who steps up in that game-type situation."

No matter what, the Golden Hawks plan to get some increased tight end involvement in the attack this year, both to diversify their route patterns and to bring an extra potential blocker into the package in situations that will put them in a stronger position to run it.

The offensive line is one position where they're already locked and loaded, with seniors Javyn Brooks, Zorian Reeves and Cory Hall carrying over as starters. WACO will be replacing two lost seniors with younger players at right tackle and center, but both those jobs have already been won by rising sophomores.

"It's a mixture of young and old, but we're hoping the old guys will help the young guys mature quickly and give them the confidence they need to go out there and block well for our run game and our pass game," Edwards said.

On defense, WACO's most inexperienced position will be outside linebacker, where big holes were left by Culpepper and Tayshawn Poole.

Depth charts saw a good bit less turnover everywhere else.

The defensive line, making use of a lot of two-way players in the rotation, will be led by veterans.

Top 2024 tackler Kam Shaw (59 total and eight for loss) will be a senior at linebacker. Junior Jakobe Poole and senior Cameron Battle (back off an injury) are expected to play a key role there as well.

Aiden Watts, a freshman all-region pick at safety with multiple college offers, returns as a focal point of the secondary.

The Hawks have some seniority at corner, though returners there were limited last year by injuries.

"That's the position we're at a wait and see moment right now, to see who's going to step in and fill those roles," Edwards said. "Luckily, we don't play a whole lot of teams that throw the ball as much as we do, so they get a lot of work in practice and they're going to continue to get a lot of work that's going to prepare them for the season."

Potentially biggest among question marks... who replaces the highly effective Christian Rountree at kicker?

There are a lot of options (including several who belong to the less orthodox straight-on school of kicking), but WACO has yet to settle just who will handle that area of their special teams.

"Teams don't realize how important the kicker is until you don't have one," Edwards said. "We've been kind of auditioning players to kick for us this year, and that's wait and see, too."

It may not have been exactly the next step the Hawks had in mind for last season, but they definitely took a big one on the back end of their schedule last fall in some strong performances – and finally a few signature wins – that followed through on some long-awaited hopes of re-establishing themselves as a team to beat.

The schedule, placing region runner-up and champion Northeast and Dublin back-to-back in games 3-4, wasn't at all conducive to a strong start. But the 91-9 combined score in the two losses, combined with a 22-6 score in another to Jeff Davis in which the Golden Hawks got overwhelmed at the line of scrimmage, prompted some soul-searching in early September that got them on the right track.

On the other side of a short break, they'd win five of their last six, throttling Central and pulling out four other barnburners vs. Bleckley, East Laurens, Southwest and ACE. The lone loss against Dodge County, only decided by 11, was a game they were in the whole way.

"After the Dublin game, we had that bye week, then we went to Bleckley County and we started to hit our stride on who we were and the identity we wanted to create, and we finished pretty strong," Edwards said. "I thought we played well finishing out the season."

They also measured up a lot better to the Jeff Davis benchmark as the two teams rematched in the Pinelands as 16 and 17th seeds in the first round of the state playoffs. The game was all even until a tipping point early in the fourth quarter that brought on 16 unanswered points for the Jackets to run away with it.

"It was a letdown," Edwards said, candidly. "We thought we had a real good shot of winning that game, but they came out and played a little bit better than us at the end of the night."

But looking back at the finish in its entirety, WACO closed out with nothing but competitive performances.

And the season as a whole continued a slow step-by-step improvement in several categories as the Hawks added a win to their record for a third year in a row, and cut down on average points given up by another 2.5 per game.

Edwards is hopeful this team can pick up where last year's left off, and potentially punch its way into the region's upper echelon this year.

"We want to build on the momentum of last year and not have to start over," he said.

A similar sense of mystery seems to surround many of the Hawks' key rivals in the region, who all may be a different sort of matchup early versus late in the year, depending on how each develop and answer their own offseason questions.

There's nobody on the schedule that the Golden Hawks have down as a "gimme game."

"We know that this region's like the SEC," Edwards said. "You can't take any weeks off. That's how we're going to approach it, and you never know what a team has until you're about there, ready to play them... Everybody has athletes, everybody has great coaches. So we know that we've gotta prepare each week to go out and be prepared to compete and have a chance to win a game."

There's confidence this team has that next step in them, but a first look will give the Hawks a much better idea of where they stand.

"We can start to make the adjustments from there," Edwards said. "Right now, I feel like we've just gotta stay healthy, stay true to cores and continue to get better. I think we will have a better season than last year, and continue to get on the right track of bringing WACO football back from the old."

TEAM ROSTERS...

Dublin Fighting Irish

1	Bennett Lake	SR
3	QuanTavis Lovett	SR
4	Trav Bostic	JR
5	Ja'Karian Jones	JR
6	Nazyon Mitchell	JR
7	Royce Harrell	SO
8	Jamarcus Knight	JR
9	Will Harris	SO
10	Ethan Spivey	JR
11	Major Morton	FR
12	Patrick Caldwell	JR
13	Acente Lewis	SO
14	Will Wallace	SO
15	Jaydon McRae	JR
16	Matthew Batts	FR
17	Ryland Yates	SO
18	Jeff Davis	SR
19	Acayden Marshall	JR
21	Jabari Bell	JR
22	Raylin Harrell	SO
23	Gabriel Carcamo	SO
24	Shamaude Height	SO
27	Dontavious Cannon	JR
28	Tyzavion Salter	JR
31	Zion Porter	JR
32	Curt Norris	FR
33	Melvin "Champ" Scott	FR
34	Antonio Timmons	FR
35	Dorian Carcamo	SR
36	Terrance Rozier Jr.	FR
37	Chris Brown	JR
38	Rashad Timmons	FR
40	Ethan Lenoard	JR
41	Kye Young	JR
42	Urick Andrews	SR
43	Quino Green	SO
44	Symier Wilkins	SO
45	Vincente Bond Jr.	FR
46	Antravion Edwards	JR
50	Diaz Stanley	SO
51	Jalen Dardy	JR
52	Wi'Tyreon Charleston	JR
53	Isiah Redd	SR
54	Mathias Baker	SR
55	Blake Luecke	JR
56	Deontae Walker	JR
57	Alex Bell	SO
59	John Oliver	JR
60	D. Williams-Lopez	SO
61	Mandarian Stanley	JR
62	Jermiah Mack	JR
63	Jayden O'Neal	JR
65	Javon Thomas	FR
66	LaMarkues Lewis	SO
67	Nehemiah Snell	FR
68	Kazmerio Kitchens	SR
69	Lazarus Sutton	FR
70	Roberto Santos	FR
71	Alijaha McDowell	SR
72	Timothy Harris	FR
73	Justus O'Neal	FR
74	Carmelo White	FR
75	Ta'Maj Carswell	SR
76	Mi'Kah Harmon	SR
77	Domimarkeyo Walden	JR
79	Kegan Lowe	SO
80	Parker Jones	SO
82	Zaylan McMiller	SO
83	Malik Issac	FR
85	Jameer Renfroe	FR
87	Brandon Burden	FR
91	Jamir Plummer	SO
92	Jackson Jones	FR
93	Kevin Hightower	FR

Head Coach: Roger Holmes, Asst. HC: Joel Ingram, DC: Joe Stubbs, Co-OC: Riley Holmes, Co-OC: Keaton Wilson, STC: Brad Wallace, Run Game DC: Don Vandygriff, JV HC: Fred Williams, DL: Bin Turner, RB: Gary Morton, WR: Jarius Evans, Football Ops: Brandon Walden, ATC: Melissa McDuffie, Team Doctor: Patrick Hanson, Team Chaplain: Jerry Cantu, Stats: Brent Tanner

East Laurens Falcons

0	Luis Roman	SR
1	Major Floyd	JR
2	Skylar Snead	JR
3	Bryson Hazley	JR
4	Demarcio Holliman	JR
5	Jaden Griffin	JR
6	Jaden Wright	JR
7	Norrion King	SR
8	Jamari Harvey	JR
9	Lagen Mack	JR
10	Jason Giles	SR
11	Jeren Ballard	JR
12	Gary Stockton	JR
13	Tristan Anderson	JR
14	Za'norrian Ellington	JR
15	Dianco Murray	JR
16	Logan Smith	JR
17	Logan Clements	SR
18	Tawan Horne	JR
19	Cayson Wadley	SR
20	Dashawn Bentley	JR
25	Aveone Wicker	JR
27	Jeremiah Rozier	JR
28	Ethan Francis	JR
29	Travioung Cannon	JR
31	Jaxten Thomas	JR
33	Braylon Baker	JR
34	Braedyn Evans	JR
39	Zion Boston	JR
40	John Thang	JR
42	Donavon Hudson	JR
43	Jaleel Coleman	JR
49	Riley Coleman	JR
50	Jaden Mcclendon	JR
51	Cayden Stanley	JR
52	Raquis Stanley	SR
53	Robert Scott	JR
58	Ja'tuan Wright	JR
60	Roddrekouis Wicker	JR
62	Jason Lucas Owens	SR
64	Amaree Daniels	JR
65	Blake Hodges	JR
66	James Easton Wood	JR
67	Jordyn Giles	JR
68	Brody Owens	JR
70	Donny White	JR
72	Bennett Tyson	JR
75	Travunta Carroll	JR
76	Kayleb Butler	JR
77	Brayden Gomez	JR
78	Caleb Jackson	SR

Head coach: Jesse Hicks, OC: Andrew Satterwhite, DC: Ryan Selby, Assistant coaches: Christopher Burley, Eleteon Bivins, Carson Morris, Jeremiah Hicks, Chance Pittman, Eric Norris, Tyrone Stanley, Patrick Evans, Corey Dudley, Shaw Robinson, Emmanual Boone, Kris Daniels

Trinity Crusaders

0	Jamarion Ricks	JR
4	Asher Evans	SO
7	Wade Register	SR
8	Jakob Sahli	SR
11	Charlie Maffett	SR
13	Hein Schaaf	SO
15	Braden Underwood	JR
19	Mason Lane	SO
21	Austin Caraway	SO
22	Griffin Lane	JR
23	Jonathan Rozier	SO
24	Tripp Mascaro	SO
25	John Brantley	SO
27	Dash Preston	SO
30	Alston Bryan	SR
38	Kennedy Beasley	JR
40	Alec Preston	FR
50	Carter Lee	SR
51	Corbin Albritton	JR
52	Blake Simms	SO
53	Garrett Collier	SO
55	Cody Register	SO
61	Aiden George	JR
75	Nolan Terry	SR
77	Gavin Hightower	FR
87	Elijah Maddocks	SO
88	Sam Fuller	JR
99	Andrew Helton	SO

Head coach: Bruce Lane, Assistant coaches: Rob East, Ben East, Tyler Green, Christian Lane, Jim Coleman

West Laurens Raiders

0	Jermidous Brown	SR
1	Juvon Hill	SR
2	Justin Blash	JR
3	Ty Cummings	SR
5	Jayden Watkins	SR
6	Shannon Adkins	SR
7	Branden Brooks	SR
8	Jayce Blash	SR
9	Ethan Cason-Guyton	SR
10	Nicholas Hester	SO
11	Jaden Stanley	JR
12	Cason Pollock	SR
13	Janile Browder	JR
14	Evan Holmes	SR
15	Hunter Castellaw	SR
16	JD Hogan	SO
17	Duggan Malone	SO
18	Blayne Becker	JR
19	Jeremy Brownlee	JR
20	Jabiri Martin	JR
21	Zorian Willis	SR
22	Stephen Odom	SO
23	Braylen Robinson	SO
24	Evan Williams	SR
25	Briceton McMiller	SO
26	Trashawn Carswell	JR
27	Jamari Blash	FR
29	Jace Williams	SO
30	Brenden Bathon	FR
31	Kelsey Ashley	FR
32	Lavaris Bailey	FR
33	Cameron Curbeam	FR
34	Terrence McClain	FR
35	Devin Watkins	FR
36	Martez Thomas	JR
37	Lorenzo Wright	FR
38	Kentay Henderson	SO
39	Kaden Bloodsaw	SO
40	Evan Ellis	JR
41	Leroy Mack	JR
43	Jacob Jones	FR
44	Ayden Moore	SO
45	Maxx Chafin	SO
46	Tripp Nesmith	SO
47	Knowledge Taylor	JR
48	Zachery White	FR
49	Jaylon Mcmiller	SO
50	Christian Rozier	JR
51	Trey Williams	SR
52	Malique Green	SO
53	Lane Neal	SO
54	Brayden Bailey	FR
55	Rashod Dixon	JR
56	Janden Whitley	FR
57	Tramel Tobler	SR
58	Stevie Maddox	FR
60	Tristen Hardnett	FR
61	Tremayne Chambers	FR
62	Cooper Smith	SO
63	Timothy Sanders	FR
64	Greyden McManus	FR
65	Jonathan Toney	JR
66	Brayden Baldwin	FR
68	Keith Walker	SR
70	Dameon Palmer	SO
72	Perry Mackey	FR
74	Michael Dasher	SR
75	Jackobi Burney	SO
77	Grady Howell	SR
78	Hudson Lee	SO
79	Landon Neesmith	FR
81	Alijah Jackson	FR
82	Josiah Byxbie	FR
83	Joseph Reynolds	FR
84	Torrey English	FR
87	Jimmie Trussell	SR
90	Takobe Tobler	FR
94	Braden Willis	SO
95	Robert Veal	SO
99	Juquan Gainey	SR

Head coach: Kip Burdette, OC: Gabe Gay, DC: Kenny Murphy, Assistant coaches: Tyler Rogers, Matt Janufka Reggie Mack, Brandon Edmond, Jordan Green, Jacob Floyd, Parker Gordon, Trevor Wood, Tech: Dennis Howell, Trainer: Hunter Hester

Johnson County Trojans

1	Cory King	SR
2	Chance Wombles	SO
4	Jeremiah Scott	SO
5	Tayshawn Norris	SR
6	Jacaden Webb	JR
7	Daezon Devero	SO
8	Jeremiah Taylor	SO
9	Zacorian Graddy	SO
10	Kelsey Waters	FR
11	Dre Hudson	JR
12	Nathan Turberville	SR
13	Jacob Peeples	SO
15	Jalen Daniels	SO
16	Jacorian King	SO
17	Will Peeples	SR
18	Ashton Griffin	SO
19	Taylin Norris	SO
20	Kaleb Carlyle	SO
21	Jamir Wadley	JR
22	Rj Moorman	FR
23	Mickel Carter	FR
26	Morgan Prosser	FR
27	Ricardo Taylor	FR
28	Chris Monroe	SO
33	Gage Kleingardner	FR
36	Preston Kilpatrick	FR
51	Carsen Jones	FR
52	Jeffery Dupree	SO
53	Dwayne Abrams	JR
54	Knox Tanner	FR
55	Derrick Dixon	SO
56	Cedrick Bridges	SO
57	Brycen Devero	FR
58	Ziion Wesley	SR
59	Matthew Mccoy	FR
60	Jake Rogers	SO
61	Ayden Hall	FR
62	Jamie Moss	SO
64	Matthew Connell	SR
66	Scottie Horton	
68	Grayson Jackson	FR
70	Albert Connell	

Bleckley County Royals

1	Josh Stanley Jr	SR
2	Eric Burns	SR
3	Deondrez Robertson	JR
4	Tug Pasby	SR
5	Zyion Love	JR
6	Jireh Campbell	SR
7	Kelvin Sneed	JR
8	Terrollieo Brimidge	SR
9	Jahiyan Blackshear	SR
10	Brody Fleming	JR
11	Patrick Roberts	SR
12	Connor Cairney	SR
13	Chrishaun McCurry	JR
14	Colton Defore	JR
15	Willyndrick Walters	SO
16	Terrence Young	JR
17	Isiah Grissett	JR
18	Landry Nobles	SO
19	Jason McNulty	SO
20	Jeremiah Jackson	SR
21	Octavius Tate	JR
22	Marty Beck	SO
23	Gage Harris	SO
24	Zayden Lassiter	JR
25	Keondre Stanley	JR
26	Hunter Williams	SO
27	Caleb Kilpatrick	FR
28	Brayden Hill	FR
29	Kix Foskey	FR
30	Rashad Flagg	SO
31	Ahmari Blackshear	SO
32	Isiah Simeton	JR
33	Demarcus Williams	SO
34	Brody Arnold	FR
35	J.J. Stephens	FR
36	Ray Girtman	FR
37	Tylen Brown	FR
38	Jackson Ford	FR
39	Ayden Raffield	FR
41	Brenton Richards	FR
44	Cameron Braden	SR
49	An'taevin Horne	SO
50	Kmarion McClinton	JR
51	Jeremiah Brown	FR
52	Caleb Foskey	SO
53	Stachon Owens	SO
54	Jesse Reece	SR
55	Trent Fountain	FR
56	Malachi Ates	JR
57	Wyatt Ward	SO
58	Brysen Rogers	SR
59	K.J. McBurse	FR
60	Brayden Foskey	FR
61	Dylan Lamb	FR
62	Kemaji Hodge	SO
63	Tonio Graddick	SR
65	RETIRED	
66	Damon Allen	JR
68	Austin Smith	SR
72	Cam Beck	FR
73	Garrett Segal	SO
74	Jason Balthrope	JR
75	Monroe Mcnair	SO
77	John Teston	SR
79	Raidan Black	SO
81	Mason Asbell	FR
82	Jonah Kelley	JR
84	Cadrian Rumph	FR
85	T.C. Edge	FR
87	Weston Crowe	SO
88	Jamir Thompson	FR
89	Jy Smith	FR

Head coach: Von Lassiter, Asst. HC of offense: Stacy Nobles, Asst. HC of defense: Brad Davis, OC: Phillip Manning, DC: Kagan McClain, DBs: Tyler Kinsler, OLBs: Lee Foskey, DL: Kevin Kinsler, OL/Co-STC: Noah Davis, WR/Co-STC: Kolby Kinsler, Ys: Tijea Randall, Trainer: Ansley Giddens, Training director: Tyler Sapp, Stats: Antoino Farrow, Assistants: Joe Ward, Jason Dean; Student trainers: Tia Johnson (SO), Josie Lanfair (Jr.), Kaylee Long (So.), Bryn Jackson (Fr.), Film: Nick Pickel (So.)

Brentwood Eagles

1	Tristan Robinson	SO
2	Peyton Yates	SR
3	Jaelen Johnson	JR
4	JW Hitchcock	JR
5	Quez Collins	JR
6	Baylor Cobb	JR
7	Brody Smith	FR
8	Austin Albright	SR
9	Zyion Andrews	SR
10	Grady Boutelle	SR
11	Will Hodges	SR
12	Tristan Copeland	SO
13	Brody Brooks	FR
14	Jones Sheppard	JR
15	Brayden Tyson	SO
16	Jackson Bragg	JR
17	Jacob Hooks	SO
18	Jordan Haines	FR
19	Aiden Knight	SO
20	Abe Williams	SR
21	Tucker Hancock	JR
22	Trevor Darsey	FR
23	Jesse Middleton	FR
24	Cole Everett	SO
27	Weston Garbutt	FR
30	Cole Dudley	SO
31	Chase Daniel	JR
33	Tucker Collins	JR
34	Riley Helton	SR
35	Wyatt Albright	SO
40	Kaiden Long	SR
45	Cody Farmer	SO
47	Ryan Frost	SO
50	Dalton Palmer	FR
54	Everett McAfee	FR
60	Reid Benfield	JR
62	Cordy Francis	SR
64	Connor Cowart	SR
75	Jackson Pittman	SO
77	Zj Scott	SR

Dodge County Indians

0	Jeremiah Carr	SR
1	Kawaski Robinson	JR
2	Kain Mincey	JR
3	Jeremiah Alston	SR
4	Josh Devine	JR
5	Cam Hughes	JR
6	Jauriel Bray	JR
7	Jamal Smith	SR
8	Brayden Hand	SR
9	James Branch	SO
10	Mike Powers	JR
11	Dallas Worthen	FR
12	Jerimiah Burns	JR
13	Kentrez Griffin	SO
14	Gabe Yeomens	SR
15	Jordan Spady	FR
16	Parker Neil	SO
17	Terrance Fordham	SR
18	Justin Spady	SO
19	Pierce Knight	SO
20	Greg Beck	SO
21	Jordan Johnson	JR
22	Karson Dupree	SO
23	Kaleb Mack	SO
24	Kaden Powell	SO
25	Allen Jackson	JR
26	Tanner Williams	SO
29	Cale Johnson	JR
30	DJ Gibson	FR
31	Ray Facison	SR
32	Gavin Richards	SO
33	Carter Mckinney	SO
34	Javion Patterson	JR
35	Tim Dewberry	SO
36	Jeremiah Monford	JR
37	Devin Rushing	FR
39	Juluis Roberts	SR
40	Keegan Jordan	FR
41	Keegan Mincey	FR
42	Mario Whitton	FR
43	Tobias Mcloud	FR
44	Nicholas Williams	FR
45	Darrell Bonds	FR
47	Dmarion Jordan	FR
48	Jakavion Harris	FR
50	Dorian Hughes	JR
51	EZ Burney	FR
53	Noah Studstill	SO
54	Brayden Sheffield	SO
55	Adam Wells	JR
56	Peyton Butts	SO
57	Kezyan Harris	JR
58	Lee Carr	SO
61	Isaiah Burns	FR
62	Jadan Simmons	FR
63	Kendall Simmons	JR
65	Tecarion Williams	SR
66	Damarcus Thomas	FR
67	Jacob Goolsby	FR
68	Jaden Henry	FR
69	Kristopher Johnson	FR
71	Jaziyan Johnson	SO
72	Deandre Antone	SO
80	Justin Lafavor	SO
82	Kingston Antone	FR
84	Dee Allen	SO

Montgomery County Eagles

0	Jaquez Kelly	JR
1	Zaden Waller	JR
2	Landon Williams	SR
3	Hayden Hayes	SO
4	Kameron Henderson	JR
5	Bryan Bonner	SO
6	Keegan Mills	FR
7	Elijah McEwen	JR
8	Christian Jordan	JR
9	Mattrew Harvey	SO
10	Jaqwavion Grissom	JR
11	Markel Tanner	FR
12	Kadan Williamson	SO
13	Ayden Jordan	FR
14	Kenya Tate	SO
15	Riley Dees	FR
16	Emory Roberston	SO
17	Ashton Bland	SO
30	Chaz Perry	FR
31	Breylan Coats	FR
32	Dominique Jackson	FR
33	John Corum	FR
42	Arnez Howard	FR
44	Jake Hudson	SO
45	Haze Thigpen	SR
50	Jonas Carpenter	SO
53	Seamus Stephens	SO
54	Jayden Roberson	SR
55	Abisael Mezquititla	JR
56	Chez Rivera	SR
62	Mack Chambers	SR
64	Carson Scott	FR
66	Brantley Beasly	FR
70	Torion Smith	SO
75	Thomas Ford	SO
77	Josh Bell	JR

Treutlen Vikings

0	Jones, Tyrone	SR
1	Peeples, Kavion	SR
2	Brown, Zion	SO
3	Stokes, Zan	JR
4	Johnson, Johnny	SR
5	Tobler, Za'Kian	JR
6	Wiggins, Dibryo	JR
8	Knowles, Deverin	JR
9	Miller, Nathaniel	SR
10	Smith, Sammy	JR
12	Hamilton, Markell	SR
13	Johnson, Chayden	SO
15	Petito, Tito	SO
16	Wicker, Jermarvian	JR
17	Meza-Avila, Joseph	FR
18	Hamilton, Marquez	FR
19	Bridges, Caleb	JR
20	Sharpe, Gabriel	FR
21	Brinson, Leo	JR
22	Miller, Peyton	JR
23	Miller, Nijadace	FR
24	Mendez, Jesus	FR
26	Taylor, Cayden	FR
27	Johnson, Jalek	JR
30	Daniels, Noel	SR
32	Daniels, Noah	SR
40	Powell, Caleb	JR
42	Johnson, Javon	SO
44	Meza-Avila, Christopher	SO
50	Briggs, Lucas	SO
51	Glass, Julian	SO
52	Ricks, Anthony	FR
55	Gillis, Nyleaj	SO
56	Gillis, Tyler	JR
58	Daniels, Kennedy	FR
64	Robinson, Carter	SR
65	Miller, Brandon	JR
66	Givens, Charvis	SR
78	Miller, Jordyn	FR
79	Phillips, Tegan	JR

Twiggs County Cobras

1	Demontrez Brown	JR
2	Jeremy Stanley	FR
4	Harold Crawford	SR
6	Koby Stephens	SR
7	Elijah Davis	SO
8	Jamarcus Stephens	JR
9	Courdon Parker	SR
10	Kahiliyal Jackson	JR
11	Isaiah Paschal	FR
13	Derrion Johnson	SR
16	Devon Plank	JR
18	Jeremy Stephens	SR
20	Jordan Williams	SR
26	Michael Johnson	FR
30	Amarrion Thomas	JR
50	Jacob Williams	JR
51	Kamron Davis	FR
52	Jordan Stephens	FR
53	Rhaje Brown	SO
55	Jaden Jones	JR
56	Jacory Washington	JR
57	Nytavious Veal	SR
58	JuTony McIntyre	JR
60	Clarence Loper Jr.	SR
77	Jaden Wilson	SR

Head coach: Roderick Cummings, DC: Robert Cummings V, Assistant coaches: Darryl Hill Jr., Tony Bustos, Brandon Sanders, Cuevas Stephens, Jamarcus Thomas

Washington County Golden Hawks

No roster submitted

Wheeler County Bulldogs

1	Sencear Marks	
2	Reco Wooten	
3	Jah'Koryan Dinkins	
4	Alvin Ricks	
5	Amur Weeks	
6	Kasyn Troup	
7	Kayden Coats	
8	Ahmad McMillian	
9	JJ Woodard	
10	Marley Peeples	
11	Justin Culver	
12	M'Kaylin McDuffie	
13	Ethan Hall	
14	Carter Tobler	
15	Malik Madison	
16	Adam Garcia	
18	Dakari Robinson	
19	Konner Smith	
20	Nate Wright	
21	John Miller	
28	Brylan Thomas	
33	Laith Davis	
34	Riley Dean	
40	Toby Clark	
44	Jaden Bridges	
45	Lane Connell	
50	Rhett McCranie	
51	Jeff Worth	
53	Xylan McMillian	
54	Jeric Peeples	
55	Luke Smith	
56	Fisher Thornton	
60	Andre Turner	
65	Aiden Lanier	
66	Trey Williams	
70	Walter Belfiore	
71	Jackson Scott	
75	Isaiah Williams	

Head coach: Thomas Smith, Assistant coaches: Drew Collins, Wesley Lowery, Ken Pack, Calvin Wilcox, Garret McDonald, Sensier Carnes

Wilkinson County Warriors

No roster submitted

Best of the rest...

Other area teams worth keeping tabs on this fall

By CLAY REYNOLDS
Sports Editor

Baldwin

2024: 7-5 (6-2 region 4-AAA)
FINISH: GHSA playoffs (lost to Peach County in second round)
IN A NUTSHELL: It was a very up and down first year under new head coach Kevin Patterson, as the Braves tapped into a great deal of their strong upside, but were held back by injuries and inconsistency. Tight end Jaylen King and wide-out Kielan Walker take the lead of another stable of big-play threats, with sophomore Kamden Patterson likely taking on an increased role at the skill positions. Linebacker Jazz Lamar will lead a rebuilt defense that has to build an identity separate from longtime matchup nightmares Devarious and "Q" Russell in the front seven. Baldwin will have another quality team that holds its own in region play, but needs to take a significant step forward in order to challenge 4-AAA's elite.

GMC Prep

2024: 0-10 (0-5 region 5-Low A)
FINISH: Missed playoffs
IN A NUTSHELL: There's nowhere to go but up for the Bulldogs in a second year under head coach Gavin Tierce. Last year's overwhelmingly young roster lost only a handful of seniors, and optimism is high the continuity will lead to some encouraging strides.

Hawkinsville

2024: 7-4 (4-2 region 4-Low A)
FINISH: GHSA playoffs (Lost to Metter in first round)
IN A NUTSHELL: All told, last year was another step forward for Tim Suttles and the Red Devils, who added a win to their record, but wound up with the same tough playoff draw due to a couple of heartbreaking region losses that put them on the wrong end of a second-place tiebreaker. College prospect Nieem Blair, who's scored 21 career touchdowns and picked off five passes, stands to become their biggest two-way weapon, with an increased role on offense alongside brand-new quarterback Sebastian Clark. But it's their defense, which returns six starters including end Johnothon Solomon and top 2024 tacklers Nakivius Releford and Landon Johnson, that'll win them ballgames, and make them one of the most solidly built contenders in a loaded region. For a chance to survive the gauntlet and win it, Hawkinsville will have to bring it every night, and still have a few things break its way.

Jeff Davis

2024: 8-4 (3-3 region 1-Low A)
FINISH: GHSA playoffs (lost to Fannin Co. in second round)
IN A NUTSHELL: The Jackets will look a little different than you're used to as they break in a completely new backfield, and try out the triple-option in a slight shift from coach Lance Helton's roots in the Dublin Wing-T, but will emphasize the same brand of physical football on both sides. A defense bringing back eight returning starters, including preseason all-state linebacker LaTrell Sellers, will give them a puncher's chance in a strong region.

Jefferson County

2024: 1-9 (1-8 region 2-High A)
FINISH: Missed playoffs
IN A NUTSHELL: The Warriors were shut out in their first five games last year, but things began to look up in the second half with some occasional scoring, and a winning note to go out on as they defeated Central 18-0 in their finale. They'll have some size and athleticism at several positions to build around, but need to make up more of a major gap with region rivals in depth and consistency to turn their fortunes around this fall.

Peach County

2024: 11-2 (5-0 region 1-AAA)
FINISH: GHSA quarterfinals (lost to Calhoun)
IN A NUTSHELL: After an isolated down year in 2023, the Trojans returned to their traditional form last fall, acing the region and taking a once-beaten streak to the state quarters before being put out by the eventual state champ. Sparkplug quarterback D.J. Hudson is gone, but younger bro Zion Hudson will be back as the primary target of new signal-caller Caiden Ivory. Returning talent at supporting positions is likely to put them back on an elite track. Peach may cruise to the region title once again, but early non-region tests vs. Northeast, Perry and Northside will likely give a sense of where the Trojans measure up among statewide contenders, which will again include usual suspects Calhoun, Sandy Creek, Troup, Oconee County and likely Jefferson near the top.

John Milledge Academy

2024: 2-9 (1-3 district 6)
FINISH: GIAA playoffs (lost to Tiftarea in quarterfinals)
IN A NUTSHELL: Last year's 10-win dropoff, from a period of virtual invincibility, was equal parts unexpected and unheard-of from the Trojans as their long run of region and state titles ended in a sudden crash. Is there a rebound coming this fall? Some transfer help has thickened the ranks on a roster that struggled with durability despite the significant step back last fall. If things come together as hoped, JMA is likely to return to relevance, though rediscovering the dominant

AREA
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JOCO

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some patient and steadfast cultivation.

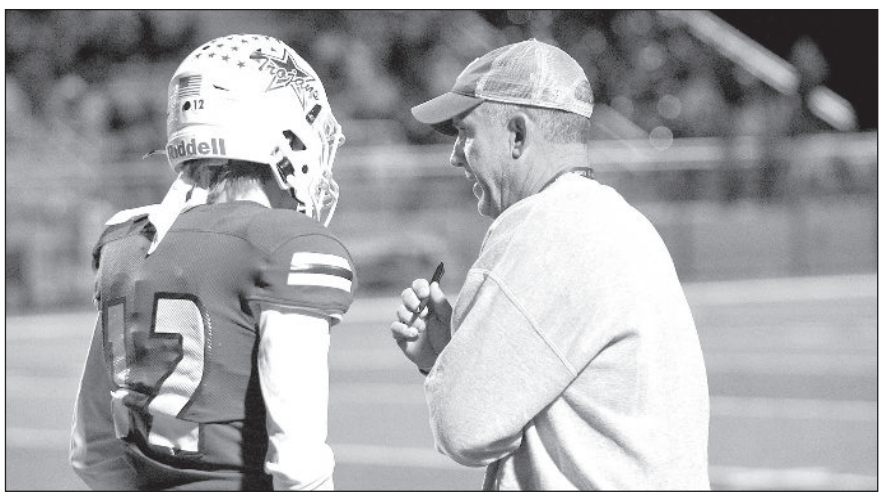
The Trojans' development comes down to two big Cs... competition and chemistry.

And both go back to some core beliefs that are locked into the M.O. of Johnson County football.

The first comes baked into practices, lifts and team activities that usually divide players against one another in teams, sometimes to contend for prizes, but usually with simply the gratification of having their photos posted on the team Instagram as daily winners.

The second, though it's either there or not, usually doesn't present until much further down the road, closer to or even after the season's already begun.

For JoCo's great teams, somewhere along the way there's been a defining moment where players start to display a level of selflessness that reaches critical mass and helps "everything fall into place."



VETERAN PRESENCE: The seasoned brain trust of 19th-year Johnson County head coach Don Norton and third-year starting QB Nathan Turberville, who confer during last year's playoff game against Clinch County, promises to keep the Trojans' offense running as an efficient and fine-tuned machine/CLAY REYNOLDS, File

Though you can never tell, Norton believes team has many of the same positive makings.

"Character is huge," he said. "We've got some great kids, here. We're very fortunate."

As the practices and games go on, the Trojans will only continue to discover – and also decide – what they're made of.

"If they can develop chemistry, play for each other, play for something other than themselves, who knows? We might luck up and win a game," Norton said.

Each season's ever more daunting task offers another challenge to rise to.

This one will be defined by some tall tasks in non-region matchups against multiple teams, East Laurens, Butler and Treutlen included, who appear to have made big strides from last season.

Among region foes, Wilkinson County has risen up to pose the most consistent threat to JoCo's 18-game region winning streak both of the last two seasons. Beating the Warriors for an eighth-straight time, and any others who may sneak up out of the 5-Low A pack, may be as tough as ever.

Last year's Trojans became the school's first team in history to win three region titles in a row, and that fact is not lost on this year's senior class that's intent on finishing its career in Wrightsville an even better 4-for-4, and with a perfect league record.

"That's something that can't be broken," Norton said. "That's on this class."

The goal, like many other standards around the program, is not necessarily one that's written down and posted on the bulletin board. Rather, it's something more implicit like the general expectations everyone in the building is held to from season to season.

Continuing that small slice of Johnson County's long-running tradition, and carrying on the whole of it, remains a huge point of pride.

"They understand what's expected of them here," Norton said. "I don't think we have to keep talking about it. The standard was set a long time ago with our traditions, so they understand the pressure that's on these kids here. It's an honor for kids to get to play here. And I think some take it for granted, but most of them kind of realize that. When they go home, they have to talk to their uncles and cousins and everybody who played, and they want to have bragging rights."

TWIGGS

Continued from page 13

tice swing to live game situations, will be a key question early in the year.

"The biggest thing is getting him confidence where he's making those kicks and doing that kicking stuff," Cummings said.

For most of the above, last year's lessons – however rough at times – should pay dividends.

"We're gonna be 10 times better because of those reps, and that experience," Cummings said. "The good thing about last year was we were young in all the right positions, which in turn, allows those guys to gain that experience early, because they don't have a choice but to play. They definitely gained experience by playing, but the downside of that, the con, is those guys have never been in a varsity situation, so they were learning on the go and making a lot of mistakes. We were probably sometimes being just overmatched, because you aren't really strong enough there to know."

Time will tell how much better Twiggs can measure up, as there's not a team they play that won't challenge them at the line of scrimmage.

"Dealing with the run-heavy region we're in, with teams like Johnson County, and Glascock, who probably beat us up more than anybody last year... they were just so good at what they do well," Cummings said. "That's the piece I think we put so much emphasis on. We've gotta be better in the run game. In this region, if you play the run better, you'll have a chance to win games."

That was the primary focus of their efforts over a well-attended summer session headlined by a few OTAs, and some half-pad camps where they traded a few licks with some larger schools.

"We went places where every team that was there probably had 30-40 kids more than we did," Cummings said. "So, 80-90 reps per session. It really showed us what we were, made us a lot tougher. And I said to them after the fact that I knew it was going to be that way, and it was going to prepare us to be in this region."

Offseason activities were one piece of some growing buzz around Twiggs County football that's been nonexistent for a good while in Jeffersonville.

With some slow but steady improvement for the Cobras, and encouraging involvement in not only varsity but middle school and youth ball this spring and summer, some of that long-awaited optimism seems to be coming back.

Stability breeds consistency, and Cummings has seen a lot of one translating to the other around the program recently. If everyone remains as committed, both have the potential to snowball soon.

"I honestly feel like it's going to be better," he said. "The kids have done their part, they've paid their dues, they've worked hard, they've been here."

WHEELER

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offensive line, including tackle Jordan Bridges and guard K.J. Williams.

In particular, the team needed a new pair of guards, and Jackson Scott and Trey Williams, both sophomores, have stepped up to fill those roles.

Scott began as an offensive line starter last year and has since put on some bulk to take over the new position, while Williams was occasionally swapped into the lineup when a starter suffered an injury.

Luke Smith will assume the tackle position as a first-year starter, with Jerric Peeples as the other tackle.

Over the summer, the Bulldogs took part in more 7-on-7 matchups than usual, and have placed an emphasis on improving their passing game.

Smith said the team will ask a lot of wide receivers J.J. Woodard, K.T. Troop and Jah'Koryan Dinkins.

In addition, Wheeler County focused on weight training and conditioning, and 18 players never missed a workout session.

"I've been proud of the guys, the work they've put in this summer," says Smith.

Staff spent time during the offseason speaking to the team about handling adversity, and set up leadership groups with players from each grade level.

Looking at the 2025 schedule, Smith isn't concerned with any one game save for Wilkinson County, but only because the matchup will again be the Bulldogs' first game and a test of their summer training.

In fact, Smith encourages players not to look ahead on the schedule, but rather to take each game at a time.

"What we sell and what we get our kids to buy into, we don't look ahead," he said.

Rather, Smith wants his players to focus on practices and training, which he believes will serve them far better than dwelling on specific games.

"What one of our just, I guess, foundational deals is if you make practice as hard as your games are, then the games should be easy," he said. "And so, just getting them to, every day at practice, to bring that same mentality, the results at the end will take care of themselves."

TREUTLEN

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Vikings' defensive front following the departure of linebacker Jake Brooks.

"So our strength's now going to become our interior guys, and they're doing a great job for us on that," said Shurling.

Caleb Powell has also shown his skills for defensive call-outs during 7-on-7 matchups and camp training.

The Vikings aim to win their way into the playoffs, though they have some specific games on their minds as well, such as their match against the Bacon County Raiders.

That's a big one for our kids, because they were so close to it last year, you know, started bad, they got so close," said Shurling.

Also on Shurling's radar is the team's first region game against the Wilcox County Patriots, as to him, it would be nearly impossible to win the region title after losing the first region game. In addition, the players hope to beat their rival schools in Montgomery County, Wheeler County and Johnson County, which Shurling described as the team's worst game last season with a score of 21-6.

"I think the kids had that one circled too, just because of, you know, this time last year, they were kind of dealing with the 'I don't know if we can do this or not,'" said Shurling. "Now they truly believe, they truly believe they can win these games, and they're going to go out and get it done. I believe it."

WILCO

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front."

The Warriors have gotten noticeably stronger over the past year, a fact owing in part to a move by the school to create a dedicated weight training class for football players starting in the spring semester that gave many an opportunity to lift during school hours every day.

"We've got a much bigger, much stronger football team," Ward said.

And at this level, where the most important variable (besides turnovers) is control of the line of scrimmage, that detail goes a long way.

With the exception of Wilco itself, region 5-Low A will again play a heavy percentage of smashmouth football.

"Our region's about stopping the run," Ward said. "If we can stop the run and be consistent as far as stopping the run, we can win games in our region."

None of its five non-region games will be a slouch, but Ward has Treutlen – set to visit Bud Dupree Field Aug. 22 – circled as a key matchup because it'll offer a preview of the Wing-T attack they'll see a version of from both three-time defending champion Johnson County and GMC.

"It's a tough schedule that gives us a lot of opportunities against tough teams and really good coaches. The non-region schedule is going to prepare us really well for the region."

The Warriors have been region runner-up three years straight, and posted a 6-4 record in the regular season in each time as well.

With such an experienced returning team, it's not an outrageous suggestion that this could potential be their year to kick the door down.

The program's last team to win eight or more games and advance to the state quarterfinals was in 2012, on the tail end of their last good run under head coach James Hagins. That was two years after their most recent region title, in an 11-win 2010 campaign that reached the semis.

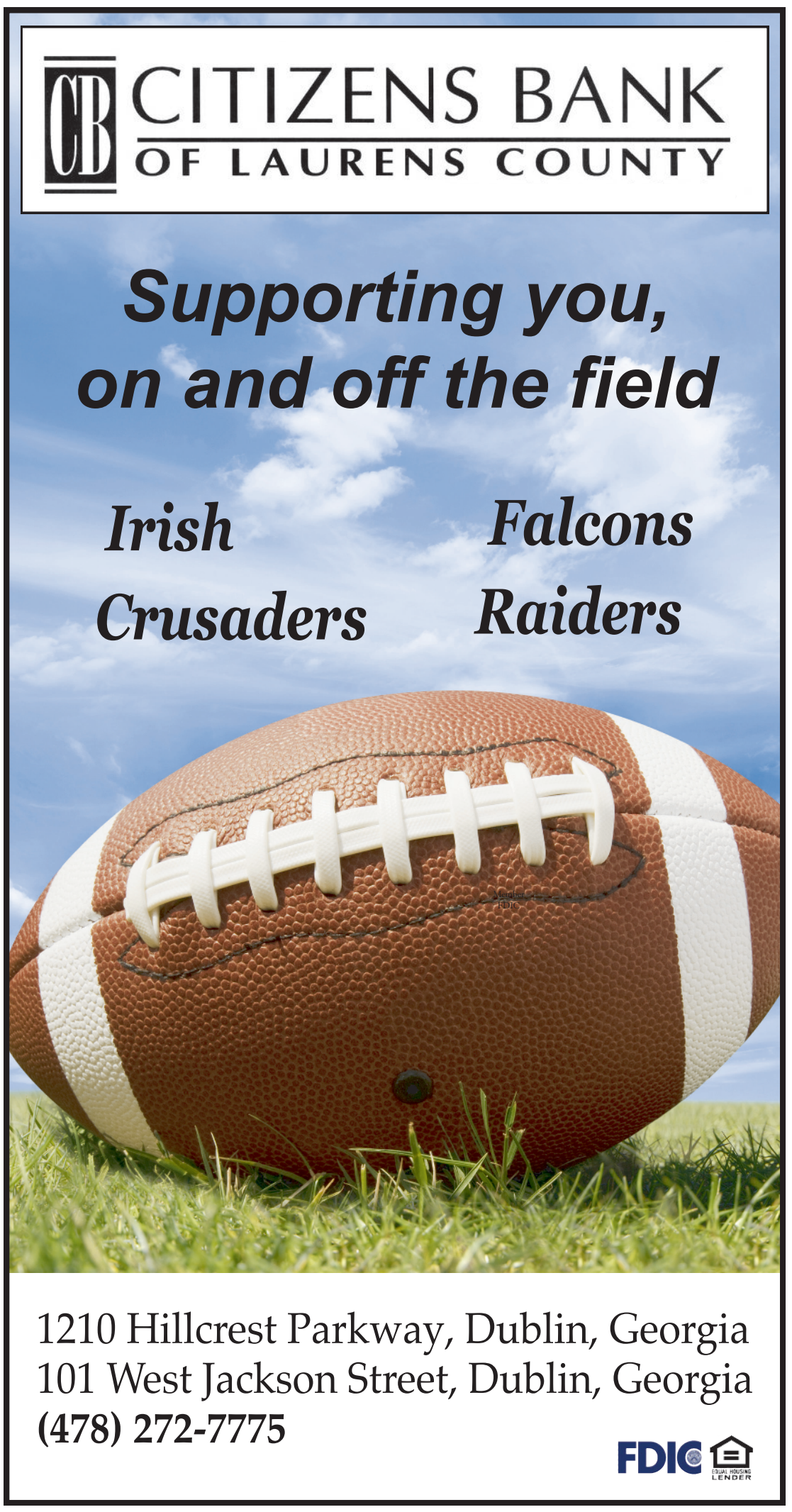
None of those possibilities are out of reach for a team that's gotten quite close the last three years... within eight points, in both its last two tries against Johnson County, of running the region table and to the second round of the playoffs back in 2022.

"Our kids are hungry to take that next step," Ward said. "Our community is hungry, our administration is hungry, and me and my staff are hungry for it."

That buzz has been on a steady rise, with many signs to indicate a positive long-term direction for the program from community and alumni involvement to interest in football at the middle school and local rec level.

And Ward has been more and more encouraged with each new connection he's able to make with fans and supporters.

"Our community and our administration has done a tremendous job backing our program," he said.. "It gave me a hard time of meeting everybody that I needed to meet. When I got the job last year, it was football, football, football. This offseason, I've had a chance to talk to more individuals in the community, telling us what they've been seeing and the outlook is bright for our program."



AREA

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edge achieved by teams in the recent dynasty seems to be a ways off.

Jones County

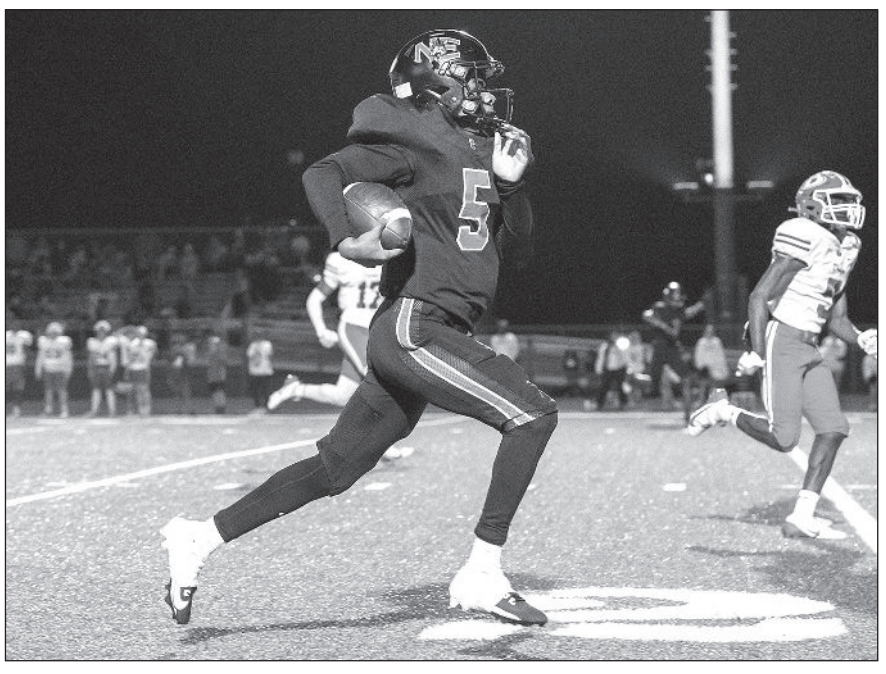
2024: 10-2 (8-1 region 2-AAAA)
FINISH: GHSA playoffs (lost to Marist in second round)
IN A NUTSHELL: Offseason controversy led to the resignation of two midstate football icons — AD Chad Alligood and head coach Mike Chastain — at the helm of their program, but the Grayhounds seemed to make a quality hire by bringing in Carrollton defensive coordinator Justin Montgomery to take the reins. It remains to be seen whether his defensive perspective may shift recent trends away from the high-scoring shootout games that have been the norm for teams averaging points in the 30s per game for well over a decade, though offensive coordinator Bradley Hunnicutt (formerly of Baldwin and Howard) will be the man tasked with keeping that high-octane tradition rolling.

Emanuel County Institute

2024: 7-4 (5-3 region 3-Low A)
FINISH: GHSA playoffs (lost to Telfair County in first round)
IN A NUTSHELL: Chris Kearson, who retires as the Bulldogs' all-time winningest head coach, handed things off to longtime assistant Chad Harper in a smooth transition that'll preserve many pieces of their program identity, defined lately by a hard-nosed demeanor on both sides of the ball. Look for that to continue with a healthy portion of last year's lineup — led by talented rushers and defenders Chase Johnson and Tyler Foreman — back in place for a team that hung with every team on its schedule.

Swainsboro

2024: 4-7 (2-2 region 3-High A)
FINISH: GHSA playoffs (lost to Northeast in first round)
IN A NUTSHELL: The Tigers, off of back-to-back state championship game appearances, took some unfamiliar lumps in 2024 as they reckoned with youth and inexperience in a number of areas. The defense and lines of scrimmage, where most of last year's turnover was concentrated, will likely be the units Swainsboro hangs its hat on as it develops a new identity with a collection of unknowns at the offensive skill positions. Look for junior linebacker Ja'Bios Smith, defensive lineman Christian Tarver, safety Jayden Wilcher and corner Kamarion Dukes to take the lead in a potential resurgence that will start on D. "We're just trying to find a way to be a little better," head coach Scott Roberts said.



HERE COMES THE 'BAM!': Northeast quarterback Reginald "Bam" Glover will take over for backfield-mate Nick Woodford as one of Macon's most exciting players to watch this fall as he and the Raiders make another run at the region and state title, after their runner-up finish to Toombs County. But stay tuned to find out exactly how the returning senior will fit into an offensive identity that could have him playing one - or several - new positions on the field/**JESSICA GRATIGNY, File**



LET'S RUN IT BACK: Toombs County graduated most of its highest-rated skill players, but has several back including running back Justin Powell (9), who's one of multiple Bulldogs who carried the ball a good bit behind top gainer Dabvn Wadley in last year's championship season. A fresh cast at many other skill positions will have them answering some early-season questions, but a core of outstanding guys on defense and up front will make running the football, and stopping the run, major strengths for a 2025 squad with hopes of a repeat/**CLAY REYNOLDS, File**

Telfair County

2024: 9-3 (6-0 region 4-Low A)
FINISH: GHSA playoffs (lost to Trion in first round)
IN A NUTSHELL: Matt Burleson and the Trojans will look to keep their strong run going, after conquering a competitive region last year to claim a first region title since some 1990s glory days. The loss of top playmakers Jabari Zanders and Bradyn Cook will be difficult to replace, though Telfair — which has consistently made its living molding impressive offensive and defensive line units — never fails to make the most of the skill talent that's available behind the big men in the trenches. A region mountain being climbed by several worthy contenders will be tough to scale once again, but the Trojans aren't a group to count out.

Toombs County

2024: 13-1 (3-1 region 3-High A)
FINISH: GHSA state champion (def. Northeast in finals)
IN A NUTSHELL: The Bulldogs have some pieces returning, including several experienced ball-carriers, No. 3 wideout Gavin Fletcher and three of their top five defenders (Alex Scott, Hayden Roy and Hayden Bullard), but are replacing a lot of the big names that made up their 2024 super-team. Expect many similar calling cards — in a capable passing attack now led by junior QB Joseph Owens (a former freshman sensation at Montgomery County who was T.J. Stanley's backup), some formidable size on both lines of scrimmage and a junkyard-style defense that'll remain a trademark — to keep them high in the top 10 mix all year. But this new Toombs team will have to find its own path back to Mercedes-Benz Stadium in order to carry over last year's success.

Vidalia

2024: 3-8 (0-4 region 3-High A)
FINISH: GHSA playoffs (lost to Fannin Co. in first round)
IN A NUTSHELL: In a region of state powerhouses — both public and private — the Indians will once again likely have to rely on their non-region schedule — and it's just as stacked — to build a viable playoff resume. Their streak of bad luck with injuries has continued this preseason, with multiple key players who'll be sidelined for much of the first half. Opposite a mostly clean slate on offense, Vidalia's defense will have to step up in a big way to make a number of swing games winnable.

Houston County

Northside (2-8) and Veterans (1-9) both made splashes with their respective head coaching hires of Langston Hughes' Daniel Williams and former Griffin state champion Steve DeVoursney to fill vacancies this offseason, signaling that both intend to take steps to vie for a seat at the table of state powers alongside neighbors Warner Robins (7-4), HoCo (8-5) and Perry (8-4), who've done the most of late to maximize their portion of the community's deep football talent pool. The cluster of schools, for a first year in a while, had no state title contenders last season, in which Houston was the only team to make it past round 2 of the playoffs. Each of the three who achieved winning records should have another quality season in the works, though with the Bears replacing prolific passer A.J. Hill at the heart of its high-scoring offense, the Panthers set to do some more rebuilding around QB Reid Ginn and tailback Decorrion Daniels and Demons replacing all of their big names, it's tough to project if any will emerge with a shot at going deep.

Macon-Bibb County

Chief among storylines among the Mac-town's public schools is this season's final go-round for legendary Westside head coach "Spoon" Risper, who has announced this season as his last before retirement. And his team — as talented as any of late for the Seminoles — will have a shot to send him out on a pretty strong note. Northeast, following its runner-up finish in 2024, appears positioned to pick up right where it left off, with a ton of returning starters — minus mainly tailback Nick Woodford — at the skill spots and on lines of scrimmage and defense, and notably QB Reginald Glover, who's rumored to be potentially moving around in favor of a new starter behind center in freshman Jordan Wiggins. But expect to see Glover, and multiple familiar names of a stacked defense, dominating the FFN highlight reel. The Raiders, barring a challenge by Dublin, Bleckley, Dodge or WACO, could be the heir apparent in 2-High A. Howard may also be a team to watch in the region 4-AAA race. The Huskies, who are going into a second year under head coach Trey Porter, put a lot of heat on teams last season, and may take a significant step forward with a handful of returning offensive go-tos and receiver-safety Ta'Shawn Poole as their big names. Defending AAAA state runner-up FPD will once again lead the pack of GIAA programs, with a strong club back that lost several key players, but does return transcendent quarterback Major Simmons. The return of Barney Hester as head coach has renewed a sense of optimism despite some heavy personnel turnover at Tattnall Square. The Trojans will join Stratford, which faces its own question marks with a new quarterback, and an upstart Mount de Sales team in the competitive mix.

