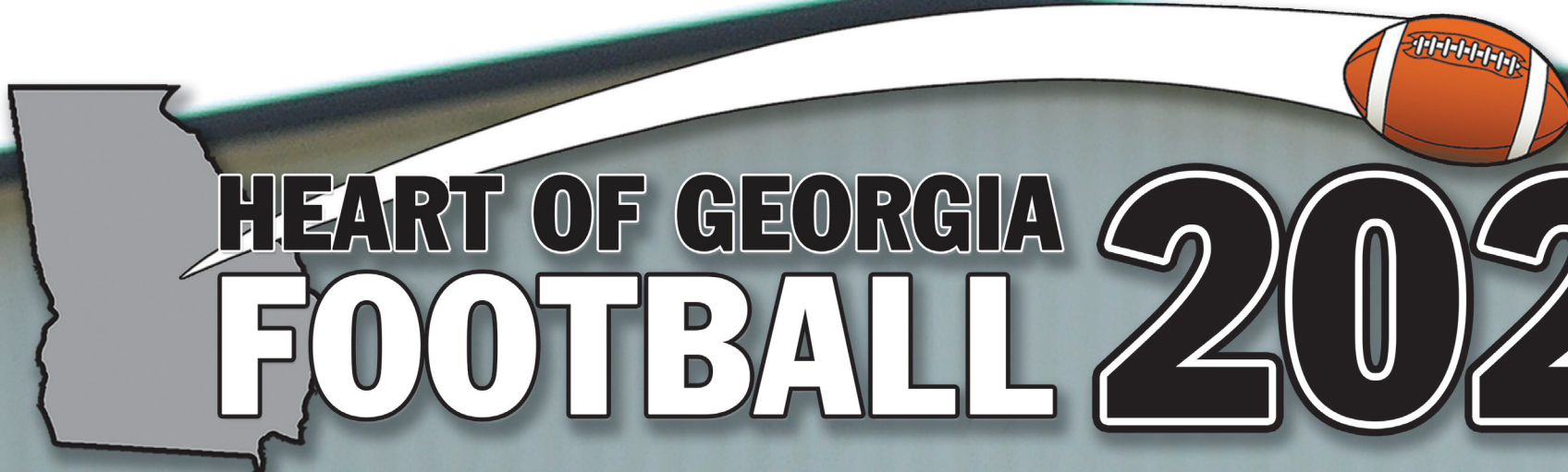




HEART OF GEORGIA FOOTBALL 2026



OH, SNAP!

Bleckley County's Zayden Lassiter and Cody Register go inside the overlooked art of long-snapping

An award-winning season
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ARE YOU READY FOR SOME FOOTBALL?

It's a snap...

Long-snapping is one of the most intricate and underappreciated disciplines in football. These two Bleckley County teammates, both top prospects at the position, share how they make it look easy

By CLAY REYNOLDS
Sports Editor

It may be up for debate how Bleckley County stacks up against others in Middle Georgia at different positions this season, but there's little question heading into the fall that the Royals will be the deepest team around at one: long snapper.

They already had one of the area's best sending the ball back for their special teams units in rising senior Zayden Lassiter, who recently committed to do the same for Georgia Tech.

This past offseason, Bleckley inadvertently added a second nationally rated prospect at the position when Trinity's Cody Register transferred to Cochran, though the fact was as a bit of a surprise for head coach (and Zayden's dad) Von Lassiter, who didn't realize that the talented defensive lineman's versatility in the third phase extended beyond just punting and kicking.

"The first day he was here, Georgia texted me and said you've got the best long snapper room in America," Coach Lassiter said. "I didn't know he long snaps, and we talked about it."

Their job is easily the most anonymous in football, but these two, just a class year apart, have become some of the country's most well-known as the cream of the crop in this unique niche of the kicking game.

Both have received high marks from evaluators at the nationwide camps and showcase events, sponsored by various special teams-dedicated scouting services, they've attended.

Rubio Long Snapping, the most widely respected outlet, tabs Zayden as a five-star prospect, and ranks him No. 3 overall among snappers in the class of 2027.

The former quarterback and tight end now focuses pretty much exclusively on the craft, which has gained him not only the interest of the Power 4, but prestigious recognition including a recent Navy All America Game invite as well.

"It's great," Zayden said. "I've worked since ninth grade to get (the opportunity), been to camps, college camps, put in all the work to get it, and it's finally come out to be something I wanted."

When all is made official, he'll also be a second in his family to sign D1 at the position, following his oldest

brother Zach, who snapped at Mercer, and later Western Kentucky.

Rubio doesn't compile more than an early top 20 for any class besides the current one, but also has Cody – with a two-star endorsement – on its radar for the 2028 wave.

It was a role he handled for the Crusaders as both a freshman and sophomore, working in tandem with his older brother Wade, their standout kicker and punter who is now doing the latter as a freshman at the University of Georgia. That, on top of leading the Trinity defense in tackles (101) and tackles for loss (16).

In addition to adding some intrigue as an immediate starter in the middle of their defensive line, Cody will give the Royals an overabundance of depth in the snapping role, though his talents this year will be in much greater demand on the receiving end of them in two other skills with which he's impressed the national scouts as much or more.

"He's a really good punter and a really good kicker as well," Coach Lassiter said. "This year, we'll probably use him on the kicking side, and next year, more on the long-snapper. It just depends on who we can develop. But we're blessed to have that, and he's a really good defensive lineman."

A special talent...

There's a lot more than meets the eye – if you're even watching as the specialists trot out to line up for a kick or punt – to the craft of deep snapping, which is easily football's most under-appreciated line of work.

The speed, accuracy and grace with which the best can do it is exquisite.

"It's an art, and it's a skill," said Dublin head coach Roger Holmes.

And a good bit too often, that tremendous aptitude goes largely unnoticed for the many flashier feats of athleticism displayed in the other two phases of a game, with the routine of special teams largely an afterthought for those in the stands.

It's said that the name or number of the long snapper is never called to anyone's attention unless something goes horribly wrong, though the infrequency that something does is a credit to these unsung key players, and how steadily they go about



Zayden Lassiter (left) and his new teammate Cody Register (right) have different roles on Bleckley County's special teams unit, but both hold in common some long-snapping talent that's gained them national recruiting attention. Lassiter, a top-three ranked player at the position, has committed to play at Georgia Tech after his senior season. Register, a rising junior, is also rated highly as a snapper, kicker and punter by many special teams scouting services/CLAY REYNOLDS

getting it done every night.

Few on the field carry the weight of the game on their shoulders so quietly, or have their job down to as much of a science.

"I think it's awesome, just because a lot of people overlook the long-snapping part, but it's such an important part of making field goals and punting," Cody said. "It's just a fourth down play, getting those points or being able to get the ball away."

For both these young snappers, a lot of time and work goes in weekly, if not daily, to perfecting the discipline in and out of season.

Each have certain routines they follow when practicing on their own time.

For Zayden, reeling off snaps at home, a lot like shooting free throws on a hoop in the driveway, is just a matter of repetition.

"I have a target that I snap on a lot," he said. "It has three holes, and I always set a number I want to get, and I've got to get it before I finish (each day)."

Cody focuses as much on his mind as his mechanics, using mnemonic devices to help establish a link between thought and action in the routine.

"What helped me the most was remembering things in my head, like I would remember like three words I'd say while I'm snapping, to help me focus on those things to replicate," Cody said. "I do have a net, and I'll snap to Wade a lot when he's home."

There are as many ways to snap a football as there are to skin a cat.

The book on how to do it can teach you some general principles, but in the end, learning how is finding a method that feels natural to you.

Just as no two baseball swings or pitching deliveries

are ever the same, so too are the myriad different quirks and variations in mechanics you'll see from player to player.

"It's a lot of little things with snapping," Cody said. "It's little movements, and kind of being able to replicate the same thing. That's all it is. You learn your snap, because I think everyone snaps differently. Everyone learns from different people and everyone's body's different."

Having ideal physical tools isn't a requirement, but they help an awful lot with the physics associated with launching the ball from an inverted position to a certain spot a fixed distance away.

Long levers are important for generating that power, but also for the football you have to play at the position, as well.

INDEX...

	3
	4
	5
	6
	7
	10
	12
	14
	15
	17
	18
	19
	21
	22

EDITOR'S NOTE...

Historical data included in this section was researched using archives of the Georgia High School Football Historians Association, accessible online at HSFHA.org.

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Challenges can't take away from Irish upside on lines/in backfield, high hopes for season ahead

By CLAY REYNOLDS
Sports Editor

There are a few preseason interview topics in play for the typical high school football team that, when raised in conversation with Dublin coaches or players, are liable to get you a somewhat quizzical look. Namely, the question of what goals they're setting for themselves ahead of a given season.

Besides collectively aspiring to be their best, the Irish don't spend much time thinking about what "best" amounts to from year to year, because it doesn't affect the program's unchanging objective that kind of goes without saying.

What it's made a custom of achieving regularly is what many in the state aspire to only in the most promising of seasons, on the hopeful chance that the stars of greatness align favorably. Success that for others would be considered a bonus is, here, considered a baseline.

"There are no specific goals, because I think our goals are pretty well established at Dublin High School: Be good enough to make the playoffs, and play your best football in week 10," said Irish head coach Roger Holmes.

That aim of peaking in the post-season will be no different this fall for a team that looks to have the potential to do it, and plenty more. But the Irish will also face their share of challenges not limited to the high caliber of competition.

Though unrelated to football, the circumstances of Dublin City Schools financial woes have created turbulence across the district that was felt in the Shamrock Bowl field house as much as anywhere.

After weathering the staff and roster turnover that resulted from the crisis in the offseason, they now head into a campaign that's sure to be marked by some more uncertainty, and a good bit of noise from outside the building.

But as Holmes put it in remarks to the Rotary Club of Dublin in late July, a lot of those things can be an excuse for many programs... Not for the Irish.

"With all the different stuff that



Jalen Dardy (51) celebrates a fumble recovery by teammate Kye Young (3) during the Irish spring game. Dardy, along with Blake Luecke (46, left) are two of the D-linemen who will make up the roughly eight-headed Irish pass rush monster. Opponents beware!/CLAY REYNOLDS

we've gone through throughout the course of this year at Dublin City Schools, there's one thing that doesn't change, and that is the expectation of what Dublin football is supposed to bring to the field," he said. "We can have all the distractions, we can deal with all the stuff we want to deal with. The people in Dublin still expect Dublin football to be good."

Fortunately, the Irish will be fielding a team they know is pretty doggone good, and likely has a chance to be great.

It's a roster full of proven playmakers, and a few rising stars, with pretty much everything you look for: Speed all over the field; strong, intimidating big men on both lines of scrimmage; and depth at just about every position.

Most in the group paid their dues last year in a 9-3 season (which the Irish finished as runner-up in the region before reaching the second round of the playoffs) that you'd have to consider more of a reload than a rebuild.

If history is any guide, Dublin teams who return eight starters on each side of the ball from that type of team are usually on the verge of a significant next step.

More good news: With the quality of opponents the Irish will play up and down their schedule, they should get a pretty good idea of how

they stack up against the best of competition, not to mention a few power points in the GHSA post-season rating system that will now be the most significant determining factor in playoff seeding.

Three of four non-region opponents are from higher classifications. A fourth who's in the same won nine games last season. Then comes 2-AA, which is packed with perennial heavyweights also picked to be right up there with Dublin among the best in the state.

The Irish should be good enough to go toe to toe with every one of them. But you might have to cut them just a little slack if they're not able to run the whole table.

"We're going to be a pretty good football team. But I don't know how it'll look on the record when it's all said and done," Holmes said.

It all starts up front...

There's a lot of the last two years' season preview stories, concerning Dublin's offensive and defensive lines, that you could simply copy and paste into this one.

Not only are the same things true for the interlinked units, which have only built on their strength, size and depth from 2025, but both return lineups virtually identical to the ones that finished last season.

The Irish lost only two significant

members of the former rotation, offensive guard Ta'Maj Carswell and defensive end Quantavis Lovett, who like most of their cohorts up front were starters only in title as part of a group with the means to trade in an equally capable player in for its No. 1s at any of the nine positions, and manage the two-way demands of each accordingly.

That sense of interchangeability among incoming starters who've all played significant football for multiple years makes it as if they're not actually replacing anybody.

Altogether, the mix of physical and athletic gifts, plus experience, along these front lines reminds of awful lot what marked the play of similar ones in 2019 and 2024 that paved the way on runs to the state championship and semifinals.

The Irish will have two of their most seasoned veterans at tackle.

On the left side is senior John Oliver (5-8, 245), "a very intelligent, good football player."

On the right, it's another senior and two-time heavyweight state wrestling champ Domimarkeyo Walden (6-3, 315), who's been a regular somewhere on the line since his sophomore year.

Both, respectively, have the backing of likely starting-caliber reserves in seniors Blake Leucke (6-5, 230) and Deontae Walker (6-4, 325), who will major on defense.

Senior Mandarin Stanley (5-10, 230) pushed some massive weight this spring (maxing out with a 330-pound bench and 665 squat) in preparation for a second season anchoring things at center.

"He's strong as an ox, and has got a good lower body," Holmes said.

Seniors and multi-year starters also return at both guard positions.

A longtime backup, highly recruited D-lineman Jalen Dardy (6-3, 245), will assume the starting role on the left. The senior has added a lot of size, close to 25 pounds, in a bulk this offseason that will boost his intrigue as a prospect, but also make his fit on the line a lot more specific and also increase the difficulty.



DUBLIN AT A GLANCE...

HEAD COACH: Roger Holmes (25th season, 288-126-1 career)

OFFENSE: Wing-T
DEFENSE: 4-3

2025: 8-3 (8-1 region 2-High A)
FINISH: GHSA playoffs (lost to Fitzgerald in second round)

RETURNING STARTERS:
8 offense / 8 defense

KEY LOSSES: ATH/DB Bennett Lake; TE/DL Quantavis Lovett; QB Jeff Davis; OL/DL Tamaj Carswell; K Urick Andrews; LB Will-J Harris (transfer)

IRISH TO WATCH: OL/DL Jalen Dardy, Sr.; OL/DL Domimarkeyo Walden, Sr.; RB/DB Trav Bostic, Sr.; RB/DL V.J. Bond, So.; RB/LB Dontavious Cannon, Sr.; OL/DL John Oliver, Sr.; OL/LB Jaydon McCrae, Sr.; RB/DB Matthew Batts, So.; WR/LB Will Wallace, Jr.

THE UPSIDES: Strength/depth on lines of scrimmage; balanced backfield
KEY CONCERN: Holding up to the grind

SCHEDULE...

8/21	at Jasper Co.
8/28	Perry (\$)
9/04	Baldwin
9/11	at Washington Co.
9/25	at Bleckley Co.* (\$)
10/09	Swainsboro* (\$)
10/16	at ACE Charter*
10/23	Dodge Co.* (\$)
10/30	at Vidalia*
11/06	East Laurens*

* — region 2-AA
(\$) — pivotal games

DUBLIN
Continued on page 11

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Falcons' flock of high-flying athletes ready to take off

By CLAY REYNOLDS
Sports Editor

East Laurens head coach Jesse Hicks is a big devotional guy.

Matter of fact, he writes his own almost daily while jotting down thoughts from scripture study each morning and, most weeks without fail, texts out a paragraph's worth of encouraging words to people in his contacts before the sun comes up.

He shares many of the same truths and principles with his players on the day-to-day, with faithfulness, patience, delayed gratification, perseverance in adversity and the Lord's timing as recurring themes that also happen to be highly relevant to their journey as a team.

The Falcons have taken a good many of those messages to heart over the course of the past two seasons, which were both filled with potential, but not so much with the winning results they were hoping for.

Neither were the type you would consider lean, with three wins, a few close games that gave them a chance at a couple more and their 2025 playoff appearance among the reassuring bright spots.

But each, as well, lacked in the abundance of success foreseen in the bright future of a young roster that had not yet reached its intended breakthrough.

Ecclesiastes 1 holds that for everything there is a time and a season, and East Laurens is hopeful that, in 2026, its time and season is finally about to arrive.

The possibility looks as good as ever for a squad that has paid its dues, and is hungry to see the fruit of its persistence. And for the Falcons' talented and now thoroughly experienced core of players, the chance to make that long-awaited move is coming up.

"It's harvest season," Hicks said, channeling words from a devotional message he'd shared with the team a little prior to a conversation in early July. "You've planted it, you've watered it, it's multiplied and now it's time to reap a harvest. If we stay steadfast in what we're doing, we're going to reap a harvest, and that means wins on Friday night."

In the highs and lows of his first two years at the helm, East has shown flashes of potential greatness with a handful of big wins, and several other upset bids that came up just empty as short-lived momentum fizzled out.

But the tipping point, both seasons, was in sight. And promise of some big things remains for a generation of players – led by two of the school's strongest

classes of athletes ever – that has steadily developed and matured on its way into this pivotal season.

Will their third be the charm?

A high ceiling has been there from the beginning. But now it's time for the Falcons to reach it, and play the level of football they know they're capable of. Youth, inexperience and unfamiliarity with a new coaching staff are no longer excuses.

"At the end of the day, they know what the work is now," Hicks said. "This is year 3 with me being here as head coach, so those guys who are juniors, they know what the workload is. They understand what it takes to be successful."

Positive steps on the field and in the weight room this offseason were indicators that many of those things are starting to catch on in a meaningful way. Rather than just a few isolated leaders, it's now a majority of the team that's making a daily practice of meeting the standard.

"We're building a different culture," Hicks said. "Culture is called consistency. What you do consistently is who you become, that's habits."

With that in mind, the Falcons are staying faithful to the plan they've been working at for a couple seasons, and counting on the experience that's been slowly building as a catalyst for what could be a big step forward this fall.

"There are no real major changes, just a lot of kids who've played a lot of football who are now juniors and seniors, and we're just excited about what they can bring to what we already have established," Hicks said.

Gold-chip prospects...

Since the start of the Hicks era two years ago, that wave of supremely gifted and strong-willed players has been a focal point for East Laurens fans with a strong sense of optimism that they hold the keys to reversing the program's long-running football fortunes.

Standouts in the group of a couple dozen, who are now juniors and seniors, have shown repeatedly in the two seasons they've cut their teeth why those great expectations aren't at all misplaced.

Arguably the Falcons' top two athletic talents out of all of them – rising 11th graders Major Floyd (6-0, 185) and Bryson Hazley (6-3, 190) – have been the subject of some unsurprising recruiting attention this offseason.

The standout athletes have turned heads locally since their eighth grade team's unbeaten MGMSAA



EAST LAURENS AT A GLANCE...

HEAD COACH: Jesse Hicks (third season, 139-123 career)

OFFENSE: Spread
DEFENSE: Multiple

2025: 3-8 (3-6 region 2-High A)
FINISH: GHSA playoffs (lost to Heard Co. in first round)

RETURNING STARTERS:
6 offense / 6 defense

KEY LOSSES: RB/DB Norrion King (Arkansas Baptist); OL/DL Caleb Jackson (Valdosta State); TE/LB Logan Clements; LB Luis Roman; WR/DB Cayson Wadley; OL/DL Raquis Stanley; QB/P Jason Giles

FALCONS TO WATCH: ATH/DB Major Floyd, Jr.; WR/DB Bryson Hazley, Jr.; QB/DB Skyler Snead, Sr.; RB/LB Jeremiah Rozier, Sr.; OL/DL Kayleb Butler, Sr.; DL Lagen Mack, Jr.; ATH ZaNorrian Ellington, So.; WR/DB Demarcio Holliman, Jr.; WR/DB J.J. Wright, Sr.; LB Dianco Murray, Sr.

THE UPSIDES: Experience; Depth and versatility at skill positions
KEY CONCERN: Playing complete games

SCHEDULE...

8/21	Johnson Co.
8/28	at Southeast Bulloch
9/04	Washington Co. (\$)
9/18	at Metter
9/25	Swainsboro* (\$)
10/02	at ACE Charter* (\$)
10/09	Dodge Co.*
10/16	at Vidalia* (\$)
10/30	Bleckley Co.*
11/06	at Dublin*

* – region 2-AA
(\$) – pivotal games

region title run in 2023. But each are now also commanding their due attention from elsewhere as they've moved to the forefront of hot boards, and gained offers from Georgia and Georgia Tech, among other schools in the SEC and ACC.

"Everybody in the country knows who they are," Hicks said.

Starters from year 1, the pair of ATH-types have played primarily as receivers and defensive backs, Floyd also sidelining as a return man and Hazley as a moonlight quarterback due to late-season attrition last year. Both are nimble with excellent open-field speed, good height, strong ball skills, quick closing ability and quality tackling form. And they tend to give mul-



Second-year starting quarterback Skyler Snead will run point on a slightly revamped East Laurens offense, under new playcaller Emmanuel Boone, that will make a priority of quick reads and throws that expedite getting the ball to the Falcons' many talented skill athletes/**CLAY REYNOLDS, File**

tiples examples per game of why they're just a little different from most at this level.

In 2025, Floyd snagged a team-high 26 receptions for 400 yards and four touchdowns, and Hazley a second-best 19 for 318 and three scores.

With some increased passing production (putting up points was an even bigger struggle last year, at 16 points per game, than it was in 2024, with an average of 22), both could see their numbers really take off.

Defensively, they were two of the team's top seven tacklers, both combining for around 40 and all but one of the team's eight interceptions, with a hand in forcing four fumbles, recovering three of the same and breaking up eight passes.

Chances for either to excel this season will abound in their primary positions at safety and wideout, plus an endless number of other offensive and special teams applications. And both are well aware of how many eyes that will be on them, of not only recruiters and fans, but also opponents, that'll only add to the pressure to perform at a high level.

"Those two, they realize that you've got a target on your back now," Hicks said. "If I'm a player, I'm ready to go up against one of the best players in the country, even the South."

Though their names are the first you'll hear mentioned when East Laurens is talked about, there are plenty of other worthy athletes who'll be wearing the Black and Gold that'll earn their share of the spotlight.

"It's not just Major and Bryson," Hicks said. "We've got some guys."

The Falcons' other most exciting playmaker may prove to be their quarterback, senior Skyler Snead (5-11, 165), who's "really turned it up a notch" as he's prepared for a second season behind center.

One of several signal-callers East rotated at points last year, he threw for over 700 yards and nine

touchdowns with six of the 17 interceptions that were the QB room's hauntingest demon, while scrambling for about a hundred and one additional score.

But last season's lessons and some added experience over the spring and summer have helped Snead – who will double as a trusted cornerback – "work out some kinks," and learn how to harness his many tools in a better way.

"Last year was his first year really starting, and we weren't sure whether he'd be the guy," Hicks said. "He's just matured, to be honest with you."

His season got off to an unofficially great start in East's scrimmage, which began with a 50-yard gain as he pulled the ball down and took off on one of the first few offensive plays. Touch rules prevented too much more out-of-the-pocket improvisation, but his quick release and improved accuracy stood out as much as the potentially dangerous agility and acceleration that opposing defenses will have to account for.

Hicks listed making good decisions, trusting his instincts, reading key defenders and acting with confidence as his keys to an exceptional season leading the offense.

"He's our point guard on the basketball team, but he's got to look at his role at quarterback the same way," he said. "He's been so productive, being able to get the ball out, his run game is really really good. He's not a guy you want to get loose on you. He can hurt you both ways. He can throw it, run it, spin it. There's not much he can't do."

Look for a potentially elite season out of two others on the defensive side of the ball, where senior Jeremiah Rozier (5-10, 190) is back after pacing the Falcons in total tackles (with 65) last year and earning the team's defensive player of the year honors.

The team captain, who seems to have added a little thickness to his pro-

file, will be looked to as a principal run-stopper, and also remain involved in the running back rotation as a downhill option, and receiver out of the backfield.

There's also junior Demarcio Holliman (6-0, 175), a DB/receiver combo who may get overshadowed by some of the names above, but looks just as much the part, and made a case as the Falcons' best pure coverage man a year ago with the lone other interception and a team-best 10 break-ups as a sophomore starter.

While he'll have to compete for regular targets with the abundance of different shapes and sizes of wideouts on the offensive side, an even more prolific season at corner could be ahead.

"He's in the same class with Floyd and Hazley, and he's going to be a highly recruited kid," Hicks said.

Their abilities have continued to blossom, but the most important aspect in the development of each player this offseason may be coming to the understanding that their role in getting this team to where it wants to go is about more than just what they do as an athlete.

"They're not just being good football players, but leading everybody in the work it's going to take to get around that corner," Hicks said. "I think the big thing for them is they know there's an expectation level, and they're ready to step up to it."

The names you don't know...

Looking past the top few, there's a lot of value to be found among a wealth of other versatile players on the roster, many of them more unfamiliar, that will make an impact.

"They don't know their names, but they've been playing for us for the last three years, and we know that something good is going to happen," Hicks said.

A huge supporting cast in the backfield and out wide will give coaches a happy problem of finding a way to give the key guys above their due opportunity to shine, while also highlighting what everyone else has to offer.

"We've got skill position players and running backs coming out the wazoo," Hicks said.

But that will also offer a benefit in making it less difficult to manage workloads and keep everyone fresh, particularly the handful that the Falcons need at their best for as much of games as possible.

"What you don't want to do is burn those two out when you've got other kids who can give you the same

EAST LAURENS
Continued on page 16

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Athletic additions, young newcomers have good things cooking for Crusaders

By **CLAY REYNOLDS**
Sports Editor

Trinity's Bruce Lane isn't the type of head coach who's out to fit his team to a certain scheme.

Rather, it's about tailoring his system to the unique strengths and weaknesses marking each year's roster of players.

And from his point of view, one of coaching's unique pleasures is the process of discovery that takes place every summer, which can be compared to the fun had by a chef figuring out the best way to use what's in the pantry.

For the Crusaders, a lot like every program their size in the GIAA, each season's challenge can be a lot like pulling together a dish from the arbitrary selection of groceries that are dropped in your lap on a round of Chopped.

"Every year is a new year," Lane said. "It's kind of like you're a mad scientist, and you go into the laboratory and you take the ingredients, and that's what June and early August are about is mixing it up and seeing what you've made when you get to the 14th of August."

What's in the Crusaders' basket for 2026?

Overall, it's a fairly young group of players, dominated by juniors and freshmen (who account for 19 of the roster's 27) that will have their share of inexperience. But the upside is that both classes feature some pretty talented players who made a name on middle school squads that were some of Trinity's most successful in recent memory. Among the seniors and sophomores in between are a handful who have established themselves as dependable players and leaders.

Throughout the summer, all were faithful to show up consistently with a desire to get better.

"(They) are working hard," Lane said. "Unless a kid's been on vacation, they've been here. I've been very pleased with the effort they've given, and dedication to being here. We haven't had any guys AWOL, just missing without letting us know why they weren't there, which I think speaks highly of them and their character."

Provided the Crusaders can keep them all healthy, there are a lot of intriguing players to work with at the skill positions and in the defensive front seven.

If the right pieces fall in place along the offensive line, that unit has a chance to be a strength as well.

The challenges? Putting together a serviceable kicking game (set back by the loss of both last year's main specialists, one to graduation and the other to transfer) and... something that goes without saying for any small football program... building enough depth to get by.

"I'm excited about this group," Lane said. "They work really hard. We are going to have to play ironman football. We've got a lot of guys going both ways."

Early samples out of the kitchen have passed the taste-test.

With time running out on the appetizer round, the Crusaders looked pretty fine-tuned as they took the field in a controlled scrimmage on July 30.

"We scripted 36 plays," Lane said. "Not down and distance, we just wanted to look at every play we had installed and we wanted to see each person touch the football and try to make a determination what we can do, what we need to clean up and what to throw in the



Senior Tayt Evans, an all-purpose back and defender, will be a cornerstone of Trinity's ground attack, run D and pass rush this season/**DANNY SCARBORO, File**

trash."

The results seemed to indicate some good things are cooking. All that's left to do is get it on the plate.

A little of this, and some of that...

The Crusaders' use of their most unique basket ingredients could score some points for creativity with the judges, as they weren't content to go by the same recipe as last year.

Absent a few of the defining components of their 2025 offense and defense in the cupboard, this year's spread will have its own distinct flavor after some somewhat significant adjustments, whether in personnel or scheme, intended to maximize what they have to work with.

"Our playbook is kind of like a menu at Waffle House," Lane said. "There's a lot of stuff on it, but we only choose to use the things that are going to fit within our personnel. That's one of the things we've been able to gauge this summer is looking at people in spots, particularly the skill positions, and figuring out where our strengths are and trying to play to those strengths."

The most interesting move has Asher Evans (6-2, 181) moving from quarterback to receiver.

In the truest sense, he'll be a tight end, though one that lines up wide probably more than he does adjacent to the formation.

The position is a bit new for him, but has turned out to be a pretty natural fit for a junior whose height and speed should create a lot of matchup problems for defenses.

"He has the skills," Lane said. "He has really good hands. He's a good route-runner... We won't necessarily always use him as an attached tight end. We'll try and formation people with him. If you just play him at receiver, and play him at X, it's easier to double him. We're trying to find ways to get him open."

Taking over behind center with the responsibility of delivering him the football is younger brother Jude (6-2, 155), an incoming freshman who's hit a growth spurt this offseason and is now pretty much equal in stature with his brother.

Both came up as quarterbacks, but have clicked especially well in this passer-receiver arrangement.

Asher caught 23 passes at a Georgia Tech camp Trinity attended in June, and seven in the late-July exhibition, as part of a 10-for-11 night for Jude, whose lone incompleteness was a drop by a different target.

If two Evanses aren't enough, there'll also be a third, albeit unrelated, in their baseball teammate Tayt (6-0, 185) taking part in the offense as one of their main running backs.

The senior, back for his first full season since transferring from West Laurens midway through last fall,

was a rusher of about 250 yards, and two touchdowns last season as he filled in at both tailback and quarter. He'll also be an option at a number of places on defense, the newest one as a situational pass rusher off the edge of the defensive line.

A regular in that role will be Will J Harris, a transfer from Dublin with the type of body (6-2, 230) and skill set you could potentially use anywhere on the field.

For the Irish he played linebacker. Lane plans to move him down a spot to the D-line. He'll double as a fullback, and potential tight end on the offensive side.

"He's very well-coached, very athletic," Lane said. "I think his desire is to play on the next level, and I think that will be as an edge player, more than likely. But he also understands that from time to time we may have to move him around a little bit. I know by reputation he's a really good player and played in a really good program. He knows what it takes to win. So I think he brings that with him, and he has the expectation of being willing to work hard."

Someone Lane considers "our best football player" is junior Andrew Helton (6-0, 200), who is a lock for a two-way starting job on the offensive line, and at linebacker.

"He has a motor, comes off the football, will attack you and loves to hit," he said. "Andrew was probably our most consistent linemen from last year. He has a great work ethic in the weight room."

Corbin Albritton (5-9, 170), off a season-ending injury, is slated to be back as center on an O-line that is otherwise feeling out the rest of its main five.

Receivers will include Hein Schaaf (6-0, 150), Griffin Lane (who will be a third-string option at quarterback, and work on defense as either a cornerback or safety) and Mason Lane (who will see potential snaps as any of the above).

Another "wild card," with some applications at both positions, is freshman Sam Owens (5-8, 140).

"He did a really good job for us in middle school last year as a running back, but he has really good hands," Lane said. "He could be one of those slot receivers, or could be a guy when we go one-back who could be a receiver type in there."

Alec Preston (5-11, 195) and Mason Lane (5-10, 166) return alongside Helton in the linebacking corps.

Blake Sims, who battled a few bumps and bruises but started most of the season in 2026, is back to anchor the middle of the defensive line.

Sam Fuller will be an option at either linebacker or safety.

Dash Preston (5-10, 165) returns at corner, and will be mirrored on the opposite side by either Griffin Lane (5-10, 145) or a second Dublin pickup in sophomore Jackson Jones (6-0, 141),



TRINITY AT A GLANCE...

HEAD COACH: Bruce Lane
(third season, 255-168-1)

OFFENSE: Two-back
DEFENSE: Four-man front

2025: 5-6 (0-3 district 3)
FINISH: GIAA playoffs (lost to Briarwood in first round)

RETURNING STARTERS:
5 offense / 6 defense

KEY LOSSES: RB/LB/SPEC Wade Register (Georgia); ATH/LB Jakob Sahli; TE/DL Tripp Mascaro (transfer); OL/DL/SPEC Cody Register (transfer); WR/DB Charlie Maffett; OL/DL Carter Lee; OL/DL Nolan Terry

PLAYERS TO WATCH: TE/DB Asher Evans, Jr.; QB/DB Jude Evans, Fr.; RB/DB Tayt Evans, Sr.; RB/DL Will-J Harris, Jr.; WR/DB Griffin Lane, Sr.; RB/DB Dash Preston, Jr.; OL/DL Corbin Albritton, Sr.; OL/DL/SPEC Aiden George, Sr.; OL/DL Blake Sims, Jr.; OL/DL Andrew Helton, Jr.

THE UPSIDES: Intriguing skill players; young talent
KEY CONCERN: Solidifying rebuilt offensive line

SCHEDULE...

8/14	Briarwood
8/21	at Robert Toombs (\$)
8/28	Edmund Burke (\$)
9/4	at Augusta Prep
9/11	Brentwood
9/25	at Gatewood* (\$)
10/2	at Windsor*
10/16	Flint River*
10/23	at Piedmont* (\$)
10/30	Riverside Prep

* — GIAA district 2-A/AA (\$)
(\$) — pivotal games

who has made an impression so far.

They'll be counting on making a limited number go a good ways on each side of the ball, but the goods are there to compete.

"We have some really strong football players coming back," Lane said.

New staff, similar identity...

During his remarks on the preseason forum put on by the Rotary Club of Dublin late in July, Lane joked that he looked around on the practice field on a recent afternoon and didn't recognize any of his coaches.

In addition to what the Crusaders lost in player personnel to graduation and transfer, their staff took a fairly big hit as three key assistants moved on. Lane's son Christian took a new job as head coach at Vidalia Heritage Academy, and siblings Ben and Rob East have stepped away from coaching entirely.

The only true holdover from last year will be Jim Coleman, a former Crusader quarterback who is continuing his role as a student assistant.

New additions came from both near and far.

Looking locally, Lane brought on '06 Dublin state champion running back and D-lineman Thomas Barnes.

Quinton Cooley (a first-time coach who was an all-American running back at Liberty) and John Scargle (a veteran of more than 20 years who's coached ball at multiple Florida high schools, and a few colleges, most recently as DC at Pennsylvania's Westminster College) join from out-of-state.

"Those guys coming in have some big shoes to fill, but they have some really good credentials as well," Lane said. "The kids seem to have been very receptive to some new ideas and some new faces. The coaches have been very good in developing some relationships."

Getting to know so many new staffers at once has likely been the biggest adjustment for Lane.

"We're trying to build a relationship and rapport with one another. You can take for granted that, 'I thought you knew that, but I didn't tell you that,' so I'm having to coach coaches, and coach myself to coach coaches."

Despite the new faces, the brand of football Lane has carried as his trademark — with a priority on blocking, tackling, running the ball and out-executing everyone on special teams — isn't really changing.

Defense is likely the place where you'll see the most tweaks in style, though the Crusaders plan to work under the same framework of an even front with the same general idea of how they look and what they're doing.

The kicking game, despite the loss of two blue-chip specialists in the Register brothers (Wade now punting at the University of Georgia and Cody a transfer to Bleckley County), may once again be the most integral piece of their plans to compete and win this fall.

It'll just be a totally different ballgame without the set of players whose ability to just knock the ball out of sight made the phase pretty foolproof.

"The one thing with Wade, and with Cody, when they were here, you pretty much knew the other team was going to start on the 20-yard line every time," Lane said. "I was tempted several times last year, with Wade, to just send him out on the kickoff team and leave 10 guys on the sideline, because he was going to kick it in the end zone, and we really wouldn't have to cover. We're going to have to coach a little bit this year."

Without that luxury going forward, the Crusaders will have to focus a lot more on the details of what they're doing. And they're doubling down on the amount of practice time — already a lot, by most standards — that'll be budgeted for special teams.

Instead of the standard 15-minute segment of practice they devote per day, Lane and Cooley, who'll be his special teams point-man, plan on spending a full 30 minutes looking to locate as much "hidden yardage" as they can on kickoff and punt situations.

"We're going to have to do a really good job of scheme and coverage," Lane said. "Make sure we have the right people on the field to take care of that."

As for the scoring part of it, Trinity should be in pretty good shape between the legs of freshman Whit Byrd and soccer transplant Aiden George, frontrunners for the open kicking job.

Touchbacks and 40-plus yard field goals won't be near as frequent, but Lane feels that they'll be in position to make the proverbial layoffs.

"Your goal would be to convert your extra points, and be able to kick the ball to the 20 or the 15 or so yard line, you hope you can step in there and kick a short field goal," he said.

The younger Register was also the Crusaders' snapper on punts and scrimmage kicks, and those duties will be handled by one or both of Helton and Albritton.

Punting, throughout summer, has been a project, to an extent where there are a good many fourth downs this year where Trinity may feel comfortable taking its chances and going for it.

"I'm reading this guy's book that never punted," Lane said. "We may have to do that this year, too."

A quest to build depth...

When your roster size is in the 20s and low 30s, having the depth to weather injuries — let alone 48 minutes of football — is a never-ending concern.

Last year, no amount of it would have really helped Trinity to survive a constant storm of attrition that amounted to a curse from August all the way through November.

The most brutal loss was probable starting quarterback Asher Evans, who suffered a broken leg at the very end of their preseason scrimmage that knocked him out for the season before it even began.

The core who remained intact made a fairly strong rebound, compiling four wins in a row after a medicinal opening loss to Brentwood, and finishing the first half in position to contend.

But that's when a second wave hit, wiping out at least half a dozen other key players — representing roughly 12 starting spots on the overall depth chart — and most all remaining hope of salvaging much from the second half of the schedule, which Trinity would finish on a five-game slide.

With fill-in QB Jakob Sahli, super-specialist Wade Register and at least two key linemen in and out, the Crusaders wrapped the regular season with a 5-5 record, and were on the chopping block against Briarwood in the first round of the playoffs.

If there's any silver lining Lane can point to from the ordeal, it's that it allowed a lot of the younger players he's set to depend on this year to begin the process of experiencing and adjusting to varsity football several games early.

So that group, along with main returnees Evans and Albritton, who've both bounced back well, should be able to hit the ground running in 2026, as they keep their fingers crossed for some much better luck on the injury front.

"I found this to be true whether I was coaching 75 kids or 30 kids or 27, if the wrong person gets hurt, it changes your whole season," Lane said.

A reality at this level of the GIAA, save for those in the elite class of Brentwood and the association's superpowers in AAA and AAAA, is that most teams are in the same boat as far as overall numbers.

How any can manage to build themselves a safety cushion in the form of extra athletes to take off some of the load or pressure borne by their top guys, or give you that next man up as a fallback in case of emergency, can often be the separator between good and great.

"Everybody in our situation, save for one or two schools, are looking at 25 to 30 kids, and playing seven or eight guys both ways," Lane said. "You've gotta develop that depth."

But the rest is simply doing the best you can with what you have to work with.

All in all, the Crusaders believe they've been dealt a quality hand to play here in 2026.

"I feel good about the pieces, now we just have to make them fit in the right place," Lane said.

Raiders replacing a lot, but reloaded roster looks to have ample speed, line talent to run gauntlet

By CLAY REYNOLDS
Sports Editor

Exceptional seasons are about exceptional players. And it was a special senior class of them that led West Laurens to its greatest ever, complete with 13 wins, the region 4-AAA championship and trip to the state semifinals, last fall.

In football's cycles of success, which usually bring those along only every so often, it's tough to lose one so big and still turn the page smoothly from that type of team to the next.

The Raiders, whose 20 or so losses from 2025 accounted for about two-thirds their starting lineup, are facing one of those huge transitions as they reset for a new year.

But the predicted wave of turnover is one they were bracing for, and for the most part, they've weathered it in best-case fashion.

"We've still got some question marks for sure," said West Laurens head coach Kip Burdette. "But we feel good about some things we've seen... We're still trying to find out who we can count on. We're still trying to find out who really wants to take a starting job and run with it. But we feel good about the progress we've made at this point."

Last season was another of the landmarks that have come for West Laurens at steady intervals over its recent history, coinciding with the crest of one of those athletic waves every 4-5 years.

Both the last two peaks, as memorable seasons in 2014 and 2019 also culminated in region titles and deep playoff runs, were followed by some type of valley. However the first (for a Raider team that came back to win only one fewer game, and reached the second round) was much less steep a dropoff than the second (a fairly significant step back from 11 wins to just five, and a first-round exit).

It remains to be seen whether this year will fall into one category, the other or somewhere between.

But the quality players they're not replacing, and some good signs seen this summer, offer a good bit to suggest that the more things change, the more they might stay the same as West Laurens seeks to reload, and remain in a strong position as a program.

The Raiders' soft debut in a home scrimmage with Mary Persons early in the month was somewhat erratic, as a bunch of new guys tried things out under the lights, very clearly for the first time, and showed a definite lack of experience that will probably continue to be visible for the early part of the fall.



Troy commit Christian Rozier (50, left) and Memphis pledge Jonathan Toney (65, right) at the two tackle positions give an otherwise inexperienced West Laurens offense a strong front line to rebuild on this fall/CLAY REYNOLDS



But there also appeared to be no lack of talent that, when the newness wears off and some cohesiveness finally develops, could easily have them in a spot right back at the top of the region.

"It's still a work in progress, but we're trying to work to get better and answer a lot of those questions," Burdette said.

Depth perception...

Despite the many changes, West Laurens had two important things it could count on coming into 2026...

One was a small but significant set of returning starters who, late last year, demonstrated as much leadership as many of their senior counterparts.

The other was its strength program, which didn't miss much of a step in continuing to churn out good-looking football players that have been a common denominator of Raider football teams going back close to two decades.

If there was any question of where they needed to re-start back in December, the natural answer was in the same weight room that's been square 1 of the off-season for all of Burdette's teams, as those of both the two head coaches who preceded him.

"Lifting weights was just part of the fabric of West Laurens," he said. "Those kids like to lift. It's something they enjoy. We're strong."

A theme you tend to see in winning programs: Success that reinforces itself to a point where, when it's time for a changing of the guard, one generation can easily hand things off to another one that's well-trained and prepared for its moment.

Those tabbed as the next Raiders up this season are eager to hit the ground running.

"Some of the kids we're counting on, and some of the newcomers, they've worked to earn that spot," Burdette said. "There are a lot of kids that, with that class that we just had graduate, guys that have really been waiting their turn. Maybe they were sophomores and juniors

last year, and they're kind of chomping at the bit to get their chance to go out there and play."

There may be a high number of new starters coming up, but West's concern hasn't been finding talent to replace what was lost. It's just finding the level of depth they'd like to have at a number of positions that are sharing many of the same players.

What most identified those issues over the summer were intrasquad scrimmages that forced a lot of athletes doing double-duty to pick a side.

"We're trying to make it where we can practice against each other a little bit," Burdette said. "When we do that, we get a little thin. But it's good, to a point, because someone you're not really counting on is going to end up getting better, and you end up working on your depth like that."

The more of those solid contributors they can add to the rotation to help out by September and October, the better, because a big concern will be figuring out how not to lean too heavily on some players West Laurens will have to lean on pretty heavily.

Others could emerge, but there are a handful of which a lot will be requested in all three phases. And the Raiders hope that the demands of that workload won't take too much of a toll on guys like senior Jaden Stanley (5-9, 160), who's pretty elite in coverage at cornerback, but has some speed they'll probably need to utilize frequently on offense and special teams, too.

Another... Trinity transfer Tripp Mascaro (6-0, 185). The junior is an imposing blocker and receiving target at tight end on offense, but also one of a few really big bodies in the defensive front seven that there just aren't many of.

Perhaps the most involved player of any will be junior J.D. Hogan (5-10, 175), who excels as a tackler and interceptor of passes on the back end, punts, holds and covers kicks, but

also showed with big runs in the Jefferson game and MP scrimmage why he probably doesn't touch the ball enough on offense.

Still, keeping him from injury and fatigue is a priority that Burdette and staff are paying close attention to. 'Cause if they don't find some way to manage his snaps, he's liable to never leave the field.

"We've got to be smart, because he's a kid that wants to be in all the time," Burdette said. "We've got to keep him healthy, because he's got a lot to offer... We've got to keep a cap, and keep him healthy."

Some late-blooming athletes who emerge at different positions could change the equation, but for the time being, West Laurens will have to do a lot more with less than it's used to while working to fill the many sets of big shoes left behind from a season ago.

"I do feel good about the pieces we've got, but we are thin in some spots," said West Laurens head coach Kip Burdette. "That's one thing we're working on this summer, just developing depth, trying to find out who can do some things."

Turning over some new leaves...

There were the eight starters the West Laurens offense had to replace from last season, and then there was feature back Ty Cummings, who was almost worth eight more players on his own.

"He was different than any player I've ever really been around," Burdette said.

The Georgia Southern signee, who's said to be making a strong case for some carries and kick returns as a freshman Eagle this fall, wasn't the only graduate the Raiders will miss on offense.

But his ability to take the entire unit on his shoulders, demonstrated in 13 games leading up to a 14th in which an unfortunate ankle injury suffered in the quarterfinals showed how little they could afford to be without him.

Other key cogs included

in the class of 2026 were min-uteman quarterback Cason Pollock, sparkplug receiver Juvon Hill, short-yardage bulldozer Shannon Adkins and dynamic wings Branden Brooks and Evan Holmes who were pivotal in producing the remainder of a little over 5,000 total yards, and helping last year's squad put up a record 525 points, nearly 40 per game.

What was spared in the offseason purge?

In large part, a scattering of rushing yards and TDs out of Hogan and rising junior Braylen Robinson was all that remained of meaningful production.

The departure of offensive playcaller Gabe Gay, to become head coach at Montgomery County, has done even more to start the Raiders from something pretty close to scratch on that side of the football.

Burdette, who has been a defensive guy since his early days as an assistant coach but came up as a quarterback at Mary Persons, will be stepping back over to the offensive side to coach the QBs and collaborate with new OC Matt Janufka on running the offense. The transition, taking him back to some early roots, has been a fun experience.

"It's a little more of an analytical game, but just some of the fundamentals I enjoyed working with as a kid, the footwork fundamentals and mesh fundamentals, have been enjoyable to work with," he said. "I think the head coach and quarterbacks, they are always kind of attached. Most of the time, the head coaches at the QBs get too much credit when things go good, and too much blame when things go bad, so they're kind of attached in that regard."

Some mystery surrounded exactly what about the Raiders' approach might change under their watch. But in this month's first scrimmage look, things were mostly similar in presentation, revolving around most of the same core formations and run plays that carried over from last year.



WEST LAURENS AT A GLANCE...

HEAD COACH: Kip Burdette
(fifth season, 24-21 career)

OFFENSE: Multiple
DEFENSE: 3-4

2025: 13-1 (8-0 region 4-AAA)
FINISH: Region champions;
GHSAA semifinals (lost to Jefferson)

RETURNING STARTERS:
3 offense / 4 defense

KEY LOSSES: RB Ty Cummings (Georgia Southern); WR/DB Juvon Hill (FVSU); OL/LS Grady Howell (Georgia Southern); RB/LB Shannon Adkins (Charleston Southern); DL Ethan Cason-Guyton (Shaw); DB Jayce Blash; QB Cason Pollock; LB Jayden Watkins

PLAYERS TO WATCH: OL Christian Rozier (Troy); OL Jonathan Toney (Memphis); ATH/DB/P J.D. Hogan, Jr.; LB Leroy Mack, Sr.; ATH/DB Jaden Stanley, Sr.; QB/K Duggan Malone, Sr.; RB/LB Braylen Robinson, Jr.; RB/LB Justin Blash, Sr.; TE/LB Tripp Mascaro, Jr.; DL/LB Maxx Chafin, Jr.; WR/DB Jamari Blash, So.

THE UPSIDES: Outstanding O-line; Team speed
KEY CONCERN: Developing depth

SCHEDULE...

- 8/21 Bleckley Co. (\$) 9/04 at Dodge Co. 9/11 at Cook 9/18 Monroe Area 9/25 Southeast Bulloch* (\$) 10/02 at New Hampstead* 10/09 Harlem* (\$) 10/16 at Long Co.* 10/23 at Liberty Co.* (\$) 11/06 Windsor Forest*

* — region 3-AAAA
(\$) — pivotal games

Some different wrinkles, though, could be in store based on how well this new group of players can find its footing.

"What we do up front is going to be similar to what we've done in the past," Burdette said. "It may look a little different in the backfield, but our identity and what we do is going to stay pretty consistent."

Carries will be spread around much more evenly between members of a running back committee, but pounding the ball will very much stay the main thing, with Robinson (5-11, 179), junior Kaden Bloodsaw (5-9, 175) and senior Justin Blash (5-10, 145) due to split them

WEST LAURENS
Continued on page 13

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Prosperity gospel: Norton preaching ills of complacency as Trojans try to sustain recent streak of success

By CLAY REYNOLDS
Sports Editor

When you're used to succeeding, how do you avoid getting used to success?

That's a question Johnson County head coach Don Norton spends a lot of time thinking about these days as he looks for new ways to keep the message fresh, and his team on its toes, with each passing season that the Trojans keep on winning at a high level.

Football's fortunes are a double-edged sword: With any blessing of repeated victory comes the curse of complacency, and a steadily creeping tendency toward entitlement and satisfaction anytime a streak of prosperity can continue long enough to be assumed.

As the years go by, generations of players directly familiar with what built a tradition of excellence ultimately give way to new ones for which it has always existed. Following an 11-win season, and a historic region championship four-peat, that subtle danger of getting comfortable looms as large as ever this season for a JoCo team that has experienced little other than that trend of greatness.

Not a returning member of this year's Trojans, much like the seniors on last year's squad who finished their career with 41 wins (an average of just over 10 per season), knows anything besides region titles and playoff berths that they've rattled off like clockwork over a stretch of dominance topping any in the program's history.

"We take that for granted," Norton said. "We think

that's normal, and that's not normal."

Those who were even old enough to remember some leaner times will still have to think back awful hard to recall the last season JoCo didn't qualify for the post-season, in 2018, or finished with a .500 record, the year just before. But those brief lulls weren't far removed from comparable runs under Norton, Bill Bonds and other predecessors going back to the 1970s whose pattern of great teams have made Johnson County's preeminence into more or less a fact of life.

"We forget, kids forget, people forget that it's very hard," Norton said. "It's hard to maintain that, and we have to keep them humble, and really keep our system and keep our fundamentals and keep the main thing and keep the main thing. If you're not careful as coaches and as players and as fans and everything that makes our athletic department and our teams work, all of a sudden, you're going to forget something and you're going to take something for granted, and that's when you falter."

Keeping the right mindset...

School spirit and community pride aren't the only reasons you see such an emphasis on Trojan football heritage and the larger-than-life legacy of its past legends at "The Blue Monster." It's also about elevating the school and program above the individual, and even a given team... so that players taking the field



Lineman D.J. Abrams (53) and corner Jacaden Webb (6) are both returning key pieces of what looks to be another formidable Johnson County defense/CLAY REYNOLDS, File

can feel the weight of what they're tasked with upholding, or going up against.

In his methods, Norton is just as intentional about reminding everyone that the status isn't a birthright. It has to be achieved every day, week and season.

He always takes things slow during the summer, starting every new team from the beginning to re-teach the basics of how the JoCo operates, because to skip any of the most routine steps in that process would be to take something important for granted.

"We're really teaching them the very basics right now, and still are," he said. "I know we're about to play, but we're still really trying to do good on the fundamentals and be good at the small things like eyes and feet and hands."

Open battles for every position on the depth chart, even those with last season's most reliable contributors, are ensuring no one begins to feel secure in their job.

"We've got a QB race go-

ing on, we've got all these guys trying to take someone's spot on the offensive line or the defensive line," Norton said. "Our players know very well that what they did last year doesn't mean anything to us."

While it's true that players make plays, the Trojans look at that truth from a different angle, where no single player's contribution is considered more important than the structure of the unique playbook that fits them all together as a cohesive unit.

"Our system works for us, and we stick with it," Norton said. "We believe in what we do, and try to have an identity that emulates our team personality, and really the traditions of Wrightsville, but it's all the same."

The scheduling process for a new two-year cycle has also been handy in using difficult competition to serve up some doses of reality, or several, over the course of this season's first half.

Between scrimmages and a four-team non-region

slate, point was made of lining up opponents with winning credentials and/or a reputation for playing JoCo pretty tough.

"I scheduled as hard of a schedule as I could come up with," Norton said. "We don't have any boo boo teams. I really thought that that would help us out, and I hope it will."

The region title race, with the addition of defending quarterfinalist Jenkins County, also won't be nearly as clear-cut as it's been made to seem the last four years, so the Trojans' heads should be on a swivel from August all the way through November. There will also be an 11th opponent – satisfaction – that they'll have to get the better of every single week, and probably work a little harder each time to keep doing it.

Though JoCo teams of late may have made success routine, this one can't allow it to become a routine.

"It'll sneak up on you," Norton said. "It's difficult, once you start getting there."

The makings of a winner...

While they're assuming nothing, Norton and JoCo also aren't shying away from a hard-earned expectation that they'll win most of those games and have a shot at hoisting a fifth-straight region trophy after the initial 10 games.

The 2026 Trojans seem to have what it takes to be just as good, if they can achieve the cohesiveness last year's did, and others

JOCO
Continued on page 12



JOHNSON COUNTY AT A GLANCE...

HEAD COACH: Don Norton (23rd season, 157-85 career)

OFFENSE: Wing-T
DEFENSE: 4-4

2025: 11-1 (5-0 region 5-Low A)
FINISH: Region 5-Low A champions; GHSA playoffs (lost to Brooks Co. in second round)

RETURNING STARTERS
7 offense / 8 defense

KEY LOSSES: RB/LB Cory King; WR/LB Tayshawn Norris; QB Nathan Turberville; OL/LB Ziion Wesley; OL/DL Matt Connell; K/P Will Peeples

TROJANS TO WATCH: QB Chance Womble, Jr.; RB/DB Jeremiah Scott, Jr.; RB/DB Jacaden Webb, Sr.; WR/DB Daezon Devero, Jr.; RB/LB Kelsey Waters, So.; RB/LB Jeremiah Taylor, Jr.; OL/DL Matt McCoy, Sr.; OL/DL D.J. Abrams, Sr.; OL/DL Albert Connell, Sr.; OL/DL Derrick Dixon, Jr.; OL/LB Cedric Bridges, Jr.; ATH/LB Gus Ragan, Fr.

THE UPSIDES: Returning experience everywhere; Proven playmakers at skill positions
KEY CONCERN: Avoiding complacency

SCHEDULE...

8/21	at East Laurens
8/28	Warren Co.
9/11	at Wheeler Co. (\$)
9/18	Wilcox Co. (\$)
9/25	at Glascok Co.*
10/02	at Wilkinson Co.* (\$)
10/09	Twigg Co.*
10/23	Hancock Central*
10/30	GMC*
11/06	at Jenkins Co.* (\$)

* — region 5-A
(\$) — pivotal games

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Prolific offense, pervasive playmakers have Royals poised for potential run after season on precipice

By CLAY REYNOLDS
Sports Editor

If a team can pick up a new season right where it left off in the previous one, Bleckley County certainly wouldn't mind the opportunity this fall.

Its loss to Worth County, after taking the eventual state champs to the wire on their home field in the second round of the playoffs last November, left a sufficiently bitter taste. But once the sting of losing one they had a real shot to win wore off, the Royals felt perhaps as encouraged as they were disappointed by the result... viewed as only a pause, rather than an end point, in a continuing story arc.

When all was said and done, how well they measured up against the state's gold standard served as evidence that this team, with most in its core due to return for another season, was right in the position it needed to be, with its best likely still to come this fall.

"I thought we kind of solidified what kind of team we had," said Bleckley County head coach Von Lassiter. "We had a lot of kids coming back, so it kind of propelled us into the offseason, knowing we're close, so let's do the little things right and get ourselves in position to take a step forward."

Right there with them the whole way, and never down by more than a touchdown, the Royals came within a couple key breaks of a chance to eliminate the Rams outright.

As it would turn out, hopes of overtime – with the teams deadlocked at five scores each – disappeared in the closing seconds as Worth rode a big play into the red zone, and despite meeting some strong resistance there from the resilient Bleckley D, booted a chip shot field goal to win it, 38-35, as time expired.

The ending probably made it hard getting to sleep for a few nights, but now that it's settled, is a memory the Royals don't mind going back to relive, and not just for the motivating effect that type of loss can have in generating hunger for redemption.

The missed opportunities – for the offense a couple pivotal chances to take the lead or turn momentum and the defense one or two big plays it could ill-afford – will stick with them.

So too will what they proved to themselves, and the rest of the state, by going back and forth with one of the top-scoring offenses in the classification and holding it on several key defensive stands.

"Worth County was a hurtful loss," said senior Zayden Lassiter. "By three points, and then they went on and won the state championship. So, I mean, that gives us (proof) that we have a chance to go pretty dang far and win it."

The Royals' work was pretty well cut out as they attacked the upcoming months with a strong sense of conviction about getting a little bit better at everything they do.

"That's kind of been our mission this summer, and all offseason," Coach Lassiter said. "Our kids have responded pretty well, and I think we've got a chance to do really well if we stay healthy."

Ready to light it up again...

Bleckley County offenses in the Lassiter era have been so explosive (the last four averaging in the 30s per game and ranking as the top four highest-scoring in program history) that it's a little difficult to adequately characterize the degree of firepower



With a majority of his top targets returning from last year's record-shredding season, Bleckley QB Brody Fleming could be poised to put up some even bigger numbers if the Royals reach their potential this fall/**ZACH DAWSON, File**

and efficiency that marked the Royals' record-breaking production in 2025.

They put up 441 points to top the school's previous high-water mark set in 2020, with a lot of credit to the masterful quarterback play of Brody Fleming (6-0, 175), who shattered two other single-season highs in the record book with his 2,583 passing yards and 30 touchdowns, against only six interceptions.

His flair for dialing up receivers extended equally to plays badly off-schedule as those that were on, with tremendous throw-on-the-run ability that made him perhaps more dangerous when scrambling than he was in the pocket.

Big plays were routine, and helped him put together three game totals exceeding 300 yards, and five four-plus touchdown nights.

The breakdown of his balance in spreading the ball around might have been even more impressive than the raw numbers: Six receivers had double-digit grabs, two more had at least eight, and five of those finished with 250 or more yards.

It was the type of season typical of a senior QB going out strong in the culmination of several years of experience. Never mind that Fleming was a junior, actually in only his first year as a full-time starter, with still one more ahead of him.

So it's anybody's guess how much more stellar this one has the chance to be if he can take things up another notch.

The desire to get better shared by the entire Bleckley roster is one that he's embodied as much as anyone.

"Another whole offseason in the weight room has been good for him," Lassiter said. "His arm's stronger, he's running faster, even. He just has a more confident mindset than he's ever had, and he's really leading our team in a way that's been fun to watch."

Aside from Fleming, picking a key guy out of Bleckley County's 2025 offensive lineup, which has few differences from the one coming back this fall, is kind of tough to do.

Production was so uniform and balanced for the Royals across the board, not just in that passing dimension, that no one else stood out. They were all just really effective.

That the vast majority of those skill athletes are back in the fold is just another reason to like what Bleckley, which will have seemingly just as much variety in its methods of attack, is capable of doing.

Four running backs, who all return, carried the football 50 times or more and cleared at least 300 yards. And a fifth rusher in Fleming, who's not to be overlooked as a scrambling threat, toted it about 35

more for a 250-yard chunk as well.

Zyion Love (5-7, 167), who missed most of last season with injury, was still the team rushing leader on 52 carries for five touchdowns over only four appearances.

"He had really good games whenever he was playing," Lassiter said.

Rising senior Deondre Robertson was neck-and-neck with 446 on 70 and seven touchdowns. This time, he's the one dealing with a preseason injury, though with an expectation of being back intact no later than the end of August.

Incoming senior Isaiah Simeton (5-8, 198), the only runner in the bunch to touch it in all 12, had comparable carries for 299 and five scores. Then, there was Kix Foskey, a freshman who got proved himself an increasingly reliable rusher as the season went on, grinding out 316 yards and three touchdowns, and bringing in eight receptions for 120 and an additional TD.

The collection of backs, which each have some subtle size and don't shy away from turning it up between the tackles, gives the Royals a consistent rushing dimension to build on.

It's a similar picture of depth at the receiver position, which also doesn't overwhelm you with top-tier prospectus, but features some similarly well-rounded athletes – four of last year's top six on the stat sheet – who play the game well, and fit with each other and the system.

Senior Kelvin Sneed (6-0, 165) is the fastest of the bunch, a top sprinter, relay-layer and long-jumper on the track and field squad clocked at a 4.39 in the 40, and with offers from each of the military academies. He'll be the primary deep threat.

Senior Octavius Tate (5-11, 150), junior Jason McNulty (6-1, 150) and junior Gage Harris (6-1, 170) won't burn the coverage as much, but are equally reliable at finding ways to get open.

"Our other guys are striders, but they're down in the 4s running really good routes," Lassiter said. "I think that, and the running back position is going to be the strength."

The Royals find themselves in the same situation of abundance on special teams, where a wealth of options have made for some competition at positions where you're usually happy to have just one that's reliable.

Trinity transfer Cody Register (6-3, 275) will handle punts and kickoffs, but has also created depth behind senior snapper Zayden Lassiter (6-3, 180) and junior kicker Dylan Lamb (5-8, 165).

"He can do all of the above," Lassiter said.

Double-duties...

If there's any downside to the multitude of skill options, it's that so many of them will be equally important pieces of the puzzle on one side of the ball as they are the other.

It's somewhat ironic that the uptick in those offensive numbers the past four seasons have coincided in large part with a departure from the Royals' longtime practice of two-platooning the majority of the lineup.

That change in mindset began by necessity starting with the replacement of a big senior class in 2023, but has continued in the years since with Bleckley sending a pretty good number of its top athletes both ways.

Circumstances have made a tighter rotation the norm, and it won't change this season as the Royals face more tough calls about where they can afford to spare their best players.

Sophomore Marty Beck is among the select few who will be mostly reserved for defense, as a third-year starter is probably Bleckley's best pure secondary player.

But the receivers Tate, at the opposite corner, and Harris, Sneed and McNulty, rotating at safety, were projected for a pretty heavy two-way workload. Senior Ter'Martez Elvine, another potential cornerback, could help balance some of it out.

Same for a couple at the running back post who will spend time at linebacker. Simeton and Kix Foskey enter that rotation, where junior Willy Walters (5-5, 170) was a producer last season, and freshman Jamir Thompson (5-11, 188) also got some scrimmage action.

Junior inside 'backer Landry Nobles (6-1, 205) is also listed as a potential tight end, though he's likely to fo-

cus on defense as he comes off a knee injury that cut his 2025 season a bit short.

Bleckley welcomes returning starters Jason Balthrope (6-2, 190) and K'Marion McClinton (6-2, 230), both seniors, back to its defensive line, with Register set to take over for the game-wrecking Tug Pasby in between them as the nose, though he'll occasionally line up further outside.

Junior Stachon Owens (5-10, 250), another they're working to get back healthy, and senior Malachi Ates (6-2, 290) will work in.

There figures to be at least a little of that crossover for a still-developing offensive line that has undergone some offseason upheaval.

Junior Raidan Black (5-10, 270), who is headed into his first year starting at center, was the only true lock at a specific position as the Royals mixed and matched during the summer.

Rising junior Caleb Foskey was also likely to be back at one of the tackle positions. Ates, Owens, senior Damon Allen (6-0, 305) and junior Wyatt Ward were involved in preseason experiments looking for the right mix of players at the rest.

"Really, we're musical chairs right now trying to figure everything out," Lassiter said.

Tight end is a similar position of uncertainty, though junior Ahmari Blackshear (6-0, 180) has risen above younger candidates as the Royals' prospective starter.

Out of about 57 on the roster, there are more than enough players to go around. But this early in the season, it's unclear how much depth Bleckley will be able to really depend in matchups where having your "best 11" out

BLECKLEY
Continued on page 20



BLECKLEY COUNTY AT A GLANCE...

HEAD COACH: Von Lassiter (10th season, 104-48 career)

OFFENSE: Spread
DEFENSE: 3-4

2025: 9-3 (7-2 region 2-High A)
FINISH: GHSA playoffs (lost to Worth Co. in second round)

RETURNING STARTERS:
7 offense / 6 defense

KEY LOSSES: ATH/DB Josh Stanley; DL Tug Pasby (Chicago State); WR/DB Jireh Campbell; WR/DB Jahiyann Blackshear; TE/LB Patrick Roberts; TE/DE Connor Cairney (Washington-St. Louis); OL/DL John Teston; LB Terrolio Brimidge (St. Norbert)

ROYALS TO WATCH: QB Brody Fleming, Sr.; WR/DB Octavius Tate, Sr.; WR/DB Kelvin Sneed, Sr.; WR/DB Jason McNulty, Jr.; DL/SPEC Cody Register, Jr.; RB/LB Isaiah Simeton, Jr.; RB Zyion Love, Sr.; WR/DB Gage Harris, Jr.; OL Caleb Foskey, Jr.; OL/DL Malachi Ates, Sr.; RB/LB Kix Foskey, So.; LB Landry Nobles, Jr.;

THE UPSIDES: Experience; proven producers on offense
KEY CONCERN: Toll on two-way players

SCHEDULE...

8/21	at West Laurens (\$)
8/28	Cook
9/04	Jasper Co.
9/11	at ECI
9/25	Dublin* (\$)
10/02	at Swainsboro* (\$)
10/09	ACE Charter*
10/16	at Dodge Co.* (\$)
10/23	Vidalia*
10/30	at East Laurens*

* - region 2-AA / (\$) - pivotal games

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DUBLIN
Continued from page 3

culty of the two-way workload.

Fortunately, there's some good support in the wings from senior Wi'Tyreon Charleston (5-8, 150).

Jayden O'Neal (6-0, 215) moves back to the right guard slot where he played his first year starting in 2024, and will work with freshman Jayden Blackshear – one of two freshman (the other Caden Dardy, a backup at center) that have surpassed the typical ninth-grade learning curve, and represent lone exceptions to an overwhelming theme of seniority.

That blessing of experience and continuity has been a luxury this offseason, even though the group has still had to pace itself to give younger players new to the mix a fair chance to keep up.

"We feel like we're further ahead right now on install than we normally would be, but when you mix in some freshmen and sophomores, you still have to (teach)," Holmes said in July. "Eventually, they have to play for you, too."

Ironically enough, the two folks in the O-line huddle that probably had the most to learn this offseason were the pair of coaches, each new to their respective positions, who were likely helped along a bit by their pupils at a few points in the process.

Keaton Wilson, who's been with the Irish for a while but previously coached tackles and tight ends, has moved inside to work with centers and guards, in place of Joel Ingram after his move to Bowdon. Taking Wilson's place there is Jake Brock, who's an entirely fresh face on the Dublin staff.

"That in itself creates a little of that learning curve," Holmes said. "Sometimes kids are a little more comfortable than a new coach coming in."

All the same carries over to the defensive side, where there really isn't much of a distinction between first and second strings.

In fact, during padded camps over the summer, Dublin flexed that depth by deploying two alternating D-line groups... one as formidable as the other.

"We'd run out a new front four every few plays," Holmes said.

That probably won't be exactly how the Irish play their cards in the regular season, but options for utilizing this position group's

many strengths, in concert with the O-line, are pretty wide-open.

"Any of the four positions, it doesn't bother us who's playing," Holmes said. "You can sit them for a series and not get beat down."

Jalen Dardy and Leucke, both ends, are widely considered the best pass rushers of the bunch. And you could likely pencil them in as true 1s atop O'Neal and sophomore Roberto Santos (6-0, 200), though the latter two will see the field a bunch.

Look as well for the prodigious sophomore V.J. Bond (6-1, 195), to this point exclusively a running back, to play a part in the edge-rushing rotation after proving himself a surprisingly ideal fit for the role, with his elite speed and wide wingspan, upon trying it out in situations this summer.

Stanley, Walker, Walden and Oliver rotate freely as D-tackles in the middle of what, all told, is a defensive front with plenty to throw at you, not to mention degree of durability that will make it pretty tough for even the best teams to match up with consistently.

"It's a long, athletic group in that front four," Holmes said.

Some playmakers
with potential...

Dublin's abundance of great ballplayers isn't just concentrated to its lines of scrimmage.

The Irish are loaded with athletes at every other position that will make their defense and offense into a well-oiled machine.

That begins at linebacker, where all three projected starters are seniors, and two – Jaydon McRae (5-8, 170) on the strong side and Jamarcus Knight (5-8, 170) on the weak – were among last year's top tacklers. Nazyon Mitchell (5-11, 185) in the middle, worked at the position a bit but will see his first major defensive action this fall.

Backups will include Zyion Porter (5-11, 173), another senior and part-time starter from 2025, and sophomore Curt Norris (5-7, 158) at SAM and MIKE.

Junior Will Wallace (6-2, 160), who has been a reserve safety, is moving down to the WILL spot, in a swing role that has evolved a bit for the Irish over recent seasons from a true linebacker into the type of hybrid DB that's become increasingly popular with coordinators looking to counter the mul-

tiple receivers of spread offenses.

"We're trying to get a little more athletic, based on what people are doing offensively," Holmes said. "We're running 4-3, but so many people put you into a 4-2-5. You have to be athletic enough to drop but physical enough to step inside and play the run."

In a heavy passing region, Dublin's defensive secondary will be a focal point. And the Irish have a starting group they like a lot, with JaKarian Jones (6-1, 160) and Travion Bostic (5-9, 150) returning at corners, prospective valedictorian Kye Young (5-9, 150) at strong safety and sophomore Matthew Batts (6-2) the lone new starter at free safety.

There will be some question marks in the second layer, which includes sophomore Kevin Hightower-McCastle, senior Ty Salter and twin brothers Ray and Royce Harrell – both "on the small side" at (5-1, 120), but with "big hearts" who "play hard" – that they hope to shore up.

"Our depth has got to come, and come quickly," Holmes added.

Answers in coverage will be at a premium against a bunch of 2-AA rivals who love to air it out, and have athletes who can burn you, or at a minimum make it a long night preventing first downs.

"I think how well we can play in the secondary is going to have a lot to do with it," Holmes said. "Sometimes, the best coverage is a good pass rush. We've got to hope our front four can get quarterbacks off their spot, get tall and make them throw over the top and make plays that way."

On offense, Dublin figures to be in a position to excel at every one of its skill positions.

All three of its starting running backs return, each with virtually identical 800 to 900-yard share of last year's rushing production which for the entire top five totaled out at about 3,200, an average of 7.9 per attempt.

Top to bottom, it may be the deepest backfield the Irish have had since 2006.

The slight 2025 leader in carries and yards was senior fullback Dontavious Cannon (6-0, 185) who will be in his third year starting, and backed up by McRae.

Bostic, spelled by Batts at wingback, was right on his tail with nearly identical numbers (both had in the neighborhood of 930

and 7-8 TDs) and a nine-per-carry average that was best among the three starters, but Dublin's most explosive runner was the then-freshman Bond, whose carries were limited to about 30, but averaged double-digits a pop.

Those will see a significant jump as he rotates with Knight at Z-back this year.

"I don't know how fast he is, but he's fast," Holmes said. "Last year, he didn't have a very good grasp of our offense, but he averaged 10.2 yards a carry every time he touched the football. He's working his way in right now, and he's got a good grasp of what we're doing. And a 6-1, 190-something-pound wingback, not only can he run, but he can block a little bit too."

The rushing attack, featuring as much power as a big-play element, will be complemented by a serviceable passing dimension led by Ryland Yates (5-10, 160), who takes over at quarterback after getting a little action under his belt in some pressure spots last year. The "versatile" sophomore, who's gotten more accustomed to the job in the offseason, has matured a lot.

"He can do anything we want a quarterback to do," Holmes said. "He can throw it and run the option."

Wallace and Jones, who combined for about 16 catches and two touchdowns, will collaborate with a trio of senior tight ends, Mitchell, Porter and Acayden Marshall (6-0, 165), as targets.

A few pressing issues...

For as many things as the Irish have going for them, there are several important questions they're working to get answered before crunch time, which comes pretty much right off the bat.

A viable succession plan at quarterback, with Wallace and Batts being developed as potential backups, was a big concern.

So to were the limited set of options they'd have in case of an injury in the middle of the O-line.

Mitchell, who's stepped up to assume extra point and field goal duties after handling kickoffs a year ago, has assuaged some massive anxiety on special teams created by an offseason exodus of potential kickers (leaving the punting Yates as the only other experienced leg on the roster).

The Irish are also slightly understaffed, after filling only a cou-

ple of the five vacancies behind longtime assistants who left for new opportunities.

Holmes, for the first time in years, is taking a position group under his wing, while existing DBs coach Fred Williams II now pulls double-duty and mentoring the receivers as well. Brock and Ryan Green, who's coaching wingbacks, were the staff's new additions.

They're details that seem secondary to the places on the surface where Dublin looks to be in fine shape. But any have the potential to make a huge difference somewhere in a schedule that will make little allowance for not having all your Is dotted and Ts crossed, particularly in the set of matchups that lead off.

"The first four weeks, we will get tested," Holmes said. "Who knows? You could come out of that 2-2 and really be a decent football team."

Then comes the region.

Anywhere along that road, a streak of hard luck could make it easy to get discouraged.

"How well this team handles adversity will be key," Holmes said. "You lose a game, you can't let that put you in a tailspin."

Add in the external drama, and there are plenty of potential pitfalls and distractions.

Taking it "one week at a time" might sound cliché, but is exactly what the Irish have to do to navigate the set of challenges they face effectively.

"The No. 1 thing I think we've got to do is put our blinders on and focus on Dublin football, leave the other stuff out of it," Holmes said. "Focus on what we've got to get done, focus on our football team. Because the schedule itself can make it seem like it's not going very good, especially early in the year, when things would be OK if you just keep your blinders on."

The great news: This is a veteran team with the type of experienced players who can take that type of mindset, and run with it.

However things play out, the Irish are poised to bring an entertaining show everywhere they go this season, particularly the five high-caliber home games that promise "a lot of excitement in the Bowl."

"It should be a great home schedule for our fans," Holmes said.



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New coach McCord, multitalented roster has Warriors making plans to stick around as playoff contender

By MICHAEL A. LOUGH
GTLN Sports Correspondent

Wilkinson County's Mack McCord hopes the surprises and proving people wrong continues.

He's already working on both.

McCord is making his debut as a head football coach this season at age 55, having started his coaching career as an assistant for a middle school volleyball team after years in the business world.

When he got the job in April, he told school officials he was all in, to the point of buying a house in the area.

"The thing at Wilkinson is the coaches keep coming, they stay one or two years, and they leave," said McCord, a graduate of what is now Dade County High. "All I can do is say it over and over, that I'm not going anywhere."

"I don't intend to go anywhere, but you know, they're not going to believe that until I'm here five, six, seven years. Then they'll start believing that I ain't going nowhere."

McCord takes over a program that has gone from the 22-year tenure of James Hagins from 1996-2017 – a run that included three region titles and four 10-win seasons – to its fourth head coach in less than a decade.

That's not if one includes Keldrick Burke twice. He resigned in 2020, after his second year, and then returned after a few months, then departing in the middle of the summer of 2023 to become principal at East Laurens, putting the Warriors in a bind.

Interim head coach Terrell Holt lasted a 5-5 season, and Jamoski Ward went 10-12, choosing then to take over a Central program in Macon that is on a 1-29 run the past three years.

Now, the Warriors have a coach who started his career full-time at the age of 48 and had a goal of becoming a head coach before he was 55.

He made that by one day. Next goal?

"Be a head coach for 10 years," he said. "I ain't going

anywhere unless they kick me out of this county."

It wasn't that long ago that Wilkinson County had three straight non-losing seasons, so McCord is confident that there's a little more to the program than outsiders think.

"The biggest thing here is getting their minds right, and get the discipline," he said. "They had this attitude of 'Hey, we're talented, we're going to win on talent, why should we have to work hard?'"

"I started getting them in the weight room and getting them into spring practice and everything, I'm just like,

"Guys, the work ethic's not here. The discipline's not here."

That's coming around, as is improving under yet another coaching staff.

A quarterback with options...

The Warriors have had some quality passing games, which goes against McCord's history. He doesn't really know how to throw a lot.

And McCord grew up playing quarterback.

"I was a 5-8, 170-pound quarterback that could run the option," he said of his days at Tennessee Wesleyan. "They ran the wishbone. They didn't care how tall I was, just how fast I was and could I make good reads and pitch the ball."

Well, he'll have to adjust some, because Wilkinson County returns one of the top quarterbacks in Central Georgia, senior Quenterrion Stanford.

He has completed 62.8 percent of his passes for 3,947 yards, 35 touchdowns and 13 interceptions in two seasons.

The coach who thought for decades that airing it out meant four passes in a couple weeks has a talented arm to work with.

"I think he's a legitimate D-I quarterback," McCord said of the 6-3, 180-pounder. "He makes really good decisions."

McCord has installed a



WILKINSON COUNTY AT A GLANCE...

HEAD COACH: Mack McCord (first season)

OFFENSE: Pistol flex
DEFENSE: 3-5

2025: 4-7 (4-1 region 5-Low A)
FINISH: GHSA playoffs (lost to Jenkins Co. in first round)

RETURNING STARTERS:
5 offense / 5 defense

KEY LOSSES: RB/DB Terrelle Blount; WR/DB Rahiym Thompson; DL DiMarco Harris; OL/DL Javian Harper; OL/DL Justus Bass; OL/DL Omari Holsey; ATH/LB Myles Cobb (transfer)

WARRIORS TO WATCH: QB/DB/P Quenterrion Stanford, Sr.; RB/LB Amare Todd, Jr.; WR/DB Chammarion Hall, Sr.; RB/LB Mahki Johnson; OL/DL Jason Hurst, Jr.; OL/DL Deion Nesbitt, So.; WR/DB Damareon Justice, Jr.; ATH/DB Daverie Walker, So.; ATH/DB Jai'Den Blackshear

THE UPSIDES: Quality QB play; Ball hawks on back end of D
KEY CONCERN: Regaining "the chip"

SCHEDULE...

8/21	at ACE Charter
8/28	at Greene Co.
9/04	Jefferson Co. (\$)
9/11	Rutland
9/25	Twiggs Co.*
10/02	Johnson Co.* (\$)
10/09	at GMC* (\$)
10/16	Glascok Co.*
10/23	at Jenkins Co.* (\$)
10/30	at Hancock Central*

* — region 5-A
(\$) — pivotal games



Wilco's new head coach Mack McCord sees some untapped running ability in quarterback Quenterrion Stanford that he's hoping to utilize as much as his proven passing skills in a new offense. The rising senior threw for over 2,000 yards last year/LOGAN REYNOLDS, File

he can run, and show college scouts that he can run."

There will be, no doubt, some serious discussions between head coach and quarterback.

"In this offense, he could conceivably throw for 2,000 and run for 1,000," McCord said. "He told me, 'Coach, I would love it if I could throw for 3,000 and only run for 100.' I said, 'Well, that's possible, too.'"

McCord had some convincing to do upon arrival, carrying a reputation as a die-hard Wing-T coach.

"The kids were absolutely terrified," he said. "The rumor was out there that I was going to run Wing-T. It took me weeks to squash that."

Wilkinson County will run a pistol flex, incorporating some double-wing and Wing-T schemes as well as RPO and spread.

Stanford is taking to the learning process.

"When it comes to football, he's pretty smart," McCord said. "I've got a lot of football books in my office, and he'll take one home and read it, and he comes back and gets another one."

A lot to like, a little to learn...

The transition is a little tougher than usual because of numbers and a difficulty for a faction of players to make it to summer workouts or camps. Now that everybody's together, McCord has started to see the progress.

A boost has been senior wideout Cha'Marrion Hall.

"He just dedicated himself to learning all the formations and the offense," McCord said. "If he tells you, 'Hey, you're lined up wrong' or 'This is what you do,' he's pretty dead on every time."

Junior Amare Todd (6-0, 180) is somebody McCord can't wait to see get going on Friday nights. He's an all-region linebacker who is adding running back duties to his game.

"People are doubting that he's going to be a good running back, but I think he's going to be outstanding," McCord said of the all-region linebacker. "I think this kid could run for 1,000 yards if given a chance."

Junior Jason Hurst (5-10, 290) leads a fairly deep offensive line that Stanford, Hall, and Todd will rely on. Deion Nesbitt is a 6-3, 360-pound sophomore McCord expects plenty from, especially as conditioning improves.

"He's got grandparents that were 7-feet tall," McCord said. "He's going to grow some more."

Todd is a 100-tackle defender McCord expects to lead that region in stops, courtesy in large part of good vision and an above-average ability to read an offense.

He'll be in the middle of the 3-5-3 scheme that is strong on the back end.

"Linebackers, they're going to make the majority of the tackles," said the wid-

owed father of one. "I trust our two corners, our free safety. I trust them to literally shut down passing games."

"They're ball hawks. You throw the ball against us, and our guys are looking to go get it and take it back the other way."

One is the aforementioned Hall, who doesn't play like his 5-7, 150-pound frame, and hungers to show colleges he's worth a look.

McCord said Hall was beastly during a camp at Woodland against much bigger schools.

"They were throwing these 6-2 receivers out there against him," McCord said, "And he refused to let them catch a ball. He just man-handled those bigger receivers."

Kicker Diego Reynoso couldn't make many summer sessions, but McCord expects him to be in mid-season form pretty quickly. Stanford returns at punter, and the Warriors have plenty of candidates in the return game.

Long-term vision, short-term confidence...

Wilkinson County was a playoff team despite a 4-6 regular-season last year, only giving up 39 more points than it scored.

The Warriors will have about three dozen players, and McCord expects to play nearly 20 on most Friday nights. The roster is a little senior-heavy but has underclassmen with some big potential.

McCord isn't looking at a long-term building plan.

"There's too much talent here coming through this program for them to not be winning more ballgames," said McCord, who will spend a lot of time working on his house in Gordon because he expects to live there a long time. "Single A and double A players, when you get that work ethic right, they're going to be in the weight room, they're going to push each other, they play with a chip on their shoulder."

"Wilkinson County football players have kind of lost that chip, and I'm trying to get it back."

JOCO

Continued from page 7

before.

"Every year is a new team, and it takes time to figure out what they're going to be like, and figuring out new personalities. Leadership roles change," Norton said. "Every day is like going to chemistry class. We're trying to develop some team chemistry."

The continuity has them in position to copy and paste a lot of what existed, intangibly and tangibly. Though there's still a lot to find out when games bring some true adversity, the locker room has the look of one with the right personalities and voices in place

"We have some kids we think are going to be some pretty good leaders," Norton said.

A majority of starters on both sides of the ball return, including – in a rare luxury – every single one across both their lines of scrimmage from the 2025 lineup.

Matt McCoy (6-1, 154), 2025 sacks and tackles-for-loss leader (with 6.5 and 30) D.J. Abrams and Albert Connell are the three seniors who will once again lead the units on both sides, but some equally seasoned underclassmen in juniors Derrick Dixon (5-10, 240) and Jeffrey Dupree (6-0, 240), and a sophomore, Scottie Horton, are back with at least a season of experience.

It won't mean anything's a carbon copy, with some new members vying for spots, and nothing guaranteed to anyone who might feel assured of theirs. But their experience and projected depth there is definitely a plus.

"It's nice," Norton said. "We've got some changes coming, but it makes it easier to make some ad-

justments. It has allowed our competition on the line to get better."

Out of the relatively few seniors who graduated, a handful were important ones.

Quarterback Nathan Turberville, linebacker Ziion Wesley (last year's leading tackler) and safety Tashawn Norris (No. 4 in stops) leave JoCo among the program's best to ever play their positions.

Collectively, the three leave a big gash in experience right up the middle of the depth chart.

"They're hard to replace," Norton said.

While there's some growing room for new players in the two sets of shoes on defense, the quarterback vacancy is one the Trojans feel well-prepared to fill with multi-year backup Chance Wombles, a junior, and standout freshman Gus Ragan in a competitive battle for the job.

Considerable playing experience, plus a level of arm talent already seen from him on the baseball field, makes Wombles (6-1, 170) the odds-on favorite, with a mastery of the offense and command of the huddle are both a good bit beyond what you'd see from many returning starters.

"Chance is an excellent leader," Norton said. "He sees the game."

But Ragan (5-10, 193), a physically and athletically promising rookie who's also slated to spend some time at outside linebacker, is putting on some considerable heat as he also makes his case on the field (and especially in the weight room, where he is already one of the team's top five lifters) and projects a really bright future.

"He's got an exceptionally high ceiling in football and baseball," Norton said.

Both, paired with a returning receiver in junior Daezon Devero (6-1, 155) who has shown shades of Trojan legend Zack Walker out wide catching from each this summer, figure to make the passing game the most dependable part of the offense it's been in some time.

Two seniors departed from the backfield rotation, but four regular ball-carriers with considerable production return to ensure the rushing attack won't miss a step.

Upcoming junior Jeremiah Scott (5-9, 170), last year's leading rusher with 763 yards on 73 carries and 17 TDs (by far the most), returns at wingback as the undisputed big-play guy.

Though the Trojans are technically replacing a starter and explosive counterpart in Norris on the other side of the formation, rising senior Jacaden Webb (5-10, 153) was so effective backing him up last year (18 carries for 241 yards and three touchdowns) that the handoff of the baton doesn't really feel like a big change.

Junior Jeremiah Taylor (6-0, 200), whose output (53 carries for 332 and an identical six scores) very closely mirrored that of King with whom he split carries, takes over as the No. 1 fullback.

Sophomore Kelsey Waters (5-7, 150), off a strong freshman season with 273 yards on 52 carries and four scores, will work at both spots, with junior Zacorian Graddy (5-9, 155) and senior Jamir Wadley also in the mix for carries.

Defensively, a lot of pieces are back in place. But the Trojans plan to look to junior Cedric Bridges (5-10, 240), who's moving from the line to inside 'backer, and Devero, shifting from corner to safety, to fill their two biggest voids.

Experience reigns pretty much everywhere else. Third-year starters in Scott (who was the 2025 interceptions leader with five) and Webb (who picked two and recovered as many fumbles) are back as cornerbacks.

Taylor, JoCo's top returning tackler with 69 total, will be the cornerstone of the linebacking corps. Waters and sophomore Jalen Daniels (5-9, 160), who saw plenty of action last year, and the freshman Ragan will also help out.

Special teams has some major question marks, as the Trojans endeavor to replace an established kicker and punter who graduated.

As for placekicking, sophomore Grayson Jackson has put in a lot of time on his own learning and polishing the craft over the past year to earn a shot to contribute. And that work ethic will have a lot of people rooting for him.

"He's one of the kids that you're really excited for, and hope he can do it," Norton said.

All in due time...

As his tenure at JoCo has gone on, Norton has become more and more comfortable with the slow pace at which things come together in a season.

Getting scheme installed, technique perfected, lineups established and players to work seamlessly as a team is a process that younger coaches can be eager to rush, and prone to get anxious about when results don't come quickly enough.

But there's never much to know in August because there's not that much that's decided in August, whose main battles are getting a team into football-playing shape and simply learning who can help

you, and where everyone belongs.

The chemistry and strong bonds that distinguish contending teams don't usually develop until you've been through the fire a time or two. That those factors remain an unsolved mystery at the start of the season no longer strikes him as unusual.

"I don't think you ever really know till right there when it gets tough," Norton said.

Those same seasons have all proven that drilling the simple things which get better with repetition usually puts JoCo in position to compete by their first game, and they're making that the priority.

"Blocking and tackling, no question, and you can add hustle in there," Norton said. "I think hustle goes a long way that people forget about. That's just effort."

Deeper down, pride in those details is just as much a matter of character, which has been a common thread in recent teams that have upheld the strong standard.

But that tradition people see, from up close and afar, is more about faithful execution than it is simply the bright royal blue and star on the helmet that they've come to associate with one of the Heart of Georgia's strongest football brands.

If the Trojans of 2026 finish strong, rate high in the playoff seeding and potentially make it five region titles in a row, it won't be simply because that's what Johnson County does.

It'll be because this group also stepped up, played its best and earned it.

"I hope we can fight the complacency... the 'Ahhh, we're just gonna go out there and win,'" Norton said.

WEST LAURENS
Continued from page 6

Several more will get involved, either on the end of handoffs or receiving direct snaps, with Hogan and fellow junior Jace Williams (6-0, 185) both set to moonlight as package QBs.

As for the main signal-caller, that'll be junior Duggan Malone (6-0, 170), who's been groomed for a couple seasons to take over the position, and has a pretty live arm that Burdette feels will make throwing the ball just as much a strength as it was last season, even beyond just what would be considered that the Raiders made their main focus last year.

"Duggan's looked good throwing the ball around this summer," Burdette said. "He's tall, long, athletic and he adds an element where, if stuff's not there, he can break and go. He's shown he can run and has got some speed and athleticism. Hopefully that element helps us throw the ball a little bit, maybe even on early downs this year."

Malone was also the team's primary placekicker. But freshman Nathan Bodi, a transfer from Dublin had a confident preseason showing, may bid to take at least some of those responsibilities off his hands.

Mascaro will lead the tight end and H-back position, but you'll also potentially see junior Tripp Ne-Smith (6-0, 185), Cooper Smith (5-10, 180) and sophomore Braydon Bailey (6-2, 163) mix in there.

At wideout, seniors Jabiri Martin (5-10, 135) and Janile Browder (5-9, 160) and juniors Jeremy Brownlee (5-9, 130), Ezekiel Floyd, Nicholas Hester (6-0, 180) and Kingston O'Neal (6-0, 150) are vying for regular reps.

Hogan and Stanley will work with sophomore Jamari Blash (5-9, 163) and junior Briceton McMiller (5-8, 140) in the slot.

Freshmen Chris Brown, Bryce Shepherd and AJ Dixon are some ninth graders with potential who may get a look in some situations.

"But hopefully they don't have to do too much too soon," Burette said.

Main kick and punt return jobs are up for grabs between the same speedsters already mentioned: Stanley, McMiller, the Blash cousins and Hogan all as realistic possibilities.

A lot of who plays where will come down to consistency, but finding others besides the many primary starters on defense who are involved in offensive and kicking game rotations would be a great bonus in the Raiders' continuing effort to build depth.

"The way we've got practice going right now, they have primary positions, but those skill positions are all hands on deck," Burdette said. "We've got a lot of two-way guys, so being calculated on how we do all that will be important."

Back in the trenches...

Some generational talent West Laurens has returning may make the offensive line one of the brightest of its bright spots going into the season.

The position wasn't at all immune from the grad reaper that took its share from all corners of the depth chart, claiming three of its 2025 starters, including one D1 signee.

But the two rising seniors who remain in the fold are a couple more in what has become a long line of projectable O-line prospects streaming from the SHU to the next level since 2023.

And both, senior tackles Jonathan Toney (committed to Memphis) and Christian Rozier (pledged to Troy), are already spoken for as they prepare to graduate in December, and enroll early at their respective schools.

The lankier Toney measures 6-foot-6, 268, and Ro-

zier a fuller 6-foot-4, 315. But the length and strength of both players will make them weapons at the point of attack in a gap-based blocking scheme that loves to use its tackles on leads and kick-outs.

"They're both big, strong athletic kids," Burdette said. "They understand the game. They're pretty intelligent. Both of them are really high-GPA students, and they are usually guys you don't have to tell things but one time. They've kind of got it. We want to keep things consistent up there where they don't have to do a lot of thinking. They're capable, but they do a really good job of getting on people. I think one of the most impressive things they do is reach people. They can get around people. And they do well in pass pro and getting off the ball in the run game."

The Raiders have been just as impressed with what they've seen this summer from a brand new group of starters in between them.

At center will be junior Dameon Palmer (6-2, 265).

"He's pretty versatile," Burdette said. "He's worked hard in the weight room. He's conscientious. He cares about what he does and wants to be good."

Junior Hudson Lee (6-2, 265), on the right, and sophomore Brayden Baldwin (5-11, 270), at left, are slotted at the guard positions.

On special teams, Ne-Smith is the heir apparent to replace Southern-signee Grady Howell as long snapper, but junior Maxx Chafin is an option there, too.

"We're gonna work a couple of guys there just to see who has the best consistency and velocity on the ball," Burdette said.

Malique Green (5-10, 195) and Josiah Spencer (6-0, 280) have also been involved in the conversation up front, and might have a shot to get involved situationally when West goes back to its heavy jumbo set, featuring seven down linemen and two up-blockers, in situations calling for a little extra oomph up front.

The no-nonsense run package that the Raiders have spent a lot of their time in the past two seasons isn't going anywhere. In fact, it might be even more useful than it has been in a new region full of teams (Harlem, Long County and Southeast

Bulloch, to name just a few) who place high value on controlling the line.

"I think it's definitely something that we're going to keep doing," Burdette said. "It's been too good for us in the past couple of years to abandon it. As good as I think our offensive line can be, we're gonna lean on those guys when we can. If there's not a whole lot of bells and whistles we can execute, sometimes we just need to load up and go, and see if we can't get three or four yards."

Whether arranged in its smashmouth or traditional configuration, the O-line and its multiple slobber-knocking personalities were an underrated part of what helped last year's team rise to the occasion in major moments of big games. West needs this one to step up in a similar way to lead the way for a young offense.

"They're going to have to be our bell cows," Burdette said. "We're going to have to lean on them."

Living and dying
with the D...

Then there's the defense, which has a chance to be another of the Raiders' biggest strengths... and a little like last year, what ultimately wins and loses some games.

Hidden between the season's runaway victories were some fourth quarters that came dangerously close to a few different results, with several of this year's returning players right at the center of the difference-making moments.

Hogan interceptions turned around upset bids by both North Clayton and Aquinas. Chafin screen disruptions went along with some senior-led defensive plays in keying the win at Harlem. Stanley made a fourth-down pass break-up that was no less insignificant near the end of the record-setting boat race with Baldwin in late September. Mack had the final tackle that tied up some pesky loose ends in the quarterfinal win over Jenkins, plus a fumble-forcing sack in the final loss at Jefferson.

"I thought we played pretty good defense down the stretch last year," Burdette said.

Each are moving from supporting roles into the place of main characters, but the new and returning

"sharks" in the Raiders' base 3-4 figure to carry a lot of good things over into a new season.

And rest assured their sequel to 2025 will be a lot better than Jaws 2...

The tone-setting Mack (5-10, 190), a hard-hitting stalwart with "sideline to sideline" range and elite instincts for diagnosing formations and reading the play, will patrol the middle and serve as an unquestioned defensive leader.

"He's a lot stronger," Burdette said. "He can run. He's hard for linemen to get on, and such a good tackler. He should have 100-plus (tackles)."

The other ILB spot is "a question mark," but Robinson and Bloodsaw are both candidates to play there.

Mascaro, who was an end in Trinity's four-man front, is set to play as an outside linebacker opposite Justin Blash, who's appeared as a pass rush specialist on the Raiders' past two teams.

Senior Knowledge Taylor (5-7, 165), sophomore Zack White (5-10, 170) and Hester will be part of the rotation.

Three out of four projected starters in the secondary have experience that's made the group the quickest on the revamped defense to jell this summer.

"Those guys do a good job communicating, and a good job flying around," Burdette said.

A sort of newcomer is the "fast, physical, strong" sophomore Jamari Blash as the deep net. Hogan, who took over the permanent strong safety job by the end of last year, is effectively a returning starter. Brownlee and junior Logan Wilcher (5-10, 155) are reserves.

Back to hold down one corner spot is Stanley, better known as "The Franchise," whose work last year included six pass break-ups, five tackles for loss, three forced fumbles, two blocked kicks and one pick.

O'Neal and Stephen Odum (5-5, 133) are competing for the starting job on the other side.

Chafin (5-10, 225) returns to anchor the front, but maybe not from any one particular position as he gets an opportunity to potentially move around a bit to some spots other than the one with his hand in the dirt that he played pretty

strictly last year. Chances to rush the passer as a stand-up edge, and even work as more of a linebacker may be in the cards this fall.

Fellow senior Quay Taylor (5-10, 225) and Evan Ellis (5-8, 165), junior Ayden Moore (5-10, 210), sophomores Braden Willis and Takobe Tobler round out a D-line that, in all, will be undersized, and have to play to other strengths in certain matchups.

"I'm not necessarily opposed to playing a smaller, quicker defensive line, but if the opponents have a lot of mass on the offensive line, that can be a cause for concern," Burdette said. "That'll be something we get figured out."

Runnin' Raiders...

There are three speed limit signs posted side-by-side on the wall just outside Burdette's office opposite the hallway from the football weight room near the West Laurens gym.

Each is printed with a different number, 20, 21 and 22 mph. And all except the last has several player signatures scrawled in different places between the letters and numbers.

The placards represent three "clubs," of sorts, made up of players who have achieved the respective speed benchmarks during practice since a series of special GPS-driven measuring devices became available for them to wear during practice a couple years ago.

While the coveted 22 mph club still has no members (Cummings, to date, has been the closest Raider to the mark at 21.9 last season), there are several on the current squad who've earned the right to sign the others.

As of a visit in early July, Malone, McMiller, Brownlee, Hogan and Robinson were the certified 20 mph'ers, while Stanley was the only present player out of five total to have endorsed the 21. But more are threatening to reach both milestones every day.

That elite speed will be a big feather in the cap of this West Laurens team, which may not have as much going for it across the board as last year's, but can boast many of its own unique upsides that will provide an advantage in the three phases this fall, that among the most

significant.

"We don't have a lot of big bodies, but I do think we have good team speed," Burdette said. "So we're going to have to lean into that a little bit."

Intangibly, there's a different sort of chip these Raiders will have on their shoulders. Whereas last year's were eager to prove themselves as champions, this new generation is out to make its name as a totally different team, with realistic expectations of getting right back into contention and dismissing doubts that might lead many to label this season a rebuilding one.

"Our staff has worked hard to answer question marks from our losses," Burdette said. "Our kids are going to be hungry."

West's two toughest games on the entire schedule may be its first, separated by a bye, against loading nearby superpowers Bleckley County and Dodge. After that, two underrated tests against Cook and Monroe Area lead into the new 4-AAAA schedule, where familiar rival Harlem is the only opposing holdover.

The slate remains as much a mystery as these Raiders, with their potential shrouded at the moment by clouds of inexperience that likely won't clear out until they navigate some early twists and turns directly ahead on the roadmap.

"(They're) going to come at some point in time with as many new faces as we've got out there," he said. "How they do with the peaks and valleys is going to determine how our season ends up."

For their most recent team, learning to keep the bumps from leading to breakdowns took a couple of hard seasons, and one on the precipice, before last year's confident march to the mountaintop was finally possible.

The climb back to a new peak for the program can be a much shorter one if West Laurens is able to avoid repeating the same early habits of making rookie mistakes.

"You have to learn how not to lose before you can learn how to win," Burdette said. "We got to a point where we had to start expecting to win. We're to that point now, it's keeping up to that expectation and standard."

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Indians leaning on leaders, vying to 'finish' strong in season promising elite potential

By CLAY REYNOLDS
Sports Editor

In addition to their usual lifting and conditioning this offseason, Dodge County football players were assigned some homework in the form of a multi-week book study they undertook as a team.

The required reading? A title called "The Twin Thieves," by Lucas Jadin and Steve Jones.

A self-described "leadership parable," it identifies the closely related fears of judgment, and of failure, as unseen enemies who quietly steal the greatest aspirations and potential from teams in any field that opt to settle for less than their best.

Through the story of a fictional football program, the text illustrates how having strong chemistry and leaders who create a culture of thorough preparation and strict accountability are the keys to any association of people making the jump from ordinary to excellent.

Its message has resonated just as much with the Indians as it did their head coach, Phillip Brown, who was convinced that the word on community and coaction was just what his team needed to take to heart coming off of a 2025 season in which it didn't quite get over the hump.

"One of my assistant coaches recommended it to me, and I read it over Christmas break," he said. "It was about a high school team, and man, when I read it, it sounded so much like the situation we were in at the end of last year that they were in, and kind of how they got out of it, how they formed leaders and taught their kids to lead.

"I thought it really helped our guys understand what it takes to be a leader, and what goes into that."

Dodge is looking to some determined ones across its roster who've stepped up and taken the initiative of steering this season's effort to get the program back on an elite track.

The Indians seemed to be headed that way at full steam after the Brown era got off to an inspiring start with nine wins and a second-round playoff berth in 2024. But a returning team that felt it had every opportunity to build on that



Jeremiah Burns hauls in a deep one, from Kain Mincey, for an early TD at Dublin last October. He's not the only burner out wide for Dodge, which has stocked up on even more speed at receiver, and plans on putting up more fiery passing numbers this year/HORACE AUSTIN, File

success, by its own judgement, took a slight step back last season.

Dodge finished with a comparable record (only two fewer wins and just one additional loss), but walked away with a gnawing sense of missed opportunity after spending five early weeks ranked in the top 10, but never really making a move.

Despite a big opening win over Bleckley County and six more in the next seven weeks, another signature victory would be elusive, as setbacks against ACE and region champ Northeast Macon led into a haunting Halloween finale at Dublin, in which turnovers cost them a second-half lead.

It turned the chance of a second-straight home playoff game into both a long drive, and a long night, at Rabun County as the season came to an end in the first round.

Brown, after a chance to put it all in perspective and talk things over with his staff, settled on some pretty clear takeaways.

"There's two things we wanted to get a lot better at, and none of them had anything with what we were doing football-wise," he said. "It was more dealing with us being more of a unit, a cohesive unit. I felt like we weren't as together as where I felt like we needed to be to be successful down the stretch, and then just doing a great job of developing leadership."

Those points of emphasis, in the past eight months, have brought players to a better understanding of their role in raising the standard. And many of them have responded to the call to take ownership of that responsibility.

The senior class as a whole has been instrumental in stepping up, but Brown highlighted a few members who have been faces of the team whose strides as leaders were just as important as ones they made on the field.

- Quarterback Kain Mincey... "He's done a really good job of being more vocal with the offense, and taking that role on," Brown said.
- All-around playmaker at receiver and DB Jeremiah Burns... "I've seen him just being a team guy more this offseason, taking that role, and trying to hold guys accountable."
- Inside linebacker, and more or less the defensive captain, Kawaski Robinson... "He's just done a really good job of taking ownership and leadership of the defense, and running that side of the ball."

There's usually something powerful about the collective will to go out on a strong note, when that type

of group resolves to leave no stone unturned in its last chance to do something great. And this year's Indians appear intent on tying up the loose ends, and pulling themselves by the bootstraps to a higher level.

"The big thing for us is finishing," Brown said. "We had a good little run there, and we got beat early in the year by ACE and then went on a little run, but we felt like we didn't finish. That's kind of been the thing we've been pushing, is we want to finish everything."

Top-flight weapons...

Wherever Dodge County goes this season, it'll probably get there through a passing dimension of its offense that's set for memorable year, with a veteran starting quarterback behind center and not only two, but three top-line receivers at his disposal.

The aforementioned Mincey (6-3, 190), back for his fourth year of varsity action and third as starting QB, is loaded for bear as he sets out to top some personal bests from a junior season that featured a healthy 2,242 yards passing and 23 touchdowns, against nine interceptions, on a 54 percent completion rate.

And his coaches are working to find every way they can to optimize his abilities at the position.

"We're just finding kind of new ways to expand his skill set, and translate it over to our offense," Brown said. "He checks all our protections on the offensive line, and does a really good job handling that. And we've also incorporated more of the RPO game and added that to the offense. He's done a really good job of reading those out and making decisions off of that."

Mincey won't have any lack of capable receivers out wide, where a transfer pickup joins a couple of returning seniors in Jauriel Bray (44 receptions, 776 yards and 10 touchdowns) and Burns (36 for 714 and seven) who were his top targets a season ago.

"I'm looking for them to pick up

DODGE
Continued on page 23



DODGE COUNTY AT A GLANCE...

HEAD COACH: Phillip Brown
(third season, 16-7 career)

OFFENSE: Spread
DEFENSE: Multiple 3-4

2025: 7-4 (6-3 region 2-High A)
FINISH: GHSA playoffs (lost to Rabun Co. in first round)

RETURNING STARTERS:
9 offense / 7 defense

KEY LOSSES: RB Jeremiah Alston; RB/LB Jamal Smith; WR/DB Terrance Fordham; K/P Julius Roberts; WR/DB Jeremiah Carr; LB Braydon Hand; OL/DL Tecarion Williams

INDIANS TO WATCH: QB Kain Mincey, Sr.; LB Kawaski Robinson, Sr.; WR/DB Jauriel Bray, Sr.; ATH/DB Jeremiah Burns, Sr.; WR/DB Amaury Fountain, Sr. (Florida); RB/DB Jordan Spady, So.; RB/DB Blayc Fluellen, Jr.; LB Peyton Butts, Jr.; DL James Branch, Jr.; OL/DL Dorian Hughes, Sr.; OL/DL Keyzan Harris, Sr.

THE UPSIDES: Prolific passing attack; Depth across board
KEY CONCERN: Finishing big games

SCHEDULE...

8/28	at Lamar Co.
9/04	West Laurens (\$)
9/11	Fitzgerald (\$)
9/18	at Dooly Co.
10/02	Vidalia*
10/09	at East Laurens*
10/16	Bleckley Co.* (\$)
10/23	at Dublin* (\$)
10/30	Swainsboro*
11/06	at ACE Charter*

* — region 2-AA
(\$) — pivotal games

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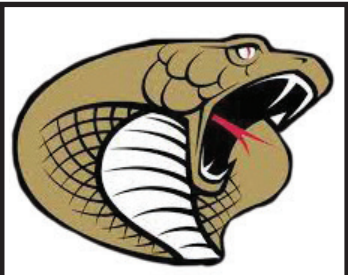
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Hard(en) times don't last: Cobras turn to former head coach in search of turnaround



TWIGGS COUNTY AT A GLANCE...

HEAD COACH: Ashley Harden (third season, 41-53 career)

OFFENSE: Wing-T
DEFENSE: 3-5

2025: 0-10 (0-5 region 5-Low A)
FINISH: missed playoffs

RETURNING STARTERS:
4 offense / 4 defense

KEY LOSSES: WR/DB Demontrez Brown; RB/DB Harold Crawford III; WR/DB Koby Stephens; TE/LB Courdon Parker; TE/LB Jeremy Stephens; LB Jordan Williams; OL/DL Jaden Wilson; QB Jeremy Stanley (transfer)

COBRAS TO WATCH: TE/LB Jamarcus Stephens, Sr.; OL/DL Jaden Jones, Sr.; RB/LB Terrell Coley, Jr.; QB Malik Brooks, Sr.; OL/DL Jacob Williams, Sr.; DL/LB Enrique Molina, Sr.

THE UPSIDES: Seniority; Line-backing corps
KEY CONCERN: Making the numbers work

SCHEDULE...

8/21	Claxton
8/28	at Central Talbotton (\$)
9/04	at Mount de Sales
9/11	Lake Oconee Academy
9/25	at Wilkinson Co.* (\$)
10/02	Glascocock Co.* (\$)
10/09	at Johnson Co.*
10/16	Jenkins Co.*
10/23	at GMC*
11/06	Hancock Central* (\$)

* — region 5-A
(\$) — pivotal games

By **MICHAEL A. LOUGH**
GTLN Sports Correspondent

The first time Ashley Harden took over at Twigg County, the Cobras had gone 8-42 in the five years since their last winning season. Harden went 12-11 in two seasons, including 8-4 in 2016. Since then? In the eight seasons since? Twigg County is 6-73, a record that doesn't include the school taking 2020 off because of COVID-19.

The well-traveled Harden is back, and hardly flinching. Twigg County doesn't have numbers, with just short of 30 on the roster. Twigg County clearly has no momentum, nearly a decade passing since that last remotely decent season and seemingly a lifetime having gone by since the Cobras went 11-2 in Dexter Copeland's first final season in Jeffersonville.

"Numbers never bother me," said Harden, who has been head coach at Butler, Jenkins County, Northeast, Stewart County and Dooley County en route to a 41-53 record in 10 seasons. "Your job is to prepare for the war. You got 200 kids on your roster, you got 20 football players. If I have 27 kids on my roster, if I can make 15 of those football players, I can compete and play football.

"You can't put but 11 kids on the field."

The roster numbers weren't much different during that 8-4 season in 2016, which was followed by two 0-10s and two 1-9s.

Harden is nonplussed because of experience, recalling at Butler when he had 33 kids and Grovetown had 99, including a Division I quarterback and running back.

"At the end of the game, we win, they lose," Harden said. "We go play Burke County the same year. We take 27 kids down there, and they're a Final Four team that year. Midway through the third quarter, they're up 8-0."

Depth did end up making a difference in Burke County's 35-8 win, to which Butler responded a week later with a 30-22 win over Josey.



In a photo from the wayback machine, Ashley Harden coaches up his quarterback Calvin Stephens during a preseason scrimmage game in 2016, the final season of his first stint at Twigg County, also the Cobras' last to achieve a winning record or playoff berth/CLAY REYNOLDS, File

"Anybody who knows me knows that I don't care about numbers," he said. "I'm not a numbers guy."

'You've gotta find something to hang your hat on'...

Except Ws and Ls, and the numbers on the roster – as well as no momentum – don't indicate much will change, at least in 2026. The only two all-region players from 2025, running back Harold Crawford and tight end Courdon Parker, are gone.

The roster for 2025 posted on MaxPreps lists nine seniors out of 29 players. But again ...

Jamarcus Stephens (6-2, 180) and Jaden Jones (6-0, 255) are all-region candidates this year, Stephens at tight end or linebacker and Jones on the offensive line.

Junior running back/linebacker Terrell Coley (6-2, 175) had a good offseason, as has senior offensive lineman Jacob Williams (5-8, 165).

There is serious suspense on offense. Harden is breaking in a new quarterback in more ways than one with senior Malik Brooks, in his first year of football.

"He's done a good job of doing what we ask him to do," Harden said. "He's getting better."

Brooks has improved in the reads necessary to run Harden's Wing-T. And he is a hardcore Wing-T guy, especially as somebody taking over programs not loaded every year with an abundance of skill or depth.

"The good thing about it is you can run it year-in and year-out, regardless of your talent," he said. "It makes it makes average players look good, good players look great."

"You don't have to change your system. If I'm a spread guy and I don't have a quarterback, I can't run to spread. If I'm a spread guy

and and a quick-gain guy and I don't have a guy that can that can take a quick a 5-yard hitch and turn into an 80-yard touchdown, I'm screwed."

He has been a longtime disciple of Dublin's legendary Wing-T master Roger Holmes, as well as Camden County icon Jeff Herron. Holmes is 12 wins from 300 for his career, and Herron went 334-69 in 32 seasons at Camden County (twice, Grayson, Prince Avenue, Oconee County, Wheeler, Cedar Shoals, and Walton, as well at T.L. Hanna in South Carolina.

"Every offense is designed to score, every defense is designed to stop people," Harden said. "You've got to find something to hang your hat on, and for us, this is what we do."

Used to deeper holes...

The Cobras will go with a 3-5-3 on defense, a scheme that also helps mask potential personnel shortcomings, because most teams have more players suited for linebacker than the defensive line, and the 3-5 allows for attacking from different areas.

Coley, Stephens, Enrique Molina (6-2, 170) and Jadayveon Butler – as well as Derrick Mayes as he returns from injury – are the early leaders of the defense.

One difference in Harden's first first season at Twigg County and this first season is some familiarity with the scheme.

"Dexter (Copeland) is a Wing-T guy, so they had gotten exposed to a little bit of the Wing-T before I got here," Harden said. "So that helped a little bit. But it's definitely a little bit deeper hole this time."

Not that Harden prefers that, along the lines of "we got 'em right where we want 'em," but he's used to deeper holes.

"I feel like we can climb out of it just the same," Harden said. "For us, having a system that you know inside and out ... it makes it easier."

"Attitude has been great. The kids we have, they're bought in."



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EAST LAURENS
Continued from page 4

volume of work," Hicks said. "There are so many guys at those positions that are effective."

The possibilities are so extensive that there are really no players who will have an exclusive hold on their particular position.

Many, even the QBs – with the dual-threat sophomore Za'Norri-on Ellington (5-8, 180) projected as a secondary QB option that will allow Snead to flip-flop for some snaps as a receiver – will likely move around to different spots and keep defenses guessing.

Ellington, senior J.J. Wright (5-7, 128) and sophomore Aveone Wicker (5-5, 125), each have the type of eye-popping speed that will demand some touches, somewhere, somehow.

Wright was East's third-most productive receiver last year, and a reserve on D.

Wicker only seldom saw the field as a freshman, but will see a big uptick in his work, mainly as a running back.

"I call him the cheat code," Hicks said. "He's very fast, very quick."

The versatile senior Gary Stockton (5-10, 164) will see regular time at running back, and possibly some action supporting Haz-ley and Floyd at safety.

Another name Falcon fans should get to know pretty quickly is senior Ja'Bryan Bigham (5-9, 210), who played a bit last year after transferring in from West Lau-rens. But this will be his first as a regular at H-back, and linebacker.

"He's a very strong kid, a great runner," Hicks said.

Bigham joins seniors in Logan Gibson, a first-year football player off the Falcons' baseball team, and well-established passing target Tawan Horne (6-1, 185) in a group of wings and tight ends that will get involved in the run game, and not only as blockers.

Senior Jaden Griffin (5-9, 145) is back after a year away from foot-ball, and a sophomore season that showed some positives. He brings another set of tools to the bur-geoning skill stable that could be used pretty much anywhere from back to receiver on offense, and is also candidate to play corner.

"Jaden's been a breath of fresh air," Hicks said. "He can run. He's really great with the ball in his

hands."

As younger players go, fresh-man Kingston Stanley (5-9, 190) could appear situationally at run-ning back and linebacker.

"He's a very smooth runner, and had a great spring game against Laney," Hicks said.

Junior Myles Burke, freshman Caleb Johnson and sophomore Jaleel Coleman are others who will probably "light up the JV" this fall, but could help out on Friday nights if needed.

"We don't want to burn our two best players out," Hicks said. "We've got enough talent and enough kids who are extremely talented at the same type of po-sitions. There will be no drop-off. When those guys come off to rest, those guys will be ready to go."

A big key for the Falcons will be getting things solidified on the lines of scrimmage, where the graduation multi-year stalwarts Raquis Stanley and Caleb Jackson left some big holes both ways.

Senior Kayleb Butler (260), ris-ing sophomore Ja'Tuan Wright (6-1, 245) and senior Travunta Car-roll (6-2, 300-plus) are back as the anchors at D-tackle.

Ends include Lagen Mack (6-0, 210), who has sized up and moved down from outside 'backer to the line, freshman Christopher Wash-ington, senior Amaree Daniels (5-7, 178) and sophomore Jayden McClendon. Daniels, likely to see a lot of time in both directions, has turned into one of East's most well-rounded linemen.

"He's not the biggest kid, but he's one of the more effective kids that we have," Hicks said.

The O-line group will have a mix of veterans and fresh faces.

Ja'Tuan Wright and Daniels worked at tackle for much of the spring, with Butler and sophomore Donny White (5-5, 173) the No. 1 guards and senior Blake Hodges holding down center.

Freshman John Walker and sophomore Easton Wood (5-6, 196) are also on the radar.

Outside of the secondary and skill positions, the Falcons' stron-gest group might be the lineback-ing corps, where another senior in Dianco Murray (5-10, 175), who had four sacks, seven fumble recoveries and was "always around the football" last year, is a rock-solid player returning along-side Rozier.

Bigham is set to take over the

starting job in the middle. Horne, Ellington, Braedyn Evans and both Kingston and Cayden Stanley (5-8, 175) will also compete for snaps.

Junior Jaxten Thomas (5-9, 185), a utility player in all three phases, will spend time as both a linebacker and a situational edge rusher, and gives you the versatili-ty to do a lot of different things in either of those positions.

The potential lineups offer a lot of flexibility that will have the Fal-cons' front morphing between dif-ferent looks based on the matchup and game situation.

"We've got guys who can pass-rush the QB, and we've got guys who can play the run and be run-stoppers," Hicks said. "We have to really understand and know what we're asking our kids to do."

Another benefit of having so much at your disposal on offense and defense is that those who might not see the field in those two phases can still find a place to excel on special teams, where there are plenty of other places to get them involved.

"Our best football players are going to be on the field whenever we're out there playing ball," Hicks said. "Kickoff team, punt block, returning kicks. This is what's so much fun about this. I've got to figure out who I'm going to put on kickoff return when we've got so many fast, skilled guys. And that's going to be a week-to-week thing."

"We've got so many guys that want to be out there that our spe-cial teams is not going to have any drop-off."

Most of the above, especial-ly some of the young ones with a lot to offer, are heavily involved in returns and coverage. The actual kicking, as the Falcons seek to replace both a punter and place-kicker from last year, was less of a known quantity going into the fall.

But a couple of first-year turn-outs, senior soccer player Cristo-pher Vasquez at kicker and fresh-man Jordyn Giles, were getting their feet wet with the roles in the early going.

Athletically, this is a team with as much to offer as any in recent East Laurens history, though much of what it's capable of, in two seasons of development, has remained below the surface.

Hicks is confident that the Fal-cons are ready to break out.

"It's exciting for me, because

I know the talent that we have, and the talent has gotten so many reps," he said. "Now, it's time for our talent to actually turn the cor-ner and get this done."

Not reinventing the wheel...

With so many capable athletes at different positions, you don't have to overthink things schemati-cally. And that's the approach that East is sticking with on offense and defense this season, though it is making some calculated tweaks that are intended to spark some new energy, and also help in better maximizing those many skill sets.

New offensive coordinator Em-manuel Boone, who was previous-ly the Falcons' O-line coach, has done just that since taking over the play card, and refreshing things significantly with his creativity in finding new and different ways to distribute the ball.

"He's done an awesome job," Hicks said. "He's taken the offense to another level."

The re-tooled system is just as spread out as East Laurens has al-ways been, and features a lot of the same run concepts and route com-bos, but will double down on exe-cuting the quick game – screens, swing action and quick-hitters – quickly, with an emphasis on get-ting the ball to those great athletes as quickly as possible, and reduc-ing the time it takes to read and make decisions.

The "fast-paced" attack will also duplicate a lot of plays in dif-ferent formations, to give the illu-sion of variety to defenses trying to get lined up. In early glimpses, it also included a misdirection el-e ment that may spice up how the Falcons run the ball, as well.

Things looked refreshingly effi-cient as they tried it all out, with some pretty hopeful results to show, during their recent spring and scrimmage games.

"The kids like the way we're getting the ball out so much fast-er," Hicks said. "We're a lot quick-er getting the ball out of Sky's hands, and the big difference to us is we're not calling plays, we're getting the ball to certain people... It really works out good, because you've got so many kids who are so special, but you've also got a bunch of formations and ways to get them the ball. They're excited about that, and so am I."

Less has changed defensively,

besides how East will arrange its chess pieces in certain spots to offer better flexibility in a system with the freedom to customize. But a priority similar to the offensive side has been made to make things as fluid and workable as possible, so that revolving athletes can tran-sition in and out seamlessly.

"Coach Boone and Coaches (Ryan) Selby and (co-DC Jeremi-ah) Hicks have made things easy," Hicks said. "Use a lot of guys, keep everybody happy, everybody fresh and everybody playing at a high level."

Being better isn't as much about the method as the execu-tion, which has lacked the consis-tency needed to get over the hump in swing games that were water-sheds of the past two years.

There were a bunch of them least year in which the Falcons had a shot – pretty much every one in the regular season except Bleck-ley County, which put them away early – but either didn't get off to a good enough start, or faltered in the second half. Complete games can't continue to be elusive.

"The biggest thing for our kids is just confidence," Hicks said. "It's just going out and getting the wins, let's start early, let's get up and let's finish football games... Consisten-cy has to turn into four quarters. If we can do that, and that's the question, then I think our football team is going to be one to reckon with."

A mix of new and familiar op-ponents, both in and outside the somewhat different-looking re-gion 2, make up the schedule. But most of the challenges East fac-es will be the same. Hicks firmly believes this year's Falcons have what it takes to overcome those, and make a significant improve-ment, if they can just get rolling.

"The thing for us right now is being positive and going to work," he said. "I think once our kids win on a regular basis, everything else will take care of itself. Winning changes the perspective of what you're doing and how. This is year 3, so things have to change. We have to get wins, and we know that as a staff. But our kids want to. They put the work in, and they understand what the work is."

"I feel good about where we are," he added. "The expectation level is extremely high. I think ev-erybody here is abuzz."

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Off back-to-back state titles, Eagles eager to keep their 'foot on the gas'

By CLAY REYNOLDS
Sports Editor

Along the steep climb up, reaching the top of the championship mountain might feel like the toughest achievement there is in a given sport.

But it's actually the summit, with its alluring invitation to pitch a tent, relax and enjoy the view, where teams like Brentwood discover that staying power is the true and elusive feat.

Coming into 2026, the Eagles find themselves in that enviable, and also unenviable position as back-to-back AA state champions, with an opportunity to win a third-straight (and the emerging dynasty's fourth since 2021) very much in the cards for this fall.

What's it like up there?

Life is definitely good for the reigning kings as they enjoy another season of supremacy. But to channel the words of Shakespeare's Henry IV... Heavy is the head that wears the crown.

As a streak of titles grows longer, sustaining it becomes increasingly difficult business. Building a championship-caliber team in consecutive years, for most schools, is enough of a challenge. But even those blessed with a perennial fount of talent have to do more than simply overcome the competition. They also have to overcome themselves.

Keenly aware of the potential for complacency and entitlement to creep in amid this run of success, Brentwood head coach Adam Lord is doing his part to keep his team vigilant of anything that might entice them to casually relax their standards.

"I feel like I'm coaching harder today than I coached this time last year, and I think that's just part of it," he said. "You get up here, and you like being on top and you want to stay on top. Well, we didn't get here by being lazy. We worked hard. We got here by holding each other accountable, and we're going to continue to do that."

When the feast of champions becomes repetitive, it can get hard to stay hungry.

And sooner or later, with so many teams who come back with something to prove a season after falling short of the ultimate goal, a worthy adversary will catch you if you're not faithful about continuing to get better, and allow yourself to lose ground.

That's why Brentwood has made the simple phrase "foot on the gas" into its motto for the year.

Though much like last season, the Eagles' engine likely packs plenty more horsepower than they'll need on most nights, Lord is encouraging his players to keep the RPMs high, even when it seems perfectly fine to let up and coast.

He proclaimed that message as loudly during the dead of summer as he will in the heat of the season.

"We want our foot on the gas in the weight room, foot on the gas on the practice field, foot on the gas in the film room," Lord said. "We're trying to be ahead of schedule coming into the year. Recovery... foot on the gas. Go to bed, drink plenty of water so you'll be better for the next day. We've got to be better tomorrow than we were today."

As Brentwood's new roster has come together, the attributes of another winner – athletically – are once again everywhere you look.

But the details Lord has his eyes on are the same that were a subject of interest this time last summer when the Eagles were

only once-defending... and they're unrelated to Xs and Os or Jimmies and Joes.

The chemistry and leadership characteristic of their 2025 squad are themes most folks looking on may have missed in the blinding display of star power, but the intangible edge was as valuable as what that group had to hang its hat on in any other department.

Whether it's for better or worse, this team carries itself a little differently.

It's a locker room without many leaders of the vocal style. And that's not necessarily a bad thing.

But it's a more business-like, and less in-your-face vibe that differs a lot from what Lord has been used to the last several years.

"This team is much quieter," he said. "When you have a quiet team, sometimes, finding that leadership piece looks a little different. There's not a lot of rah rah. It's just getting it done, leading by example, and I'm finding more and more of that each day."

How that quality develops, and translates into this team's unique drive should be interesting to observe.

"This team may not do a lot of talking, but hopefully in leading by example, we can move in the right direction," Lord said. "Talent-wise, we're going to be OK, it's just filling leadership roles that we're going to be missing, and figuring out who wants to be tough."

An abundance of, everything...

Actually, the Eagles are going to be much better than OK.

In fact, this team may be able to boast even more talent, continuity and experience than last year's could.

But they did graduate a few key pieces: Three of their top four pass-catchers and the same number of multi-year starters on the lines of scrimmage.

The hardest to replace will be all-state wingback Abe Williams, who had a roughly 500-yard, seven-touchdown chunk of the team rushing production, caught 18 passes for a little under 400 yards and seven more scores, moonlighted in the defensive secondary and made regular appearances on the highlight reel. He was also one of those loud presences on the sideline that kept things energized.

"Not just skill set, but leadership. That was the biggest piece of the puzzle with him," Lord said. "He was a guy we could count on for whatever."

The receiving production (with work by Williams, top wideout Zyion Andrews and tight end Riley Helton representing about two thirds of the catches and half the yardage of last year's passing game) took a hit.

But a lot of that will be recouped by athletes in the existing skill group, most notably junior Tristan Robinson (5-10, 208), who will be all over the place on offense. Seniors Quez Collins (5-7, 145), a talented sprinter at wideout, and Jackson Bragg (6-3, 235), an imposing presence at tight end, will also get their share of targets.

Members of a deep backfield – some names you know and a few you might not yet – are also the type you can't necessarily pigeonhole into a specific position, and will probably see doing a little of it all.

A sort-of new face to the offensive mix is junior Jacob Hooks (6-0, 180), who has focused on defense for most of his career while filling in infrequently at running back.

"He didn't have to play offense (till now), but he can fly," Lord said.

Junior Brayden Tyson (5-7, 140) was an exclusive placekicker for his first two seasons (and pretty darn good, at that, with only one miss in a little over 70 point-after tries last year), but will now dive in head-first to some additional duties on both sides.

"He's the fastest kicker in the league, hands down, and the second fastest kid on our team," Lord said. "We've got to include him in the offensive side of things this year."

Even Jones Sheppard (5-10, 183), whose downhill carries from fullback have been standard fare, will branch out a little to do some different things.

And that's kind of only scratching the surface of their offensive depth.

"We've got a lot of skilled kids," Lord said. "There's only one football. That's the problem."

The Eagles are just as set on defense, where their turnover was mainly limited to two positions: Nose tackle, with former backup Darsey taking over, and one of its two cornerback slots, where a couple of newcomers in Tyson and Chase Daniel (5-10, 162) are battling to start opposite the incumbent Collins.

Established starters, and some pretty outstanding ones at that, remain everywhere else.

All-state inside linebackers Hooks and Jaelen Johnson (5-11, 215) rate as the team's second and third strongest players. They'll be flanked by Bragg, a surefire D1 prospect, and 2025 state title game tackles leader J.W. Hitchcock (6-2, 185) to round out the rock-solid unit.

Junior Wyatt Albright (5-10, 197) and senior Tucker Collins (6-1, 194) both return to the defensive line.

The beauty of having such a well-rounded and experienced lineup is you don't have to do anything fancy. When your athletes are as good as theirs, you just have to be in position, run to the ball and make tackles.

"We're able to play fast because we are pretty simple," Lord said. "Obviously, some of the looks we show you are smoke and mirrors, but at the end of the day, we are a gap control defense up front. We read keys. We expect safeties to play downhill as force players. I think we've got the potential to be very fast, which is just hard defensively when you can't run side-to-side. It makes it tough for an offensive coordinator. But our model is playing fast and playing physical, and I'm hoping we'll be able to do that."

Those guys are still there?

Football is an 11-man game, but there are two particular players who've had perhaps a more indispensable hand than the rest in Brentwood's back-to-back titles... and we can definitely go ahead and say that for a third in a row if it happens.

Both, whose long careers in multiple sports are bordering on omnipresence, have become athletes opponents are starting to get tired of facing season after season.

Some unwelcome news regarding the first in the pair: Robinson, who's done just about everything in the Eagles' Wing-T the past three seasons, is only a junior with two still to go.

And for a phenom still technically only halfway through his career, the best

may still be yet to come.

His deadly top speed (good for a team high 850 yards and 13 touchdowns, plus about 300 and five scores on his 12 catches last season) has had applications at different positions, though his home base is at wingback.

Lord plans to get Robinson more involved in the passing attack this year with an expanded role that should do even more to demonstrate why he's the total package.

"I've never seen a kid... that can catch the ball the way Tristan does," he said. "That's why we move him around so much. He doesn't just play in the backfield. He'll be at slot receiver, out by himself, because he's going to create conflict. We've just got to find ways to get him the ball. He just has incredible field vision, ability to stop and cut on a dime. Right now, he's at 208 pounds, so he's a load. I'm excited to see how this season goes for him."

The other is senior Baylor Cobb (6-1, 186), who's coming into his fourth year running the show at quarterback, and is equally as involved in the other two phases as Robinson, the two defensive representing a "highly skilled, very physical" duo of safeties.

The headsy hardwood ball-handler and accomplished triple jumper can scramble and sling it, but might impress with his verticality as much as his movements in the four main directions.

"He's got a lot of bounce, he's extremely athletic," Lord said. "He'll be a huge piece of the puzzle on both offense and defense."



BRENTWOOD
AT A GLANCE...

HEAD COACH: Adam Lord
(fourth season, 28-8 career)

OFFENSE: Wing-T
DEFENSE: 3-4

2025: 12-1 (5-0 district 4)
FINISH: District champion; AA state champion (def. Southwest Georgia Academy in finals)

RETURNING STARTERS:
7 offense / 9 defense

KEY LOSSES: WR/DB Zyion Andrews; RB/DB Abe Williams; TE/LB Riley Helton; OL/DL Cordy Francis; OL/DL Z.J. Scott; WR/DB Grady Boutelle; OL/DL Austin Albright

PLAYERS TO WATCH: QB/DB Baylor Cobb, Sr.; RB/DB Tristan Robinson, Jr.; ATH/DB Quez Collins, Sr.; LB Jaelen Johnson, Sr.; TE/LB Jackson Bragg, Sr.; LB Jacob Hooks, Jr.; TE/LB J.W. Hitchcock, Sr.; RB/LB Jones Sheppard, Sr.; ATH/K Brayden Tyson, Jr.; OL/DL Wyatt Albright, Jr.; OL/DL Tucker Collins, Sr.; OL/DL Nathan Diaz, Sr.

THE UPSIDES: Playmakers a-plenty; dominant defense
KEY CONCERN: Breaking in an overhauled O-line

SCHEDULE...

8/14	John Milledge (\$)
8/21	at Bulloch (\$)
8/28	Gatewood
9/4	Robert Toombs*
9/11	at Trinity
9/18	at Lake Oconee Academy (\$)
9/25	Pinewood*
10/2	at Edmund Burke*
10/16	at Briarwood* (\$)
10/23	at Thomas Jefferson*

* — GIAA district 4-A/AA (\$)
— pivotal games

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Ware has Golden Hawks focused on process of 'growing culture' in first season of new era



WASHINGTON COUNTY AT A GLANCE...

HEAD COACH: Jay Ware (first season)

OFFENSE: Multiple Wing-T
DEFENSE: Odd front

2025: 5-6 (5-4 region 2-High A)
FINISH: GHSA playoffs (lost to Dublin in first round)

RETURNING STARTERS:
1 offense / 5 defense

KEY LOSSES: QB Mack May; ATH/LB Kam Shaw; TE Jordan Edwards (transfer); WR/DB Izavion Durden; OL/DL Javyn Brooks; RB Rekevious Swint; DL Cam Battle; OL/DL Torrez Floyd; OL/DL Zorian Reeves; WR/DB Jowonzia Ivey

HAWKS TO WATCH: QB/DB Aiden Watts, Jr.; RB/LB Daveion Holmes, Sr.; LB Jakobe Poole, Sr.; OL/DL Albert Stone, Sr.; OL/DL Desean Brown, Jr.; RB/DB Kamajae Johnson, Jr.; RB/DB Greg Gundy, So.;

THE UPSIDES: Smooth coaching transition; Positive vision
KEY CONCERN: Handling learning curve/inexperience

SCHEDULE...

8/21	at Baldwin (\$)
8/28	ACE Charter
9/04	at East Laurens
9/11	Dublin
9/25	at Westside Augusta* (\$)
10/02	Cross Creek*
10/08	at Hephzibah*
10/16	Thomson* (\$)
10/23	at Burke Co.* (\$)
10/30	Butler*

* — region 4-AAA
(\$) — pivotal games

By CLAY REYNOLDS
Sports Editor

It's been a decent bit since Washington County football was the level of contender that's the subject of major headlines and widespread conversation.

But their recent dip in relevance notwithstanding, the Golden Hawks very much remain a statewide brand, as evidenced by the name recognition the school carried with Jay Ware — who before this year had spent his entire career working in the northern half of Georgia — when it jumped off of a list of coaching vacancies he was perusing this offseason.

The program, without the need for a Google search to locate Sandersville or phone call to a colleague to check up on its credentials, commanded instant respect.

"I knew some people, and had heard good things about WACO, just the reputation of the school and the tradition it had," Ware said.

He was named the Golden Hawks' 14th head coach in early February. And in the time since, the Rome native has had ample opportunity to familiarize himself a good bit more with their well-known traditions and culture — a process that confirmed a lot of what's said to set this football community apart.

Ware was perhaps most amazed to discover how much of Washington County High School's faculty, administrators and coaches are Sandersville born and bred, and by nature folks with a firsthand appreciation of exactly what we're talking about. But that sentiment extends well beyond campus.

When it comes down to it, the mark of a blue-blood football school, from the northern tip of Georgia all the way to the deep south, is a town around it that cares. And there's no question that WACO football matters deeply to people everywhere from the Fall Line Freeway to the Dairylane.

"There's a lot of pride in this town and this school," Ware said.

"The community's very supportive. The main thing I say, and you don't see this everywhere, is that they love football, and that's a crucial element."

Perhaps an even more important distinction, among tradition-rich powerhouses across the state, is the rare stability the Golden Hawks have enjoyed in their recent history, with this only their third coaching change in a 30-year span of continuity likely rivaled by only the Pittsburgh Steelers.

Soon-to-be GACA hall-of-famer Rick Tomberlin presided over an undisputed golden age stretching from 1992 until 2005 that included nine region championships and three state crowns, then Joel Ingram, who was there even longer, and carried forward much of the momentum in his 16-year tenure that yielded four more region titles, and a near-miss at two more big ones on trips to the dome back-to-back seasons in 2013 and 14.

But besides a 2016 region title, and dark-horse quarterfinal run in '18 that produced the program's only subsequent 10-win season, the past decade has been a regression to the mean, with seasons averaging between 5-6 wins in each of the latter years under Ingram, who would be let go in 2022, and then WACO legend-come-home Robert Edwards, who led the Hawks to a 20-24 combined record with first-round playoff exits all four years ahead of another change at the helm this past offseason.

Though some applicants with ties were entertained in the search, the school opted for a clean start with an outside candidate they hope will bring a new voice, different approach and fresh vision that helps break up that slump.

Ware, a product of Coosa High School who played his college ball at Huntington in Montgomery, Ala., comes to Sandersville by way of Cedartown, where he spent the last three years as offensive coordinator and running backs coach under its last two head coaches (Jamie



Kamajae Johnson threatens to squeeze loose from a Dublin tackler during last year's state playoff game. The rising junior's speed will make him one of the new WACO backfield's top big-play threats/HORACE AUSTIN, File

Abrams, followed by Tommy Atha last season), following previous stops as an assistant at Alabama's Henderson, and Georgia's Madison County and North Oconee.

He shares the great sense, as do most in the community, that the tools needed to be successful are built in for this program that has high expectations, and a keen hunger to get back onto the elite tier it's competed on before.

Finding a way to do that in the near future goes without saying as a core tenet of the job description.

Ware is very much a process-oriented head coach, with an overarching emphasis on daily discipline at mastering the small components of excellence.

"My main focus is just building a good culture," he said. "It starts in the weight room, just getting kids to buy into that, getting bigger, stronger and faster, making sure that we're holding each other accountable, working every day, working hard and being consistent as coaches. My main goal is just to put a good product on the field, have kids play fast and play hard, and the rest will take care of itself."

Over the spring and summer, buy-in to that mission from all corners of the building was encouragingly high.

"It's been a great experience," Ware said. "There are fine people around here. The players have been awesome. Usually when you get a new coach coming in and there are changes, things shift, you may face a little tension. Our guys, especially our seniors, have really stepped up. They've adapted and responded the right way. The coaching staff too, they've been great. It's been very positive."

A different look...

In the film "Hoosiers," townsfolk attending the barbershop reception for a newly hired Norman Dale got right to the important topics as they grilled Hickory's new head basketball coach with some hard-hitting questions about Xs and Os.

Longtime WACO fans, given the same opportunity, are likely to express some similar burning curiosity over Ware's philosophical plans, which will indeed involve a little bit of wholesale change.

Though the Golden Hawks will continue to base defensively in a

WACO
Continued on page 23

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LONG-SNAPPING
Continued from page 2

you're just as likely to see anyone else from a reserve linebacker to its starting quarterback performing the task. Some might be undersized misfits off the end of the bench; others will be the most impressively built guys you can pick off the field. Many are true specialists; more do the job on the side of bigger commitments in the other two phases.

What sets the elite ones apart? At the end of the day, the best of the best can execute a clean one consistently, and also make it snappy.

"Your times are everything," Coach Lassiter said. "How fast you can get the ball from your hand to the punter is what's most important."

However there are plenty of nuances that elite snappers have down just as well, like being able to manipulate the spin of the ball in different ways.

"In college, on PATs, they wanted two and a half rotations, or something like that," said West Laurens head coach Kip Burdette. "I think on punt snaps, for a high school guy, we're working on trajectory and all that stuff, make sure it hits the punter in the belt buckle."

The higher you go, the more and more coaches and kickers take their snaps to order.

"Some folks are so skilled at it, they can get the laces where they want them," said Trinity head coach Bruce Lane. "I've had guys that could do that, and Cody was pretty good at that... But I don't know how they did it."

Further inquiry on that point doesn't clear up a lot of the mystery, since the ability is something that snappers kind of have to learn how to do on their own as practice makes perfect.

But there are some useful tricks like rotating the ball to a certain place beforehand so that it starts in the same position each time.

"Most of them go laces on the bottom," Burdette said. "I guess it's just like throwing the football, you want to pronate it."

"On punts, I can't do that yet, but field goals, either I have to move the ball to spin it a little bit so it comes to the right spot, or you get like Zayden, he goes eight yards out instead of seven, so it's on the laces when he snaps through," Cody said. "It's just, I think, a lot of practice perfecting that."

In high school, you often take what you can get. But in college and the pros, those details definitely matter enough to make a noticeable difference.

"For the punter, it's not as big a deal, because he has time to adjust the ball, or now with some of the kicking they're doing, they're dropping it straight down and trying to hang it up there instead of the old coffin corners that we did," Lane said. "A lot of that is on the holder being able to spin the ball, because just speaking form personal experience, you never want to kick laces. It becomes a real mental thing for them."

Family snap-shots...

Some aspect of the kicking game runs in the family tree of both players who have relatives that were accomplished special teamers in years past.

Long-snapping is a particular gift for the Lassiter clan, in which Zayden is the youngest, but also the tallest of Von and Kelli's three sons.

"Zayden's been blessed by God with a long frame," his dad said. "He's 6-3, 200 pounds, and he can run. He's been really blessed with that. That's kind of something that's been really good for our family."

Cody holds in common some above-average length, with an 80-inch wingspan that helps create plenty of leverage, plus the explosive kicking ability – in an added bonus – that's right along the lines of his older brother's.

But at 6-3.5, 275, he has more of a lineman's build, and some easy potential to reach the next level as a defender if special teams doesn't work out.

Cody began snapping as a freshman in high school, and did it for the Crusaders for the majority of his two seasons until being called upon to take over the punting and kicking jobs late last year when Wade went down with an injury.

For him, interest in learning to do it came simply out of tagging along with Wade as he worked out



Bleckley County specialists Zayden Lassiter and Cody Register leave the field after a late-July practice/CLAY REYNOLDS

punting.

"My brother needed a long-snapper," Cody said. "I worked with him for awhile, just learning how to snap. That's how it got started."

He picked up some finer points of the craft from the online tutorials and virtual coaching of a program called Special Teams U that his dad recommended.

"It comes down to perfecting the drills, and then your snapping will get better off of how well you can keep doing the same things off the drills," Cody said.

For Zayden, the art of long-snapping was something handed down through a couple layers of family, starting with his dad.

"A good friend of mine taught me how when I was in high school," Coach Lassiter said. "I'm the only one that really didn't play in college doing it."

Zach, his oldest, first picked it up as a freshman, when his dad was still the head coach at Houston County.

"He tore his ACL, and was kind of down in the dumps a little bit, and we got outside and I taught him how to long snap during that time," Coach Lassiter said. "That's kind of where it started, and you could tell immediately he was good."

A couple years down the road, he'd return to take over the helm at his alma mater, with Zach as Bleckley's starter at quarterback, and snapper, those first two seasons back, in 2017 and 18.

He'd earn an offer from Mercer to continue the latter at the next level, and did so for three years with the Bears before transferring to complete his career with WKU.

"He got better and kept working at it, and started every game in college at the long snapper position at both universities," Coach Lassiter said. "He bred that into his brother a little bit."

Zayden had also been a QB growing up, but learned the ropes from Zach there in the backyard, starting in about seventh grade.

"I kind of piggy-backed off of him," he said.

The two – separated in age by a middle brother, Zane, who graduated BC a year or two ago – are about eight years apart. But the overlap in their careers, with Zach still playing while Zayden was in middle school, allowing the two to work with each other somewhat regularly.

The older, at one point, could give his younger brother some pointers.

"... and then I got better than him, so I kind of give him a little bit sometimes," Zayden said with a laugh. "But he's done with football now. He works in Macon, but he comes and helps me sometimes, just whenever he can."

Odd jobs...

The pathway to an opportunity to snap at the two respective next levels couldn't be more different.

In college, where rosters are larger and teams likely to carry more than one, there are generally higher odds of getting a chance, though only recently have scholarship limits expanded enough to allow schools to make a practice of offering football-related financial aid to prospects at the position.

For much of history, snapping was a coveted walk-on arrangement in most places, where roster spots were just as difficult to earn as any other.

But if you assume that the jobs in the pros are just as much reserved for the very best of the best, you'd actually be mistaken.

In the NFL and other leagues, it's less about affording a decent snapper as it is justifying the use of one out of only 53 precious roster spots on a player who does that,

and nothing else.

So like many special teams roles, besides the most specialized ones in kicking and punting, it's usually something that fits into the role of certain utility players who have a good many things to offer.

As a player at any regular position, ability to snap can drastically increase your value, and chances of making the cut, when coaches are trying to decide between which of several guys they like about as much to keep on.

Holmes has two great stories about former players or teammates who made it big going either of the two routes, but were some of the last for which you'd expect long-snapping to be a ticket to big-time football glory.

Adam Miles, whom he coached at Tennessee's Beech High School shortly before the move to Dublin in the early 2000s, was a baseball star who also played linebacker and guard for his defense... and snapped, though he never thought much of it as a useful skill beyond Friday nights.

But when some big-time dreams on the diamond didn't pan out, that wound up being what kept his athletic career going.

The summer after graduation, Holmes took an hour or so one afternoon to shoot some video as he fired off a few snaps, then mailed the tape (yes, an old-school VHS) to about 25 schools.

Only one got back in touch. But that one was Phil Fulmer's Tennessee, whose staff – impressed with his pop times averaging between 1.1-1.2 seconds that beat those of anyone they had on the roster – extended an offer to walk on.

"He was good at it," Holmes said.

Miles went on to letter in four seasons with the Vols, debuting at snapper midway through his freshman year of 2002 in a home game against Miami. And he held down the job from then on.

A couple of Holmes' former teammates back at Middle Tennessee turned out to be similar diamonds in the rough, though neither even picked up the trade until both had exhausted their college eligibility.

Each, after discovering the hidden talent, rode it to opportunities in the NFL, Bill Cherry over about two seasons as a backup offensive lineman with the Packers and Dave Little in eight with the Eagles, and three other teams, as a third-string tight end.

Like any gig, having the goods as a long-snapper is a prerequisite to get hired, though there's something a little different about the line of work that seems to make landing a spot to play more fortuitous than most. On top of being good, you have to be a little lucky, know the right people, be in the right place at the right time and also nail the job interview.

Just as much as any other position, snapper is an investment that college programs don't take lightly, with consideration of grades, character and fit given as much weight as a player's ability.

"It's not just snapping," Zayden said. "You've gotta be off the field with coaches, and you've gotta be able to talk to them... You've got to show what you are as a man and go on the field and show what you are as a player too. It's both things."

(Sn)aptitude test...

Everyone has certain specific criteria for evaluating a snapper, based on what they value on special teams.

But is there a secret to identifying talent at the position? Or recognizing the type of aptitude in a player who wouldn't otherwise discover it?

"I got told many years ago that good high school catchers make

good long snappers, from a hall of fame coach," said Holmes, who was actually a high school baseball head coach before he became a football one.

Calvin Short was the Tennessee high school legend who offered that nugget in a passing conversation, once upon a time. In the years since, the more Holmes has thought it over, the more it makes perfect sense how the compact mechanics of a quick release behind the plate would translate to what, on the surface, seems like the opposite type of motion.

Good backstops, Short noted, usually throw from around their ear. And come to think of it, a snapper, though inverted in his position, starts the process from right around the same place.

"With a catcher, if he's winding up (on the throw down), everybody's probably safe," Holmes said.

It's also why long-snappers tend to warm up by playing catch, but tossing the football overhead with two hands, like a soccer ball.

You probably can't find a position on the field where perfection is at such a premium, and the most simple mistakes can become so catastrophic.

Anytime you hear "Oh, snap!" or a related interjection uttered at the start of a special teams down, it's usually not a good thing.

The few yards of extra distance the ball has to cover widens the margin for mishap on punts, which are as critical as kickoffs in swinging field position, for or against.

"It throws the whole timing off, and then obviously, on a punt it can be an adventure if the ball sails over your head," Lane said. "If it's a low snap, next thing you know the punter's down to one knee, and the ball's dead there."

Though field goal situations are a little less likely to spiral out of control, an untimely glitch can still lead to a missed layup, and cost you points.

"People don't understand, especially in placekicking, that it's three parts," Lane said. "It's kind of a three-pronged model in that the holder, the kicker and the snapper all have to be very consistent. It's something we have worked on quite a bit, and we continue to work on every day, because you're going to win one or two games, or lose one or two games a year based on special teams."

On field goals, the job of the snapper is pretty simple: Get it back there cleanly, stand up and watch, and head back to the sideline. But on punts, he's also pretty instrumental in coverage, and oftentimes, the first man on the scene to either make a tackle, bird dog the returner as he attempts a fair catch or down the ball after it hits.

"As soon as the ball's snapped, you've gotta get your head up and run down the field," Zayden said. "There's going to be a defender right there in front of you, you've got to dodge him, and you want to work him to the outside of the field, so you've gotta come around him and if you can get the tackle,

get the tackle, and if not you're gonna have players behind getting him for you."

In the bizarre situations you get on special teams, there's always a realistic possibility that a miscue could spiral into a momentum- or scoreboard-swinging play. And that's because, though you'll rarely have your "best" 11 on the field, you can always guarantee that the other team's one top athlete will be back returning.

"In all my years of coaching, there are two times I get nervous: When we punt and when we kick off," Holmes said. "A bad snap or a poor punt protection can change a game quicker than anything."

Those high stakes come with the territory for snappers at all levels who share a little in common with NFL kickers. In the case of both, one single breakdown can cost you your job, so you better have it right.

"You've just gotta stay consistent," Zayden said. "If you do a bad snap in a game, you're done. You've gotta keep doing what you do, and get some coaching when you need it and just go from there."

A team with all the tools...

Aside from some work to stay sharp, long-snapping is likely something Cody will set aside until at least next year as he focuses on juggling a lot of stuff between starting at nose tackle, punting and kicking off.

The right to handle field goals and extra points were also an open competition he was involved in this summer, though going by indications of Bleckley's early scrimmage with Hawkinsville, sophomore Dylan Lamb will be taking care of those for the foreseeable future.

The chance to get back over the ball may come in 2027, but it may not, if his other special teams talents prove too important to spare.

But the junior is definitely in an enviable position as a hot name on plenty of recruiting radar screens that will probably light up even more down the stretch of the Royals' promising season.

"I'm just looking forward to going against some different competition and being able to show what I've got," Cody said.

For Zayden, who's excited about the future at Tech, this senior year will be about the drive shared with his teammates to try to go out on a high note, and maybe even on top.

What plays out over 10 games-plus remains to be seen, but from a top-notch quarterback leading the offense to a transfer addition to the D-line, Bleckley seems to have all the means to play some elite football.

"Our line could be pretty small sometimes, but they show up every time when we need it. Our receivers, they get better every single day, and they're going to be some of the best in the country," Zayden said. "There's probably some weak spots that I've missed, but from where I sit, we're going to be pretty good."

BLECKLEY

Continued from page 10

there as much as possible matters.

"We've got a lot of guys back, that's a strength, guys that have played football," Lassiter said. "My biggest concern is some of these guys are going to have to play all the time. They're not going to be able to come off the field, especially at the skill positions. Hopefully we're in shape to do that, but it does take a toll on kids."

An opportune outlook...

The Royals' road is promising, but also no less challenging this fall than it was a year ago. They face a tough draw based on the league schedule alone, and at best an uncertain one when it comes to everybody else.

"I think we scheduled some really good teams," Lassiter said. "There are some unknowns there... I don't know exactly what we're getting into with some of those guys we're playing, but it's going to be fun to play some different people."

"Everybody's got good players, everybody's got good coaching staffs. It's just going to be a bloodbath every week. It's who can survive it, and catch some breaks."

A region championship is in the cards. But getting over humps against Dodge and Dublin, which both boast two-year win streaks over Bleckley and at least as much preseason hype, will be a key objective if that's on the table.

A second or third-place region finish, in this new playoff seeding system, doesn't set you far back if you're good enough. So look for plenty of 2-AA teams in the top 16 of the bracket come November, and for the Royals, which have advanced at least a game the last six years in a row, and twice to the quarterfinals, among the contenders.

The Royals, as much as anyone else in the state's preseason top 10, have their share of exclamation points, and question marks. But they can feel good that they've got a lot to throw at the best teams they'll face. Doing what it takes to beat them, and make that hoped-for run, will be a matter of finding a way.

The experience and resolve of this group is a cause for optimism that they can, and will.

"We've got good players, a good coaching staff and we're excited about this year," Lassiter said.

On heels of resurgent season, Vikings hope to move from hoping to expecting big wins

By **LOGAN REYNOLDS**
Tri-County Connector Staff Writer

The seeds for the Treutlen Vikings' 2026 season actually began with a mindset head coach Alan Shurling began to plant towards the end of last year.

"I just keep telling them, 'Hey, guys, nobody's going to come in and feel sorry for us,'" he said. "We've got to get out there and get the job done," and they kind of took hold of that towards the end of last year when we started making that a focus, kind of our saying."

The Vikings walked away with a 6-5 overall record, going 4-2 in region games. It was their first winning season in 10 years, and first time reaching the postseason in over 15.

But Shurling still went back over it all carefully, determined to weed out any missteps.

"A lot of those games were really close, and they could have gone either way," he said. "So we really examined a lot of those games and kind of said, 'All right, here's where we're struggling at, and that's why the games were close,' and so from there, we kind of got a game plan."

Shurling's focus for his players was the mental aspect, "Making them more mentally tough," and aimed his offseason training at helping players fight through close games remembering that, because they are close, they are winnable. That has paid off in confidence the team didn't have before.

This season, the Vikings will no longer just be hoping to win, but instead expecting to win.

"When you're around the kids now, they have a sense



Zaniel Stokes (3) picked up enough all-purpose yards as a running back and receiver to match the total of Treutlen's top rusher last season. The Vikings will have him as a major offensive producer once again this fall, while also relying even more on his defensive impact in a move to linebacker /**LOGAN REYNOLDS, File**

that they are going to win," said Shurling. "They do expect to win football games, where, you know, in the past when I first got here three years ago, it's kind of, 'Ah, might win a couple.'"

Speed, and symmetry...

Treutlen has not neglected physical training during the offseason. This year, the Vikings focused on improving their speed, as Shurling "felt like we had to get a little faster."

"I told them I don't like the whole '110 percent' thing," he said. "You can't give 110 percent, you only give 100 percent, so anytime we're doing something, just give me everything you got. And from there, if we keep stacking that on top of each other each day, we're going to be pretty successful."

Not much has changed since last season in terms of offensive and defensive strategy.

The Vikings will still run a Wing-T offense, and a 3-3 defense, sticking with systems that will allow return-

ing players to build on their previous experiences.

"The kids are real comfortable," Shurling said. "They know what's expected. They know the offense, they know the defense, so it makes it easier on them... keeping them the same."

But they will do some things differently.

On the offensive side, Treutlen has moved from shoulder blocking to modern blocking, and is working to get more members of its backfield involved in running the ball.

Though rushing leader Za'kian "Peanut" Tobler led the team with almost 850 yards and five touchdowns, he ended up accounting for a third of carries, and nearly half the team's rushing yardage, creating a tendency that the Vikings needed to break.

"That kind of hurt us, where only one guy could run the football and only one guy could block," said Shurling. "Now we don't have that issue. Everybody can do everything."

A more balanced back-

field will mean an ability to go either direction that force defenses to defend more of the field.

"We worked hard on getting that symmetry," Shurling said. "Now, both wings can run the football, so that kind of opens up more to us offensively, because now we're able to attack both sides of the defense instead of just one side."

Treutlen has also incorporated some spread packages into its offensive tool-belt.

On the defensive side, the Vikings have focused on aggression and gap control. Shurling said his players have begun to understand not just where to go, but why they need to be there.

"We spend a lot of time on them understanding how to fill the gaps," said Shurling. "You know, make sure they're in the right spot, how to not just know where to go, but now they're starting to understand why they have to be where they're at."

A senior-led lineup...

The Vikings lost two key players to graduation: Linemen Charvis Givens and Tyrone Jones. Both were major playmakers and team leaders last season.

"Losing them hurts because that's who we ran the ball behind, was those two, and on defense, we relied on them to make the plays," said Shurling. "T.J. would make the calls for us, so losing them two hurt."

But a large number of experienced players remain. The Vikings' new lineup features over 10 seniors, with many of them having served as starters for three years.

Some players have had their positions rearranged

to better support the team's needs, such as Tobler, who was moved to defensive end from linebacker to help replace Givens and Jones up front.

"He stepped up big time for us on that," said Shurling.

Zaniel Stokes (6-1, 200) was also moved to outside linebacker after becoming "bigger and stronger" during the offseason. Stokes has also been helpful in positioning other players during plays.

"And, obviously, on offense he's going to be a big threat for us as a wide receiver," said Shurling.

Rounding out the team's key players, Deverin Knowles (5-10, 160) has also stepped up as a blocking back on offense as well as a reliable ball-carrier.

Dublin transfer Major Morton has stepped into the role of quarterback vacated by Kavion Peebles.

"Those are the main, key guys that are going to determine our success this year."

Be on time, and give the best you can...

Shurling shares his team's confidence that this can be another great year.

The Vikings will be aiming to build on their 2025 success by earning a state playoff win.

But his primary goal is not to win any specific game, but instead improve personally through being part of the program.

"I've been holding them to the standard of just becoming better men and think about being better men, being everywhere you're supposed to be on time, giving the best you can," Shurling said.



TREUTLEN AT A GLANCE...

HEAD COACH: Alan Shurling (third season, 9-12 career)

OFFENSE: Multiple Wing-T
DEFENSE: 3-3 stack

2025: 6-5 (4-2 region 4-Low A)
FINISH: GHSA playoffs (lost to Mt. Zion, Carroll in first round)

RETURNING STARTERS:
6 offense / 7 defense

KEY LOSSES: QB Kavion Peebles; ATH/LB Markel Hamilton; OL/DL Charvis Givens; LB Johnny Johnson; WR/DB Nate Miller; OL/DL Tyrone Jones

VIKINGS TO WATCH: RB/DL Peanut Tobler, Sr.; QB/LB Major Morton, So.; WR/DB Zan Stokes, Sr.; RB/LB Deverin Knowles, Sr.; RB/DB Zion Brown, Jr.; RB/DB Peyton Miller, Sr.; K Leo Brinson, Sr.; OL/DL Tyler Gillis, Sr.

THE UPSIDES: Senior leadership; Better "symmetry" in backfield
KEY CONCERN: Filling big shoes in the trenches

SCHEDULE...

8/21	at Bryan Co.
9/04	at Tattnall Co.
9/11	Lanier Co.
9/18	at Montgomery Co.
9/25	Telfair Co.* (\$)
10/02	at Turner Co.*
10/09	at Wheeler Co.* (\$)
10/16	Dooly Co.*
10/30	at Hawkinsville* (\$)
11/06	Wilcox Co.* (\$)

* — region 4-A
(\$) — pivotal games

BRENTWOOD

Continued from page 17

Special teams produced the play Lord considers the most eye-popping display of athleticism in Cobb's football career as he lined up a rugby punt against John Milledge last year.

"It's a run-kick option, so he can run it if they're bailing, or he can kick it if they have an edge rush," Lord said. "He read it, but man, it was like fourth and eight. You've gotta figure he's 10 yards deep, gotta cover that ground and still got even more to go. He took off and saw it, and I swear, he jumped five yards in the air over the first down marker to get the first down. It was a really incredible play."

He's mastered most of a thick playbook weaving together a smashmouth run identity with concepts that create space for speedsters. But if there's anything left to explore, it's probably the simple run-pass options that the Eagles don't major in, but plan to carry more of this season simply because of his knack for making much out of nothing.

"You're giving them the freedom to make a play," Lord said. "It may be off script, but he's a four-year starter. If anybody can do it, it's going to be Baylor."

The only real question...

The offensive line is the Eagles' lone position that begins the season in any true state of flux as they work to replace three starters, including both guards.

The jobs are up for grabs between four candidates... Freshman Charlie Davis (6-1, 250) has made the biggest impression.

If he needs some more time to develop and settle in, there's also the more veteran Nathan Diaz (5-11, 180), a senior with a lot of position letters by his name on the roster.

"He's kind of my Swiss Army knife," Lord said. "I think he could play running back, tight end, could play guard. At this point in time, we just need a guard that can move. Right now, he's got a bunch of reps, and is the sixth strongest guy on the team."

Trevor Darsey (5-8, 160), a converted running back who's bulked up, is in the mix as well as Albright, who's become "a heck of a D-lineman" in two years starting on defense, but would be making his offensive debut on top of toting a two-way load.

The other opening is at right tackle, where former tight end Hitchcock has moved over in a pretty seamless transition.

The front, overall, has no shortage of muscle, but these blockers are more the type that can get out and use their feet on counters, wide sweeps and screens, allowing the

Eagles to feature plays that create "pressure on the edge."

"That's a new piece, just because we have so much speed on the edge," Lord said. "We're really going to make teams try to defend the width of the field, and our linemen are capable of getting out there and fitting up on those guys."

The questions up front, which may take a minute to get answered, are less about finding viable starters than deciding which of the many workable options fit best.

"We're still trying to unwind everything, but we've got a lot of capable guys," Lord said.

Back to the grind...

Brentwood's once-beaten efforts in both championship runs probably did a bit of a disservice to the quality of competition on both schedules.

But a new draw for this season looks to be a considerable step up in difficulty. They'll also spend more than half the campaign on the road, playing just one home game after a set of three in four that also includes three other recent title winners before labor day.

"When you win it back-to-back, you get into some scheduling conflicts," Lord said. "You're not on the top of the list for everybody to play. We kind of had to get in where we could fit in. Our schedule, with six on the road and four at home, is definitely not ideal. But we're going to make the best of it."

No matter how adverse the arrangements, a three-peat is without question on the table for the Eagles if they manage not to beat themselves. With numbers, depth and talent that are kind of without compare in AA, they'll be a pick of many to win it all again, and likely dominate much of the competition along the way.

But for Lord, being the highly favored defending champ only means that "The bullseye on our back's just gotten a little bit bigger."

And at no point this season will he let that fact become lost on a group of players who can be just as sure of their shot to do it as they are of what it takes in any season to become a champion – a price that this team will have to pay in full just the same.

"To tell you the pressure is not real would be a lie," Lord said. "I feel it. It's about sticking with the standard, making sure we're working hard, making sure chemistry is good, all the things that we've been good at the last two years, you've gotta do those and you've got to do them even better than you've done them in the last two. It's hard to do."



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Gay's return to roots as Eagles' head coach brings renewed emphasis on weights, establishing run

By **LOGAN REYNOLDS**
Tri-County Connector Staff Writer

Gabe Gay is Montgomery County's newest head football coach, but he actually began his history with the school system as a student. "I'm actually a Montgomery County graduate, graduated 2004," said Gay. His decision to become a football coach can be attributed to two people: his high school football coach and his grandfather. "Those two probably were two of the biggest influences for making me want to get into coaching," During his time at Montgomery County High School, he played football as an Eagle under Coach Luke Smith, who was a major influence, and an inspiration. "He took a lot of time up with me, kept me out of trouble, and it really taught me about... being just a good person overall, and that inspired me to coach," said Gay. Another of his inspirations was his grandfather, May Dobbins, who played an instrumental role in the history of Montgomery County sports. "He actually started the athletic program at the school," said Gay. "The school actually sits on Dobbins Street. Him and my grandmother were the first house on this street, so he was a longtime coach-administrator." In 2010, Gay started his coaching career as a defensive assistant at East Laurens High School. By the 2013-2014 season, he transitioned into the offensive coordinator role. "I wasn't actually calling plays then, but it was heavily involved with the game



Gay

planning, and, you know, by the 2015 season, I was calling plays," said Gay. He worked at East Laurens for seven years before taking a co-offensive coordinator position at Jeff Davis, and in 2019, returned to Montgomery County as offensive coordinator. Then, in 2021, he moved to West Laurens, again as an offensive coordinator, and spent four years in Dexter, his last a record-setting offensive season for the Raiders and Georgia Southern-bound running back Ty Cummings, before returning to Montgomery County this offseason. "Over a decade of coordinator experience," said Gay. He's never been a head coach before, though he did serve as an interim for "a couple of games" during his time at East. The job, so far, has presented challenges which had never occurred to him to prepare for. "You hear people say, you know, when you're a first-year head coach, there's things that you're going to deal with for the first time in your career, things you didn't think about," said Gay. "You can think you're prepared, something's going to come up that you hadn't thought about and prepared for." To balance out his inexperience as a head coach, Gay has been relying on the expertise of his assistants, such as Britt Ingle, who's been in the game for over 30 years with head coaching experience at both nearby Wheeler County and Treutlen, and will be serving as his defensive coordinator. In general, Gay has been "over the moon" about his staff.



Linebacker Hayden Hayes (3, left) and safety Kameron Henderson (4, right) are among the Eagles' seven defensive starters that return this season/LOGAN REYNOLDS, File

"That's been a great resource for me," he said.

Heading in a new direction...

One strength Gay believes his time as an offensive coordinator has given him is the ability to adapt to his team's strengths and weaknesses. "I feel like each school I've been at, the offensive style has been a little bit different," said Gay. A big part of the time since his hire has been dedicated to discovering the identity of his new team. He wasn't here for any of the team's previous season, which ended with a 1-9 record, but has been reviewing game tapes to learn more about the Eagles' strengths and weaknesses. "I don't know what this team - this current team - will be better at," Gay said, in reference to past teams he has trained who excelled at running and controlling the ball. But being able to be successful both running and passing is the goal. "Balanced is what all OCs want to be," said Gay. "You want to be balanced, but, you know, we're going to do what our players can do best." For Gay, one of the most

important factors to winning in high school football is a strong emphasis on strength and conditioning. "I still think at this level of football, you have to win in the weight room," he said. To that end, Gay has worked to get Montgomery County's training program closer to what it was the last time he coached here. "We had a really good weight lifting program when I left, and I kind of wanted to reestablish some of the things we were doing," he said. "You carry the weight room to the field with you." He is also working to unify the middle and high school football programs in order to create greater continuity.

Getting after it, aggressively...

Gay's biggest priority is to establish the run, running the ball on offense and stopping the run on defense, which requires physicality that's been an emphasis on the offensive and defensive lines. In terms of strategy, the Eagles are planning to run a gap scheme spread system on offense, and a 3-3 stack as their base defense. Gay said players are taking to both well.

"They're trying to do what we're asking them to do, and I feel like they're buying into the scheme, I really do." The team is particularly focusing on aggression, not wanting to "sit in one place and wait around." "We're going to try and be aggressive and put pressure on the offenses as best we can," said Gay. Multiple returning players have impressed, such as Elijah McEwen (6-0, 190), who has "been a very good player on both sides of the ball." Gay also describes wide receiver Zaden Waller (5-9, 160) as an "explosive player." Other notables include-linebackers Hayden Hayes (5-10, 215) and Kenya Tate (6-2, 215), and Christian Jordan (6-3, 200) and Kameron Henderson (5-8, 170) in the secondary. "I really feel like our linebacking corps can really be a strength of the team." Ramone Garcia, who comes over from the Montgomery County soccer team, will serve as the new kicker.

Great to be an Eagle...

Gay has a number of fond memories from his time in the Montgomery County school system, most of them related to football. "I was able to play in the playoffs three straight years, and coming back as an offensive coordinator, I had a great experience coaching here," Gay said. His ultimate goal is to give his players an opportunity to make similar lifelong memories. "I want kids in Montgomery County, when they graduate, no matter what their record is, they feel like they had a good playing experience," said Gay.



MONTGOMERY COUNTY AT A GLANCE...

HEAD COACH: Gabe Gay (first season)
OFFENSE: Power spread
DEFENSE: 3-3 stack
2025: 1-9 (0-6 region 4-Low A)
FINISH: missed playoffs
RETURNING STARTERS: 6 offense / 7 defense
KEY LOSSES: RB Landon Williams; DL Haze Thigpen; OL/DL Jayden Roberson; OL/DL Chez Rivera
EAGLES TO WATCH: RB/LB Elijah McEwen, Sr.; ATH/DB Zaden Waller, Sr.; WR/DB Kameron Henderson, Sr.; TE/LB Hayden Hayes, Jr.; RB/LB Kenya Tate, Jr.; QB Rilynn Dees, So.; WR/LB Christian Jordan, Sr.; OL/DL Carson Scott, So.; OL/DL Thomas Ford, Jr.; OL/DL Torion Smith, Jr.
THE UPSIDES: Striking size; Leaders at linebacker
KEY CONCERN: Increasing physicality and aggressiveness

SCHEDULE...

8/21	at Telfair Co.
8/28	Wheeler Co. (\$)
9/04	at Lanier Co.
9/18	Treutlen (\$)
9/25	at Atkinson Co.
10/02	Warren Co.
10/16	at Portal* (\$)
10/23	ECI*
10/30	at McIntosh Co. Academy*
11/06	Claxton* (\$)

* — region 3-A
(\$) — pivotal games

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WACO
Continued from page 18

familiar three-man front, they're moving to a fairly traditional version of the Wing-T, with its own unique spin, on offense.

Though operating from under center in foundational three-back sets, they will go to the shotgun in separate, more pass-friendly packages that give defenses a different look.

The identity is smashmouth at heart, but will build off of that with bread-and-butter Wing-T passing concepts like the bootleg and waggle, plus some ideas out of the old West Coast playbook that emphasize lateral completions on the perimeter. Ware is also a big proponent of using tempo, and quick-hitting plays to keep defenses on their toes.

"We've got some athletes out there, and we can get 'em the ball real quick," he said. "Be quick, get it out of the quarterback's hand, playing fast. We're not going to do much checking at the line. Get lined up real fast and run the play.

"We try to be simple, but make it look complex."

Exactly how it'll look remains to be seen, but the playbook is likely to have a little of everything from old-school power football to some of the exciting, wide-open stuff modern fans have kind of come to expect.

"We're going to be in a lot of different formations," Ware said. "Very multiple, as far as our passing game."

Carry-over in experience from 2025 was already minimal, but the

transitions in scheme have placed pretty much everyone – old and new – in the same boat of starting together from square 1.

"I'm proud of all these guys, just because they're learning a new system on offense and defense, and they've all pretty much responded in the right way," Ware said.

Rebuilding the ranks...

The graduation of 22 seniors, plus a transfer or two, left some big gashes in the Golden Hawks' lineup, which on the offensive side was set to replace all except for a single returning starter on the offensive line, junior Desean Brown (6-1, 240).

So there probably couldn't have been a better time for the changes that have taken everything on that side of the ball back to a clean slate. Everyone's learning new roles and responsibilities. Plenty are changing positions entirely, as is the case for many wide receivers that have been moved from a now overcrowded position room to some new openings in a three-man backfield.

Ware didn't reveal much of how the inaugural two-deep is shaping up, but did identify a number of players who have emerged as key leaders this summer.

Junior Aiden Watts (6-2, 162) has had to deal with a whole lot of that newness as he shifts from receiver to quarterback, and will also pull a two-way role as starting safety.

"He's worked every day to learn," Ware said. "Being a Wing-T quarterback is not easy, especially

if you've never done it before. He's been a real bright spot, holding teammates accountable and executing."

Kamajae Johnson (5-11, 190), a non-starter but somewhat frequent ball-carrier from last year, will be one to watch out of the backfield.

"He had some real bright spots his sophomore year," Ware said. "He's a really athletic kid. Very gifted, and probably one of our fastest players."

So too is a first-timer at full-back in Daveion Holmes (5-7, 176), a senior who played exclusively defense last year.

There's less turnover on the defensive side, where the Hawks plan to feature two experienced inside 'backers in Holmes and fellow senior Jakobe Poole (5-10, 200).

Up front, senior Albert Stone (6-1, 290) is due to anchor the D-line.

Among the mostly emerging upperclassmen, there will be some younger players carving out an early niche on the field as well.

A few you might see quickly include sophomore running back and defensive back Greg Gundy (5-8, 155), who's set a noticeable standard in his work during the spring and summer.

"He does have a great opportunity to play on Friday," Ware said. "It's really hard to find leadership in that young group. A lot of times they're hesitating. He's quiet, but he leads by example."

A couple of other super sophomores are in the mix for some considerable action, Derrienan Wright as a running back and DB,

and Harris Griffin in the lead of candidates to take over placekicking duties.

Ware, at this point in the process, is looking for some things in his players other than just football skills. Mastering the mechanics of the game is only a matter of repetition. Winning, though, is often as much about character as anything else.

Above all, that's what he wants to see in the guys that will lead the team, and accordingly shape WACO's identity in this new era.

"I think the main challenge, always with young people, is getting them to respond the right way," Ware said. "There are ups and downs in the season, but you've got to work them through that. When you go through those challenges, having the mental fortitude to get back up and keep playing, that's a crucial element in building a good football culture."

Growing in a positive direction...

It's usually tricky trying to predict anything about a team in its first season following a coaching change.

But recent years' results for the Golden Hawks will likely set a record in the neighborhood of .500 as a reasonable benchmark, which also projects as the cut line they'll need to clear in order to extend an 18-year streak of playoff appearances later this fall.

Doing so has been an accomplishment since the dawn of the power rankings era for WACO teams that each managed to fight their way in with key victories

down the stretch.

The task may be even tougher with a move back up in class to AAA (for the first time in '15) where stiffer competition and a much smaller concentration of private schools (who free up extra at-large spots among the 32 tournament seeds) will make the window of opportunity a little smaller.

But a strong slate (with re-matches against ex-region rivals representing three out of four non-region games, then a AAAA pickup in Baldwin) leading into region play (Burke County, Thomson and Westside Augusta are the teams to beat in the new 4-AAA) should put high value on wins.

Big tests loom in August and early September that should give an idea of where WACO will stand.

For now, matching and measuring up is the least of Ware's concerns entering a season that will be all about the long game.

Much like it was in the spring and summer, his objective remains getting the most possible from every day of the grind.

Eventually, and maybe sooner than later, the results will begin to match up to what the Hawks are building toward if they continue making that progress.

"To be honest, I think the main thing is to do what we've been doing," Ware said. "Just continue to work hard. I know that's a generic answer, but if we continue to work hard, keep lifting weights, keep getting faster, keep learning to do what we're doing on the field and just keep growing our culture in a positive direction, I think the rest will take care of itself."

DODGE
Continued from page 14

right where they left off last year," Brown said.

The Indians also add a third senior to that mix: Florida-commit Aamaury Fountain, a move-in from Northside, Warner Robins.

Fountain (6-3, 195) and Bray (6-1, 175), both primary corners, bring some length to man-to-man matchups on both sides, and speed in the 4.5 (40-yard dash) range that you can't overlook.

Burns (5-9, 170), a few ticks faster at top speed, will threaten primarily with his explosiveness after catches, on kick returns and in various other situations the Indians will try to create with motion and misdirection.

For a third-straight year, Dodge is starting over at running back, where all three of its leading gainers (representing over 200 carries and 17 touchdowns) from 2025 graduated. In fact, the team's best returning rusher is actually Mincey, on a little more than 100 yards.

It was one of few holes on the depth chart the Indians had to fill in, but Brown comes away from the summer feeling really good about the group of new backs – some native rushers and a few converts from other positions – they've put together.

Senior Jordan Johnson (5-8, 190) and junior Blaye Fluellen (5-9, 150) project as the committee's Co-No. 1s.

Johnson, who saw very limited action in mop-up duty a year ago, has impressed coaches with his work to earn an opportunity this summer.

"Jordan's kind of sat back and played the role we've given him throughout his career," Brown said. "Now, it's an opportunity for him to get some significant playing time."

Fluellen, who will be a newcomer to Friday-night action, features a complementary running style.

"He's more of your speed, one-cut back that can get it quick," Brown said.

A second Jordan, Jordan Spady (5-10, 175), will be available to help out at the position on the side of his primary role at safety.

Each of the above fit the profile of a traditional running back, but there's one more the Indians are liable to utilize – a guy recruited from the opposite side of the ball in junior Lee Carr (6-1, 250) – for some short-yardage situations, and the like.

"I really challenged our

coaches in the offseason to kind of think outside the box when it comes to personnel, and we really found another back that we can put in the fold," Brown said. "He was playing defensive line for us, and one of our coaches wanted to try him out at running back. We ended up doing it, and he's done a really good job just learning everything and fitting his skill set into our scheme. Being 250 pounds, he can pretty much fall forward and get us three and a half."

A well-rounded team...

Weak spots are few anywhere else you look on the depth chart.

If there's a question mark to be found, it's on special teams, where the graduation of Julius Roberts has the Indians breaking in a new punter and kicker.

But a succession plan at both positions was already in the works last season, which new starters – junior Noah Studstill (5-9, 205) and senior Cale Johnson (5-10, 170) – spent backing him up.

The Indians will also look pretty doggone good in the trenches, with likely the most formidable and experienced offensive and defensive lines they've fielded since the Rex Hodges era.

Each of their incumbents up front on offense – all five returning – have a minimum two years of starting experience. And as leaders go, they've been some of the most influential on the entire offense.

It starts with two-time all region pick Keyzan Harris (6-2, 325), who Brown describes as "consistent, day-in and day-out," at guard.

Dorian Hughes (6-1, 275) will play tackle, and also pull double duty as part of the defensive line rotation.

Brayden Sheffield (5-10, 285) is the lone underclassmen, a junior, at center, but also boasts two seasons of experience after starting his ninth grade year.

Adam Wells (6-1, 275) is expected to hit the ground running at the other guard spot, though he's coming off a minor knee injury that has had him shelved for part of the summer.

Last but not least is the other tackle, Kendall Simmons (6-1, 240), whose intensity throughout the summer has set the tone for the unit.

Established stalwarts headline the defensive line as well, with another third-year starter, junior James

Branch, back as nose, and major "physical presence" in the middle.

Though Dodge is turning to a first-timer next to him, that sophomore, Keyzan's younger brother Jakavion (6-5, 260), has some size and skills that are unusually well-developed for a 10th grader, and should make a name for himself quickly.

Robinson (5-7, 180) is moving from nickel to an all-important inside linebacker position where the Indians have consistently played some of their most reliable defensive athletes.

"We had a need there, and he has exceeded my expectations," Brown said. "I'm excited to watch him this year."

At outside 'backer, look for the "very versatile" all region first-teamer Peyton Butts.

"We can move him down and rush him off the edge, and he can play back in the box and read and fit, but he is a very physical football player," Brown said. "He is old-school."

In between Bray and Fountain (at corner) and Burns (alongside at safety) as an underrated cornerstone of the secondary is Spady, who finished his freshman season as one of the team's top six tacklers, and likely won't leave the field.

"He played every snap at safety as a freshman, and got better every game," Brown said. "He is playing some really good football."

Get your mind right...

Even for the best of teams, the gauntlet you traditionally run in Dodge County's shoes is one that can very easily get the best of you.

Looking ahead to this fall, the situation is all too familiar for the Indians, whose schedule has a lot of the same teams they're used to having to go through to earn a playoff spot, and – once you hit October – pretty much no gimmes.

Add Brown to the list of 2-AA coaches who are firmly convinced there's no league in the classification that can rival the depth of competition you get in this one.

"Our region is the best in the state from top to bottom," he said. "It just speaks for itself. You're looking at all these preseason polls, and you've got four teams in the top 10."

Much like the past two seasons, this journey isn't one for the faint of heart.

Nor, as Dodge can attest, is it one for the faint of mind.

That's why getting things right between the ears, for this team that's already got most of it down pat between the lines, could be critical to making the most of this year's opportunities.

"We felt like coming into the offseason, we had a lot of guys coming back, and a very talented bunch, but talent can only take you so far,"

Brown said. "We needed to develop not only leadership, but also just the people in our building, and let those guys go into this thing with the right mindset, because, hey, there's a lot of talented teams in our region, and we're going to face challenges. How do we overcome those adverse moments against really really good teams?"

Between the quality play-

ers and legit weapons the Indians will have on the field, and improved chemistry in the locker room, they look to have all that's needed to take on those challenges with some confidence.

And if you're Brown, that positive energy is something you love to be feeling.

"I wouldn't rather go into this season with any other group, because I think these guys are built for it," he said.



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