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WL looks to seniors for key boost in 2021

By CLAY REYNOLDS
Sports Editor

WEST LAURENS RAIDERS



HEAD COACH: Kagan McClain, fifth season (27-18 career)
OFFENSE: Pro style / **DEFENSE:** 3-4
2020 RECORD: 5-5 (4-2 region 4-AAAA)
LAST PLAYOFF APPEARANCE: 2020 (lost to Cairo in first round)
RETURNING STARTERS: 5 on offense, 6 on defense

KEY LOSSES: QB Bradley Wilson, WR Tyler Franks, DE T.J. Jones, DB JaKiel Edmond
OPENER: Aug. 20 vs. Bleckley Co.
KEY BALLGAMES: Oct. 8 vs. Baldwin, Oct. 15 vs. Perry, Nov. 5 vs. Westside Macon

In years of late, the key leadership that comes from their senior class has often been the watershed that determines the outcome of a season for the West Laurens Raiders.

Changing variables that swing games on the field aside, head coach Kagan McClain points to the initiative his upperclassmen take – or don't necessarily take – to set a standard beginning in the weight room, and on through practices and into Friday nights that makes the ultimate difference in whether they perform up to or exceeding expectation, or not.

While not every team has the top-end potential that this one did, the Raiders' 2019 club, which won a region title and reached the quarterfinals of the AAAA state playoffs, is a great example of the pivotal effect leadership can have in taking a team from good to great.

West Laurens was coming off a .500 year that turned on four region losses, three involving blown leads in self-destructive second halves, that caused the Raiders to miss out on the playoffs entirely. And the sour taste of the disappointment wasn't lost on the boatload of returning seniors who did what it took in the time between to turn that vital corner the next season.

"The kids from '18 who were juniors, they saw that, and they came back in '19 and made a point in the offseason that things were going to be different," McClain said.

The rest is history: a 9-1 regular season record, the region 2-AAAA championship and a berth in the state quarterfinals, where the Raiders lost to eventual state champ Blessed Trinity.

This fall, in the eyes of some, has some similar themes to that historic season, as West Laurens returns another experienced team and a class of quality seniors that could be the same kind of linchpin.

The Raiders don't have the same volume of players the

THREE TO WATCH...

OLB Caden Snell, Sr.

As a first-year starter last fall, he stepped right into an impact-making role at "rover" on the edge of the West Laurens front seven, playing with a hard-nosed, relentless effort and pristine technique. Snell wound up as the Raiders' third leading tackler, with 46 stops, and a team-best four interceptions. And both numbers might have been higher if not for injuries that knocked him out for two games and part of a third.

He's not unlike the teammates around him in his cerebral presence at the position, although his ability to play clever and play smart was one attribute in particular that took his game up several notches. And that should be true again for all four starters at linebacker, who will be among the brainiest on the team.

"We've got some experience at the linebacker position," said head coach Kagan McClain. "I think we've got smart kids who understand the game there... Their experience, their knowledge of the game, the fact that they're smart on the grass, oughtta really help them."

Snell is picking up some college offers ahead of his senior season, and more could be on the way if he has a year similar to 2020. He'll no doubt be a vital piece of an experienced and rock-solid linebacking corps, but in addition to his consistent tackling, will be counted on to make several more of the game-changing plays he had a flair for last year.

FB/ILB Jathan Willis, Sr.

There are few on the West Laurens roster as athletically gifted as Willis, who by

far took the top spot on the team tackle sheet a year ago, with as many assists (42) as he had solo tackles (42). He also tacked on plenty of his own big plays in momentum-swinging moments, putting up team-highs in tackles for loss (10), sacks (3) and fumble recoveries (2).

He moves at a different speed than most on the field, and closes on ballcarriers like a shark, with similar grade-A polish when it comes to his tackling form and coverage skills.

The 5-foot-11, 205 pound senior has already taken his place in the long line of dominant inside 'backers to suit up for the Raiders, and should continue the position's reputation on the Westside for filling holes and shutting down the middle. Joining Snell and Javen Ashe as returning seniors, he'll set the tone for a linebacking group that will lead the way for the Raider defense.

"If we're not going to be good at linebacker, there's nothing else we can do," McClain said. "We've got a lot of experience with the three returners."

New for this year, Willis will also rotate in on the other side at fullback, and try to turn some of his punishing strength

around in blocks on opposing defenders. And if they look to dump off some passes to him — which they should — expect his considerable open-field speed to add a quality offensive wrinkle.

RB Cordarrian Hickman, Sr.

Arriving last fall as a transfer from Mississippi, Hickman made a splash from the get-go in his Raider debut, climbing almost immediately to the top of the running back depth chart and wowing fans from week to week with his rare mix of explosiveness and agility.

The 5-foot-8, 185 pounder is a whirling dervish who runs with the skill of a ballerina and the strength of a gymnast. His uncanny ability to spin at the drop of a hat, and strength to brace himself and stay up against half-hearted tackles, helped him find an edge in matchups despite a lack of breakaway speed, earning him first-team all-region honors.

His totals in 2020: 685 yards on 136 carries, with 10 touchdowns — all team highs. Hickman also added a score each as a passer and a receiver, on seven total catches.

The aspiring member of the armed forces will be a little late to join the team this fall, after choosing to go ahead and knock out his basic training this summer. As a result, he won't be back and ready to play until week 3. But when he returns, the senior should pick up right where he left off last fall and continue to excel with the ball in his hands.

"I hope he's going to be a better version of what he was (last year)," McClain said. "He was already a super athlete, and he got stronger in the weight room."



Photo by Clay Reynolds

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THREE NEW FACES...

RB/LB Evan Guyton, Sr.

He's a bit of a late bloomer whose action prior to this season was limited to some reserve carries at running back and a few snaps on defense, but if there's one Raider whose time is now for a breakout season, it's Guyton.

The 5-foot-9, 195-pound senior, a wrestler and trackster in the offseason, has some freakish physical tools and 4.6 speed that give him a lot to offer as a starter on both sides of the ball, and a contributor on special teams. And he'll probably be asked to do the most of any one player on the entire squad.

Defensively, he will step into a starting slot at inside linebacker, while on the opposite side taking on an almost equally heavy workload — particularly before Hickman's return — as a regular at tailback. He'll get his name called a good bit, but also continue to take care of plenty of the behind-the-scenes leg work that will

make the Raiders go in all three phases.

"He's one of the best athletes on the team, if not the best athlete," McClain said.

QB Gunnar Jeffers, Sr.

His junior football season was cut short by an ill-timed collarbone injury,



Photo by Clay Reynolds

suffered after just three plays against Veterans in a week 2 fill-in for injured starter Bradley Wilson. But the two-sport athlete returned from the setback to help lead the West Laurens baseball team to a state quarterfinal finish this past spring, providing a steady bat in the middle of the

order, a reliable glove in center field and — a bit unexpectedly — some key late-season innings on the mound.

He'll now be asked to step up in the same way as a rising senior at quarterback, and the Raiders hope he'll be able to play just as reliably under the varsity gun despite his limited experience.

At 6-foot, 185 pounds, Jeffers has the athletic chops, with enough arm strength and speed to do what his coaches need him to. But it's his intangibles, and the penchant for consistency and reliability he showed on the baseball field, that won him the starting job in a competition over the spring and summer.

"He was a leader, amongst his teammates, for us," McClain said.

The offensive line

None of the players on the Raiders' starting front are brand new, each having played significant snaps last year as part of about a six-man rotation that lost only left tackle D'Ante Holloway to graduation. The unit experienced some

major growing pains as it battled season-long inexperience and inconsistency, as well as upheaval from quarantines that made the starting lineup a weekly game of musical chairs.

The group of left tackle Terry Tobler (senior), left guard Brandon Horne (junior), center Hart Soles (junior), right guard Kaleb Dacus (senior) and right tackle Gage Kelly (junior) enters 2021 hoping the hard lumps it took last season have been constructive in building chemistry and consistency moving forward.

Their coaches have all been impressed with how the line has jelled and shaped into a stronger, harder-nosed group with a rather mean streak and high set of self-expectations.

Ready or not, they'll be the key to the West Laurens offense finding a new identity as the Raiders look to run behind them early and often this fall.

"I really think that's going to be the strength of our football team," McClain said. "We're going to have to churn yards, eat clock, get first downs and try to win 21-14, 17-10 ballgames."

WEST from page 2

caliber of Brent Carr, Spencer Dacus, A.J. Mathis or D'Eryk Jackson who put that group in a championship class, but seem to have the potential to put together a quality season, and potentially challenge in the region again, if the ball bounces their way.

Last year's record, in a year defined by turnover, injuries and uncertainty tied to the pandemic, was identical to the 2018 mark of 5-5. Overcoming a slow start and a tough, injury-riddled two-game losing streak in region play, the Raiders started to get things humming toward the final games of the season and won the key matchups they needed to to secure the region's third seed and get into the playoffs. There, they ended up losing in a character-building shutout loss against Cairo in the first round.

"We started slow, then it clicked and we finished 5-2," McClain said. "Last year's kids

kind of grew into who they were. And coming into this year, we're kind of on that fence where if the leadership stays, and if we can handle adversity, I think we can lean more towards the 2019 team. If we go out there and don't handle adversity very well, we're going to slip back into 2018."

While it's hard to predict where things will pan out in several areas of uncertainty for the Raiders this year, the best-case scenarios in most departments are encouraging. And

it's likely the same step up by the leaders within this group that will be needed to help them make that jump from average to a region title contender.

None of the statewide polls have the Raiders anywhere near the top 10 just yet, although Georgia High School Football Daily's Maxwell Projections offered an unexpected surprise in picking them to win 4-AAAA, and beat out last year's No. 1 Perry and No. 2 Baldwin, who figure to be

the main contenders again.

On paper, West Laurens will seem overmatched compared to those teams in overall firepower, but not in grit, heart and the rock-solid technique that's generally the difference-maker in even matchups.

"(Our) seniors are gonna

have to step up and be mature leaders on Friday night, they're going to have to really handle some storms and weather some adversity, and as long as they can do that, I think that's going to be the tipping point to get us over that edge and where we want to be," McClain said.

EDITORS' NOTES

Photos included in cover art by Clay Reynolds, Ralph Jackson and James Scarboro.

Some historical data provided in this section was researched using Georgia High School Football Historians Association archives at ghsfha.org.

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Crusaders energized for new era under Marsh

TRINITY CRUSADERS



HEAD COACH: Jed Marsh, first season
OFFENSE: Spread / **DEFENSE:** Multiple, four-man front
2020 RECORD: 0-9 (0-4 region 2-AAA)
LAST PLAYOFF APPEARANCE: 2018 (lost to Tiftarea in state quarterfinals)

RETURNING STARTERS: 6 on offense; 7 on defense
KEY LOSSES: WR/LB Chandler Asbell, RB/LB Ben Butler, WR/DB Wade Walker, TE/LB Trey Miller
OPENER: Aug. 20 at Edmund Burke
KEY BALLGAMES: Oct. 15 vs. St. Andrew's, Oct. 22 at Pinewood, Nov. 5 vs. Frederica

THREE TO WATCH...

QB/DB Jim Coleman, Jr.

Starting behind center for the first time as a sophomore, Coleman easily lived up to the Crusader lineage of his dad Charles (a running back) and older brother David (a QB, now playing at Samford), both renowned football players for Trinity in their day.

His season-long performance as a passer and rusher, numbering 821 all-purpose yards, six touchdowns through the air, nine scores on the ground and a completion percentage of right at 40, was one of the brightest spots for a Crusader offense that struggled to do much else. In other areas, he did all but drive the bus, starting on defense at safety and leading Trinity with a pair of interceptions, punting for an average of 30 yards and returning 13 kickoffs, one of them for a TD.

But the 6-foot, 165 pounder shined the brightest behind center, where his elusiveness and flair for the dramatic was worth the price of admission, though he likely covered most of his ground running from the pursuit rather than picking up positive yardage.

Trinity's new-look offense, which will have him working from the gun on a full-time basis, figures to put him in the positions where he succeeded most last year, when defenses were forced to reckon with his improvisational ability off the scramble and accurate arm.

"He's been solid," said head coach Jed Marsh. "In this type of offense, he's having to do the most thinking, he's having to make all the reads. He's stepped up to it so far. He's a fast learner, a hard worker. He's a true leader out there."

RB/LB Kyle Currie, Sr.

He's probably Trinity's most experienced all-around returner, and also one of its most well-rounded athletes, too, with a 6-foot-2, 195-pound build that's a definite outlier on a mostly under-sized roster. Currie has battled injuries in recent seasons, but when healthy, has brought plenty of tools to the table as a rusher and linebacker.

As the new MIKE, he'll serve as "quarterback of the defense" and be the Crusaders' go-to run stopper in the middle — a role he's settled into nicely so far.

"He brings the aggression we need at middle linebacker," Marsh said. "He'll step up and meet

running backs at the line. That's been great to see."

The senior will also be counted on somewhere as an offensive skill player, though his true position might evolve as the season unfolds. At present, the plan's for him to split early season carries with junior Davis Maffett. The two, with Currie as the powerful, downhill grinder, could form a tandem that gives the Crusaders a complimentary 1-2 punch in the ground game.

WR/DB Mitchell Gay, Sr.

Bad luck with injury tripped him up in the early portion of his playing career, but Gay roared back last fall to have a strong junior season, putting in regular time at cornerback and wingback, among other spots where his athleticism stood out.

When he touched the ball, which might have been a bit too seldom while sharing the backfield with multiple other rushers competing for carries, he was always a threat to pick up big chunks of yardage. The Crusaders' shift to a new system will alter that role on the offensive side, where he's now playing a majority of snaps at wideout and also a little as the H-back, a hybrid fullback/tight end, but still look to utilize that big-play potential in every way possible.

Defensively, the 5-foot-11, 155-pound senior is likely the best Trinity's got on the back end at covering field, and seeking out ball-carriers blazing their way toward the edges. And that'll now be his primary assignment as strong safety. Big plays were a trouble spot a year ago, and Gay's ability to cut those short near the line before they unfold, while also providing some support in coverage downfield, will be a big part of figuring out how to put the brakes on opposing offenses.

THREE NEW FACES...

OL/DL Trent Whittington, Sr.

For a team with an overall lack of size, and also some nasty injury history when it comes to starters up front, building an offensive line this off-season has been a challenge.

The Crusaders will give up a lot to most of the opposition in terms of inches and pounds, and will have to make up for that with effort, experience and technique.

The 6-foot-1, 200-pound Whittington, as the all-important left tackle, has been one of a few players working on the line to already nail down a starting slot.

He'll join Mitchell McDaniel, who Marsh added has taken on the leadership role of calling out fronts and blitzes from center, as the two early

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By **CLAY REYNOLDS**
Sports Editor

Strange as it might be to say, it's been an uplifting two months for Trinity football since the school's hire of Jed Marsh as its new head coach.

The 24-year-old Florida native, a former dual-sport college athlete at a small Christian school and most recent head coach at Yulee Middle School, was an unlikely candidate for the job when he and Trinity crossed paths amid the Crusaders' drawn-out coaching search.

Acquainted at first thanks to connections Marsh shared with new Trinity Christian headmaster Jeremy Blackstock, who is also a product of Wisconsin-based Maranatha Baptist University, the two seemed to find a lot of what each were looking for in the match: the school a high-character leader for its program strong in his faith and conviction about using the game of football to mentor young men, and Marsh a chance to advance his career as a head coach at the high school level.

A lot about the opening and

the opportunity struck him and wife Samantha as the right fit.

"The school seemed to have a lot of potential to grow, and a lot of things I can build from," Marsh said.

The job comes with just as many daunting obstacles as it does opportunities, and the sharky waters of Georgia high school football are no easy swim for a first-time head coach.

But Marsh, who could easily be overwhelmed with those details, hasn't spent much time focusing on the adverse circumstances, taking instead a consistently upbeat outlook that has many around the Trinity campus looking forward to what's ahead.

His youthful optimism and positive energy have been a breath of fresh air for the program as it comes out of some dark days, and likely heads for



Marsh

TRINITY
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standouts in an inexperienced group that is otherwise in a state of flux.

Whittington, like McDaniel, is also slotted to go the other way as a D-line man, making his consistency and avoidance of injuries that plagued him a year ago of paramount importance.

"Trent has been good at left tackle," he said. "He's just got to make sure he stays healthy, playing both sides of the ball like he is."

ATH/CB Henry Williams, Jr.

He played some football in middle school, but hung it up the last few years to focus on basketball and soccer. Williams returned along with a handful of Crusaders from other sports that Marsh was able to bring back out this fall, and he's been impressed with the work ethic and progress of the 5-foot-9 sparkplug, who brings a great deal of electricity and quickness in spite of his size.

He'll join the young rotation at wideout, and on defense play some at corner back and end, where his quickness may also add to Trinity's ability to rush the passer off the edge.

"He came out and he's stepped up all over the field," Marsh said.

WR/PK Zane Shirley, Jr.

His action last fall came almost exclusively on special teams, where he was a respectable seven of 10 on points-after and proved rather masterful at executing squib kickoffs. Shirley has emerged this summer in a new role as offensive jack-of-all-trades, demonstrating some sprinter speed that could prove useful in certain change-of-pace packages.

Look for more of his consistency, and likely some improved leg strength, when it involves special teams this fall. But also keep an eye out for him to make it in there for an offensive snap or two every so often, because there are very likely some highlight plays this fall that'll have his name on them.

"I knew he was a good kicker," Marsh said. "But he's shown me a lot of things we can use him to do other than special teams — a scat back, a slot receiver and all sorts of things."

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Falcons eager to end region, playoff droughts

By CLAY REYNOLDS
Sports Editor

EAST LAURENS FALCONS



There's little question East Laurens will field one of its most talented, strong, fast, senior-laden, experienced and confident teams in many, many years this fall.

The 2021 Falcons are loaded on both sides of the ball with well-rounded players, who've all been getting after it in the weight room and, to borrow a favorite phrase of head coach Bin Turner, are looking "pretty dang skippy."

After some slow steps forward in his first three seasons at the helm, last year's a modest 3-6 campaign, he's confident this group of players is the one that's ready to take off. Now, they just have to get that in their minds.

Winning the region, and even cracking the playoffs out of a dog-eat-dog 2-AA, is a big jump in the way of predictions. But when it comes down to it, Turner says there's nothing off

HEAD COACH: Bin Turner, fourth season (5-24 at East Laurens, 10-40 career)

OFFENSE: Multiple spread / **DEFENSE:** 3-4

2020 RECORD: 3-6 (0-5 region 2-AA)

LAST PLAYOFF APPEARANCE: 2012 (lost to McIntosh Co. Academy in first round)

RETURNING STARTERS: 5 on offense, 6 on defense

KEY LOSSES: QB/DB Cole Strickland, WR/DB Zack Strickland, OL/DL Payton Daniels, OL/DL Palmer Davenport

OPENER: Aug. 20 vs. Twiggs Co.

KEY BALLGAMES: Oct. 1 vs. Swainsboro, Oct. 22 at Bacon Co. Nov. 5 at Toombs Co.

the table for this team, if it can overcome the mental block created by an eight-year playoff drought and a 47-game region losing streak, both of which the Falcons are out to break this year.

"I've seen a lot of things that lead me to believe that this is the year that, if we believe, we can go out and make some noise," he said.

There couldn't be a better season to dispel the old demons than this one, as East Laurens marks its final year playing at Falcon Field before moving to a

brand new stadium and football facility under construction on the other side of campus next fall.

In several of seven regular-season home games this season, East Laurens is making an effort to bring back and honor some of its most successful athletes, particularly in football. In addition to honoring its inaugural hall of fame class at the Sept. 10 home game against Oglethorpe County, the school will also be recognizing members of its 1991 region championship team – to date the only

football squad to hang a championship banner of any kind – on the weekend of their 30-year reunion, when the Falcons play Johnson County Aug. 27.

"Winning breeds winning, and losing breeds losing," he said. "By bringing back people that have won here, and people see that it's been done, then they're like, ok we can do this. That's something. It's all mentality. You've got to get the winner's mentality, and lose the loser's mentality. That's been the biggest hurdle is getting over that mentality."

To get over any hump, you have to build up some momentum. And on top of a two-win improvement East Laurens made last year, some major success in the weight room this offseason has given them fuel to stoke their confidence. A strength program that's now "in overdrive" yielded four state powerlifting champions at GACA competitions this spring, with several more who posted top finishes.

That progress has gone

EAST
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EAST

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hand-in-hand with the development of multiple key juniors and seniors on this year's Falcon squad, almost all of whom come in with two seasons or more of varsity playing experience.

You won't see Turner's face light up any brighter than it does when he's describing, in his own unique way, the distinct features of these different players, how far they've come since many were freshmen in his first season as head coach and where each fit into the promising picture on this year's depth chart.

His defense, loaded with players who are lean, long and quick, will be one he takes special pride in. The collection of players has few weak links athletically – all of them are built like they belong on a football field. And the spectrum of skills available of nearly every one, from size and strength to speed and agility, offers great flexibility in terms of personnel and scheme.

For last year's team and others before, offensive consistency has been the holdup. And without Cole or Zack Strickland, the quarterback-widow combo that accounted for much of the Falcons' production a year ago, the somewhat young unit will have some question marks as it works to find new go-to players.

With that said, there's likely more depth at the skill positions than a Turner team has ever had. And if the offensive line can come together, East Laurens should have an attack worth taking seriously.

"I feel far more confident than I ever have that we're going to be able to pound the rock," Turner said. "And if people load the box, we've been blessed with a plethora of receivers. We're going to be able to pound it, and then be able to take a shot."

But this year's struggle, ultimately, will take place between the ears for the Falcons rather than between the white lines. They'll look to gather and maintain confidence and poise as they take on a schedule front-loaded with winnable games.

Johnson County is the early-season test among matchups with Twiggs County, Baconton Charter, Oglethorpe County and Bryan County that

THREE TO WATCH...

RB/OLB Omarion Guyton, Sr.

He was one of the most physically impressive defenders for the Falcons before it was a thing, emerging as a member of a young, unpolished team as a sophomore and developing through two rough seasons into the experienced, and studly, playmaker he will be this season.

All along, Guyton has been a linebacker on the edge that opponents steer away from, as much for his impact as his imposing figure. The 5-foot-11, 192 pound senior earned first-team all-region selection last fall, after leading East Laurens in tackles with 74 in just nine games, adding a sack and a half, a forced fumble and one blocked punt. Over the offseason, he added to his list of accolades a state weightlifting title, "and it wasn't even close," head coach Bin Turner said.

His max weights have shot up even more since the GACA state competition in March. Guyton's bench mark of 315 at state is now up to 360, with a 345-pound power clean and a PR of 605 lbs. on the squat rack, up from the 565 he lifted at state.

He also runs a 4.5 40-yard dash, with a speed and power combo that garnered him frequent snaps at running back last year, along with three rushing touchdowns. He'll see that role increase as he shares carries this season with junior Eli Downing.

DL Quintavious Adolphus, Jr.

He's only one in a majority of returning starters for the Falcons who boast a minimum of two years in playing experience. On the field since his freshman season, Adolphus is one of plenty on the Eastside roster that has grown by leaps and bounds physically, from where he started on the chunkier side into the trim, muscular player he is now. The 6-foot, 225-pounder has also come a long way in



Photo by Rodney Manley

mastering the technique of playing on the defensive line.

His frame, with the perfect balance of size and mobility, fits almost perfectly the description of what the Falcons want in their front three. Turner's defense has evolved into a very Georgia-esque scheme, with players across the field that do fit a certain mold by position, though none at any spot lacks the skills to come on pressure or back into coverage.

"He's come a long way," Turner said. "He's a beautiful specimen now. And he can absolutely fly. You put him out with the skill guys, running, and he's probably going to come in middle of the pack."

Adolphus will be one of several in the East Laurens front seven that offensive lines will have their hands full in keeping out of the backfield.

WR/FS Khanoski O'Neal, Sr.

Like Guyton, he's almost a household name by this point in an East Laurens career that saw its first foray into the Friday-night fires as a freshman in Turner's first season at the helm. And he is likewise one of the top players in a well-rounded senior class that will lead the Falcons into 2021.

At 5-foot-10, 175 pounds, the 2020 all-region first teamer runs a 4.5 40, and could make a solid contribution just about anywhere he was needed. At times, the free safety could be a thumper, but more often than not built a reputation as the quintessential safety-net player who could cover field and help his team stay out of the big play. He made 54 stops, along with two interceptions and a fumble recovery in 2020.

O'Neal, who knows the Falcons' system as well as anybody, will be likely the most experienced and reliable returner in the entire secondary.

"He can do it all," Turner said. "He's great against the running game. He had 80-something tackles last year. And he was great against the passing game."

He also fits somewhere in about an eight-man rotation at wide receiver, and is one of several in that group with the talent for going up to make catches and making things happen after the reception. Last year, he also got numerous carries on jet sweeps, which should be another feature of the East Laurens ground attack.

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East Laurens hopes it can use as a runway to build up speed heading into region play. The Falcons had the same flight plan against a similar schedule last fall, until some adversity struck around late September and killed the momentum they had going.

"Last year, we started off well, then the COVID train just drilled us week after week, and

it just destroyed us," Turner said. "If our kids believe, we can go out and compete with anybody in the region. If we roll through our non-region games, I think the more they win early, the more we're gonna believe and we can build off that when we come to Swainsboro for the first region game, and as we go on through the region."

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THREE NEW FACES...

WR/ILB Ladarius Taylor, Sr.

Ok, so he's not entirely new. But we had to fit him in somewhere...

Taylor, the 6-foot-1, 200 pounder is another beast in the weight room as well as on the track, where he's been clocked at a 4.6 40. On Friday nights, he shows up in a big way on the field, and all over the box score and highlight reel. A season ago, he logged 57 solo tackles, three for loss, and a team-high four sacks.

The senior, one of the hardest workers on the team, is someone Turner fully expects to see playing college football next year, if all goes well.

"He's gonna have a monster year," he said. "He's grown so much. He's a big ole youngun now."

Taylor started his Falcon career as a strong safety, but now for the size he's added, has worked his way into the front seven, where his knowledge of the workings of the entire defense and ability to do most anything he's assigned is a huge plus.

"That makes him very versatile," Turner said. "I can do a lot of different things in coverage with him."

A potential starter at quarterback

The loss of two-year starter Cole Strickland leaves the Falcons with perhaps their biggest vacancy behind center. And their three-way battle for the position remained fluid as the team entered fall camp, with three legitimate contenders in the mix.

Those included West Laurens transfer Zaylen Boston (a sophomore at 5-foot-9, 165), 2020 backup Kashmere Bryant (a junior at 5-foot-10, 175) and newcomer Tenard Carswell (a junior at 6-foot, 200).

Bryant is on the smaller side, and would be a signal caller more similar to last year's starter, Cole Strickland, in his electric speed.

"He might be the fastest kid on the team," Turner said.

Carswell transferred in this spring from Valdosta High School... although don't get the impression he was challenging the Wildcats' Jake Garcia or Amari Jones as a sophomore last fall. Mostly known for his baseball, he can sling the rock with the rest of his competitors, though his biggest upside is a physical running ability.

Boston fits somewhere between the two, with solid wheels and an "exceptional arm" that might be the best of the trio. He also features an imposing build, and could offer the perfect mix of everything the Falcons need in the position.

But the decision between the three options, for Turner and offensive coordinator Derrick Thomas, will all come down to who's able to put the offense in a position to move the ball.

"We've got to get our quarterback nailed down, and we will," Turner said at the start of August. "We've thrown a lot this summer, but we've got to see who can run our offense with pads on... We don't know who the man is, but it's going to come down to who can hit the wide-open receiver."

ILB Trysten Baker, Jr.

Like most on this list, he's hardly new, as a third-year starter on the inside for the Falcon D. The 5-foot-9, 185 pounder has had his share of big plays and teachable moments as he and his teammates have matured. But like many on the defensive side, Baker is shaping into one of East Laurens' most well-rounded players.

Physically, he brings the goods that almost everyone else does. This spring, he finished runner-up at the state weightlifting competition, missing out on gold due only to the fact that he competed in the same division as classmate and state No. 1 Trey Barwick — who's likely the strongest Falcon athlete not playing football.

But the cerebral junior outdoes even that athletic ability with his football IQ, and an awareness on the field that rarely gets him beat.

"Trysten is so smart, and so coachable," Turner said. "He just does things right. He doesn't screw up... He's just a very headsy football player... He's a joy to coach. He's one who always brings that lunchpail. He's a worker. That's that wrestling background. Wrestlers just make great football players... And they're used to winning that one-on-one battle. Him being a wrestler, it makes him one heck of a football player."

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Young Irish seek depth in hunt for 4-peat in 4-A

By CLAY REYNOLDS
Sports Editor

Not to say it's easy to do, but Dublin has made winning region titles, lately, look like clockwork.

The Irish are on a streak of three straight, and now at nine for the local career of head coach Roger Holmes. If they could win another this fall, they would match the stretch of four in a row between 2005 and 2008 that, like the current one, included a AA state title.

Though eventually knocked out of the playoffs earlier than planned by state runner-up Brooks County, Dublin was virtually unchallenged in a rampage through region 4-A last season, answering conclusively the question many had of whether a 2019 state champion that was replacing over 20 seniors and all but about four starters could return to form.

They did, overcoming a slight hitch out of the gate versus Dodge County to reel off nine straight wins, by double figures in all except a win at Wilcox County, and finish the regular season at 9-1.

The question hasn't changed this fall, as the Irish bring back a few more experienced starters than they had to work with going into 2020, but still have to reload at most positions.

Dublin, again, has a first string going each way that it can feel good about. But that's never enough to get you through the grind of a full season. When inevitable injuries, quarantines and the like come along, that'll be the true measure of the team.

"Our huge question mark is depth," Holmes said in early August. "I think that's always a concern at a small school, and certainly we're no different."

In more than 30 years of coaching, he's seen his share of seasons like this one where you replace most of what you had and start from next-to-scratch. The Irish are now doing it for a second year in a row, after starting senior-heavy lineups in both 2019 and 2020 that both saw major losses to graduation.

The issues are shared by other programs, but Dublin

DUBLIN FIGHTING IRISH



HEAD COACH: Roger Holmes, 20th season (171-61-1 at Dublin; 244-110-1 career)

OFFENSE: Wing-T / **DEFENSE:** 4-3

2020 RECORD: 9-2 (8-0 region 4-A)

LAST PLAYOFF APPEARANCE: 2020 (lost to Brooks Co. in 2nd rd.)

RETURNING STARTERS: 3 on offense, 4 on defense

KEY LOSSES: QB Markelle Mitchell, RB/LB Josh Isaac, ATH/DB Kendell Wade, ATH, DB Gabe Guyton, OL/DL Natelyn Gregory, OL/DL Steve Slaughter

OPENER: Aug. 27 vs. Dodge Co.

KEY BALLGAMES: Oct. 8 vs. Wilcox Co., Oct. 22 vs. Johnson Co., Nov. 5 vs. Montgomery Co.

THREE TO WATCH...

WB/CB J.T. Wright, Sr.

Different generations at Dublin have had more of them than others, but as a rule, players with starting experience numbering three years or more are the exception rather than the rule.

Wright is one of a select few suiting up for the Irish this year who made a measurable impact as a sophomore on a loaded 2019 state championship team. That's a testament to his talent as much as his overall experience, which will be immensely valuable to a Dublin team that since climbing to the pinnacle of AA two years ago has lacked the year-to-year continuity in its starting ranks that laid the groundwork for that achievement.

But his all-around athleticism won't hurt either. The 5-foot-7, 140-pound senior might be on the smaller side, but he can fly.

After multiple difference-making performances at corner en route to the '19 state crown, Wright made his debut on the offensive side of the ball last year at wing-back, to the tune of 970 yards and 14 touchdowns. By 88 carries, that's an 11-yard average. He also added two interceptions.

WB/CB Qua Ashley, Sr.

In a complement along the lines of Maurice Martin to Cedric O'Neal, or

Brandon Edmond to Brian Wilcher, Ashley's explosive ability on the other side of Dublin's double-wing formations balances the scales of big-play potential that defenses have to respect going each direction.

Ashley vs. Wright in a footrace would be fun to watch, although the edge in pure speed goes to the latter. Qua's 5-foot-11, 180-pound build is more robust and physical, making him the back most apt to run downhill from deep in formations. His quick feet also help him fit through tight spaces, with moves and agility to add in that do even more to help him evade tacklers.

For all of last season, the quickness of both in reaching the corner was an ace in the hole against teams in the games where Dublin could find no other advantage.

If Dublin's breaking 'em to the house on a regular basis, as they're known to do quite often, it's likely Ashley and Wright — as perhaps one of the most explosive running back tandems in the state — will be the ones making that trip most often.

"They're two good ones to have back," said head coach Roger Holmes. "I really think how well we do early in the year will be very dependent upon them."

OG/DE Ramonte Dardy, Jr.

Dardy broke in on the D-line a year ago, where he made a solid impact with some turnover-forcing hits, and all-around great tackling. The 6-foot-2, 230-pounder is undoubtedly a specimen, and was a natu-

ral fit to step into one of two demanding roles at offensive guard.

The opposite starting position will belong to fellow junior Desmond Gilbert, who fits a similar mold. He was a defensive end last year, but will move inside to tackle this fall.

Both players have all the size you could need to get great leverage on a block, along with top-end speed for linemen. Even better: Both, as 11th graders, also have one more year to go after this one.

"From a physical standpoint, they have everything you want," Holmes said.

The guards, who carry most of the pulling responsibility in Dublin's Wing-T offense, are players the system depends on. And the ability of both Dardy and Gilbert to get the job done — and also stay healthy, as the Irish aren't terribly deep at the position — will have a lot to do with the effectiveness of their ground attack, and just how often the two key players listed above make the highlight reel.

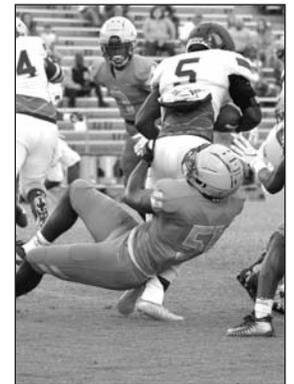


Photo by Clay Reynolds

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— for its own unique situation — has fallen a good bit behind in strength and conditioning progress, largely because last year's fully-remote students couldn't take part in school-day weightlifting and were left to their own devices when it came to strength training during the main parts of the year.

Last year's backups also got the short end of the stick during last year's summer-time crunch, with no half-pad camps or 7-on-7 tournaments that gave this year's new starters a chance to earn their stripes before being thrown right into

the Friday night flames. The cancellation of last fall's Dublin Middle School season brought on additional challenges in catching up this year's ninth-grade class, which arrived well behind on game experience and playbook knowledge.

"I think it has really created some major question marks about our depth, especially up front," Holmes said. "We're far above where we were this time last year, simply because we were able to have spring practice. But it's the same deal as last year. We were replacing 10 starters on offense...

Everything was a question mark. So having spring practice has really helped us develop our depth chart, and know where and what we want to do."

As a whole, the Irish are also a bit undersized, which is not necessarily a bad thing. What many players lack physically, they'll make up for in smarts and sound technique. That's especially true on defense, where three of four projected starters on the line run 5-flat 40-yard dashes. Move out to linebacker, and all the three frontline players run a 4.8.

"We feel like we can run,"

Holmes said of the speed. "We're lacking some in that physical size that you'd like to have, but we can run a little bit."

The starting 11, and a handful of established backups in the rotations at certain posts, should more than hold their own. And against some in region 4-A, that'll be enough to win. But perhaps not against many of the league's deeper and more experienced heavyweights.

For now, Dublin's varsity-

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THREE NEW FACES...

QB/OLB JaQuarius Evans, Jr.

This is the dawning of the age of JaQuarius... at least at quarterback.

The rising junior, and younger brother of Irish legend Ja'Ques, broke in last season on defense, where he stepped up to fill a key need at a mishmash of outside linebacker and nickel corner. Now, the junior will face the challenge of trying to go — and stay healthy — both ways.

Of multiple quarterback hopefuls in the competition through spring and summer, Evans has remained the option with the most to offer. At 5-foot-11, he's almost as tall as Ja'Ques, though much more slender, at a lean 170 pounds. But his big body, average speed and considerable arm talent should bring a few unique wrinkles to Dublin's Wing-T attack.

"He's had a good spring and a solid summer," Holmes said.

If Evans' size and speed can be half the problem for defenses his brother's was as a record-challenging fullback, Dublin will have weapons galore to work with on the offensive side.

How to balance being a two-way starter, something successfully struck by previous Irish QBs but nonetheless a challenge, is a bridge they'll cross if needed by reluctantly resting him on the defensive side, where his contributions will be just as important.

WB/FS J'Kwon Waters, Sr.

Between Ashley and Wright at cornerback and another senior in Waters at the deep safety, Dublin's defensive secondary is the richest position group in returning seniority. But that doesn't necessarily go the same for experience at the two safety slots, where Waters is the projected starter alongside sophomore Malachi O'Neal. Some other underclassmen and the injured senior David Folsom will also be in the mix, but early on, it'll fall to Waters to provide a majority of the leadership, tackles and pass break-ups as the last line of defense on the back end.

Despite some varsity inexperience, he looks to have everything it takes to play the position, and excel.

"From an athletic standpoint, he's capable of doing anything you want," Holmes said. "And he's also shown a tendency to be a kid that's not afraid to strike you."

Newcomers on the offensive line

Although it was made up of entirely first-time starters, Dublin's O-line of 2020 did quite well in maintaining the position group's 2019 momentum, paving the way for a 3,000-yard rushing season. The Irish will try to do that again this fall as they execute another complete overhaul up front, plugging in a couple of experienced players at guard but, around them, several who are much greener.

One of the newest, but also most promising, is Drew Rozier, who is slated to start at left tackle. The 200-pound sophomore hit the ground running in his first season playing football, and had "a really good spring" before a frustrating injury during the summer threw a wrench in his rapid progress. If healthy, he's expected to step in and start in a key role at left tackle.

At center is a slightly more experienced player in senior Caleb Hall. The 265-pounder got the job done when he filled in at the slot during stretches of last season, but will now be looked to as the anchor on every Friday night this fall.

"They're smart kids," Holmes said. "They have a chance to be really good."



Photo by Clay Reynolds

Trojans need cohesion between youth, veterans to stay in successful groove

By **CLAY REYNOLDS**
Sports Editor

At Johnson County, football success from year to year most often comes down to chemistry.

The Trojans, for a decade and a half under head coach Don Norton, have never had a losing season. That can be attributed as much to Wrightsville's deep reservoir of football talent as it is to the leadership of the 18-year coaching veteran, who has set in place a consistent culture and maintained some high standards when it comes to fundamentals, work ethic and character.

But what's the secret ingredient to the special seasons the Trojans have enjoyed the last two years, with back-to-back win totals of eight, a sub-region title in 2019 and a second-straight playoff berth last fall?

It's something hard to quantify or even put your finger on, but the simple answer is the unique togetherness that the members of both squads seemed to share in a greater way than some before.

For Norton, there's just as important a focus placed on family and team-building as on development of football skills and strength training. And it's that factor, among others, that seems to set some of the school's most successful teams apart from the rest.

A common bond for players and coaches of the last two seasons was the loss and legacy of longtime JoCo assistant coach Shawn Linder, who was killed in a tragic car crash late in the 2019 season. The Trojans, who have kept his memory at the forefront of mind ever since, were brought together by the new appreciation it gave them for the relationships they share with one another, and the opportunity to play the game he so deeply loved coaching.

That will remain a source of unity for this year's Johnson County team, which is out to find its own unique spark, and live up to the same high marks of the last two.

The 2021 Trojans are a mix of new players and old, with only a modest number of returning starters, but a majority of the athletes who've been vital to their success in the last two seasons back in the fold. And most would assume that combination, along with the recent winning tradition that can be its own builder of regenerative culture, would have Johnson County carrying its momentum over from last year and picking up somewhere pretty close to where it left off.

But as much as he's hopeful his Trojans can continue on the track toward contending again in region 4-A and reaching the playoffs, Norton said this particular team will have its own work cut out to get there. A new team, no matter its talent or experience level, is its own petri dish in which winning culture has to develop naturally.

"Each year, teams are fresh and brand new, and it's hard to compare one team to the next," Norton said. "You hope that the lessons learned from the previous group of seniors will continue to be taught by the players and staff, in the locker room and on the practice field and the weight room. But that's kind of up to them."

The most experienced group of returning players, and focal point of the JoCo offense, is its offensive backfield, where all three starters will return with extensive playing time under their belt.

"That's who people are gonna talk about," Norton said.

Deep as usual at the position, the Trojans' playmaking ability on the ground will run beyond the main trio of Germivy Tucker, JaKelvis Whitley and William Taylor, and likely give them a consistent threat to build on with a much younger and more inexperienced situation shaping up in the passing game.

Youth also abounds on the offensive line and all over the defense. There's no shortage of varsity-level talent in either department, though building cohesive units in both is more than a plug-and-play proposition. It'll be communication and cooperation, more than just making tackles or blocks, that likely prove to be the key to finding that all-important synergy.

"A lot of the kids are playing different positions," Norton said of the turnover. "In high school football, you've got to replace seniors every year. We replace a really good group. Our question marks would be who's able to develop the leadership roles on defense."

Continuity and consistent success, with the roster that's back this fall, have all the pieces in place for another strong season. Johnson County, if all goes as expected, should be back squarely in the mix for a top finish in region 4-A and a likely playoff berth.

The Trojans have been knocking at the door of another deep playoff run, their last postseason win coming en route to the state quarterfinals in 2015, but were denied each of the last two seasons in heartbreaking losses, last November's a two-touchdown comeback effort and overtime interception by Mitchell County that stole a first-round win.

This season should be another successful one, with equal potential for a significant breakthrough if Johnson County can find the winning concoction that takes them over the top in the close games. But the competition among region chemists will no doubt be a stiff one.

Norton is always guarded about most every specific detail on his team except the fact that they're liable to have a rough time with everybody on their schedule. And the case is certainly no different this fall.

"We have a very strong schedule, and we're

JOCO

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JOHNSON COUNTY TROJANS



HEAD COACH: Don Norton, 15th season (102-49 at Johnson County, 109-72 overall)

OFFENSE: Wing-T / **DEFENSE:** 4-4

2020 RECORD: 8-3 (6-2 region 4-A)

LAST PLAYOFF APPEARANCE: 2020 (lost to Mitchell Co. in first round)

RETURNING STARTERS: 4 on offense, 4 on defense

KEY LOSSES: QB Jet Grady, WR/DB Jax Scott, OL/DL Aiden Greenway, ATH Jamon Hodges

OPENER: Aug. 27 at East Laurens

KEY BALLGAMES: Sept. 10 at Wilcox Co., Oct. 8 vs. Montgomery Co., Oct. 22 at Dublin

JOCO

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going to see some fantastic opponents," Norton said. "I'm confident that it's going to be some excellent football games, and we're going to have to play extremely hard to stay competitive."

DUBLIN

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readiness past the first tier of the depth chart is hit-or-miss. That can change as the season unfolds and some younger players come along, but injuries and the strain a tight playing rotation can put on key athletes who have no choice but to start in multiple directions are potential pitfalls.

Add in another season of unpredictable COVID-19 concerns that can rule out any player or coach without warning, and you wind up with a lot of contingencies, and relatively few ways to prepare for them.

"This upcoming season very well can be as turbulent or more turbulent than what we went through last year," Holmes said. "Maintaining our health is going to be a major factor, or the development of our backups."

The Irish will hope for good luck as they walk that line this fall, although if there's one horseshoe they can count on having in their pocket, it's the schedule, which has all three pivotal region matchups with JoCo, Montgomery and Wilcox taking place in the Shamrock Bowl.

"Our belief has always been if we can take care of our business at home, we can get to where we're trying to get to," Holmes said.

THREE TO WATCH...

FB/OLB Germivy Tucker, Jr.

By the time his high school career is done, he'll likely have made a case for being the best Johnson County running back since... well, you know who.

The rising junior, who's already got two 1,000-yard rushing seasons under his belt (not even something Herschel Walker could claim by this point), was listed by Georgia High School Football Daily as the 11th highest-gaining of the top 15 returning backs in the entire state.

He rushed for 1,481 yards and 13 touchdowns last fall, earning region offensive player-of-the-year honors and all-state honorable mention. And if he stays healthy, expect a similarly eye-popping season from him this fall.

The 5-foot-7, 165-pounder is no giant, but runs with a low center and uses a thick lower body to generate explosive power. Stride-for-stride, his speed and momentum are as elite as it gets. And despite the between-the-tackles nature of the deep back position in Johnson County's Wing-T, his big plays are never limited to the inside versus out, where defense have to be equally prepared to account for and tackle him.

ATH/DB JaKelvis "Jook" Whitley, Jr.

He worked at wing last year, and was a devastating big-play threat to complement Tucker's downhill misdirection on sweeps to the edge that few defenses could contain. The 5-foot-6, 140-pound sprinter rushed for over 400 yards and six touchdowns, with some additional work as a returner on special teams and in the defensive secondary.

Whitley is a shoo-in to play each of his existing roles again, if the status quo stays unchanged. But he's taken some snaps at quarterback as well, where the opportunity to handle the ball on every play might take his threat level up a whole nother notch.

RB/LB Jeloney Waters, Sr.

The third in a first-class trio of rushers lining up in the backfield this fall, Waters rolled up around 300 yards and four touchdowns last fall, and returned a good many kickoffs, averaging around 17 yards a pop.

The 5-foot-7, 170 pound senior will also be counted on to make plays at linebacker, where he'll be one of only a handful of returning leaders on the defensive side of the football.

He's a player who will only occasionally leave the field, but when he's on will play a vital part at some level in almost every play the Trojans run.

fied, it's likely the cancellation of a second scrimmage game Aug. 12 will push the competition on into the regular season. The Trojans get two weeks of non-region ball, but will need to have things pretty well settled by Sept. 10, when region play starts off with a bang versus Wilcox County.

FB/MLB Joshua Taylor, So.

His older brother William, a rising senior, will return as a starting inside linebacker and spell at running back. Josh, who was only a freshman last year, found his way into just a handful of games and will only this fall see his first legitimate varsity action.

But his skills, which might wind up benefiting the Trojans in a number of spots, will be valuable for an offense and defense looking to find contributors and depth wherever it can.

OL/DT Mark Kolasa, Sr.

Johnson County's got a lot of running back talent, but it's unlikely any of its top rushers of a year ago would've covered near the amount of field they did without some excellent blocking up front, a good bit of which graduated with last year's senior class.

The 2021 offensive line will be a mish-mash of experienced players and younger blockers learning their way. While the resources are there for the group to excel again, finding the all-too-critical chemistry and consistency up front their predecessors had is neither an easy nor an overnight process.

"It doesn't matter what kind of backs you've got," Norton said. "It all falls on the line. We graduated three guys who are pretty solid and multiple starters with real high character."

Of the players vying to secure one of the five main spots on the line, the 6-foot, 210-pound Kolasa is one Norton said has stepped up. As a senior, he'll likely be tasked with providing some difference-making leadership that the Trojans will need to get where they're hoping to go.

"We're working on it," Norton said of the O-line's progress. "We're trying to get it together."



Photo by Ralph Jackson

THREE NEW FACES...

A mystery QB

The field of candidates to play quarterback for the Trojans this offseason was nearly as crowded as some presidential primaries, with as many as five different players getting looks throughout the summer and fall. And even a week out from Joco's scheduled opener, it's still way too early to project a winner.

Players other than the aforementioned Whitley rumored to be in the mix include senior K.J. Strickland, sophomore Ben Murray, senior Dalton Brantley and junior Gannon Carter. Head coach Don Norton, who plays things of this nature pretty close to the vest, said early in August that the five names had been narrowed down to four, but didn't go any further in naming a leader among the group of hopefuls who — at that point — were still rotating almost rep-by-rep.

"The QB is a hard position for us," he said. "We ask a lot of them, and you know experience is great, but the only way you can get experience is to play. We've got four kids trying to win the job, so we'll see how it goes."

If a frontrunner hasn't yet been identi-

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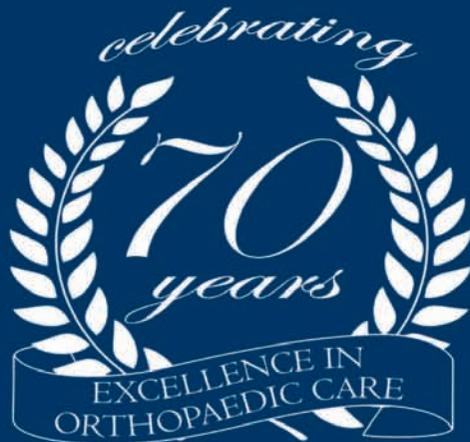
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Art of the reload: New faces, similar expectations as Royals look to build on 2020 quarterfinal run

By CLAY REYNOLDS
Sports Editor

For a program as large and healthy as Bleckley County's, true rebuilding seasons are starting to become a rarity.

There's no avoiding the early struggles of a team that breaks in a vast majority of players who've never competed on a Friday night field, but certain programs seem to be better at preparing those upcoming players to withstand the varsity fire, and in the years of only mild-to-moderate turnover, usually show why.

Bleckley is starting to look like one of them, as it faces the task of replacing a class of 2020 seniors that wasn't overwhelmingly huge, but was likely one of its most talented in recent memory. The Royals, despite graduating a five-star left tackle, a record-setting quarterback, an all-state D-tackle and a play-making tailback from last year's state quarterfinal team, have found a way to restock the thinning shelves of the pantry and put a team on the field this fall with a chance at being just as good.

There are no doubt some large shoes to fill in those go-to roles on offense and defense, but Bleckley head coach Von Lassiter believes this year's team has the talent to pick up right where it left off a year ago if it can bridge that experience gap without a hiccup.

"We were fortunate enough to have some guys that got some reps last year in games where we could get them in on Fridays, and a lot of those guys played on Thursdays as well," he said. "We feel really good about where we're at developing guys, so hopefully when the lights come on on Fridays, it won't be something new. If they can step in, work hard and do well each week, I think our guys are ready for it."

Making last year's heights of success more of a tradition (the 2020 quarterfinal run was just the second in program history) is the ongoing goal for Lassiter, who would also like to see Bleckley County get over its

BLECKLEY
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BLECKLEY COUNTY ROYALS



HEAD COACH: Von Lassiter, fifth season (60-30 career, 25-18 at Bleckley)

OFFENSE: Spread / **DEFENSE:** 3-4

2020 RECORD: 8-4 (3-2 region 3-AA)

LAST PLAYOFF APPEARANCE: 2020 (lost to Rabun Co. in state quarterfinals)

KEY LOSSES: OL Amarius Mims, DL Willie Harris, QB Dominic Sasser, RB/LB Chuckie Stephens

RETURNING STARTERS: 6 on offense, 6 on defense

OPENER: Aug. 20 at West Laurens

KEY BALLGAMES: Sept. 24 at Dodge Co., Oct. 15 vs. Northeast Macon, Oct. 22 at Washington Co.

THREE TO WATCH...

RB Jahvon Butler, Jr.

As a sophomore, he led the Royals in rushing with 1,266 yards on 174 carries, as half of likely the most efficient and consistent tailback tandem in the classification. The style of the 5-foot-10, 205-pound bowling ball went hand-in-hand with that of the slightly quicker, but almost identical Chuckie Stephens (his stat line came just short of



Photo by Clay Reynolds

1,000 yards on the year) as both went to town behind one of the nation's top left tackles in Amarius Mims, and the rest of a road-grading Bleckley offensive line.

Butler, with Stephens and Mims having graduated, is the last of those 2020 standouts

remaining. And though the rising junior will no doubt have some talented backups to lean on, he'll be expected to shoulder a bigger mantle for the Royals' ground game, and likely its entire offense, as the only proven playmaker to return this fall.

Bleckley's O-line should be solid again, although with a new group you can bank on the holes not being quite as wide-open as they were last fall. So it'll now be more up to Butler to continue making the plays he did in 2020, and make the rushing attack just as much of a problem for defenses.

RB/OLB Christian Newbern, Jr.

There were a boatload of solid, experienced seniors around him in the front seven last fall, giving Newbern — one of a handful of young, first-time starters — a safety net in his first varsity season. And that helped set the stage for a breakout year, where despite an early learning curve, the sophomore showed out with more than his share of big plays.

"He started last year, but he was probably a little young and new to the position," said head coach Von Lassiter. "I think, defensively, he's going to have a really good year."

At 6-foot-1, 205 pounds, Newbern offers a unique skill set that makes him somewhat mismatch-proof as a linebacker, featuring the size to fit the traditional mold of pass-rusher and run-stopper, but also the speed to hang with receivers and running backs step-for-step. His position, truthfully, is more that of the increasingly-popular hybrid nickel back — a "rover" or "star" to some — that functions as a fifth member of the secondary, but plays close to the line of scrimmage, where he can blitz, support the run or drop into coverage.

As the 2020 season unfolded, Newbern transitioned slowly from talented newcomer to as important a piece of the Bleckley defense as anybody. And as the new leader of a rebuilt front group this fall, his versatility and experience as a starter would figure to set him up nicely for exceptional junior and senior seasons.

DB Tyler Wilcox, Jr.

The Royals were exceedingly young on the secondary depth chart at the start of last season, and despite some ups and downs against a myriad opposing offenses in the regular season, started to lock in when it counted come playoff time. Their best game, of three quality performances in the postseason, was likely the finale against Rabun County, when they all but took away Georgia-bound quarterback Gunner Stockton's options deep down the field.

Wilcox proved a major key in that matchup, and as the season went along, emerging as a top tackler and picking off at least three passes from his spot at safety.

Look for some added consistency this fall as he continues to provide over-the-middle coverage and sound tackling out of the secondary, also working in as a target at wide receiver on the opposite side of the ball.

THREE NEW FACES...

QB James Teston, Sr.

Both Teston and rising junior Eli Mullis, slated to remain a starter at tight end after his 2020 first-team all-region selection, backed up the now-college quarterback Dominic Sasser a year ago.

Their competition for the starting job, through the summer, was mostly a dead heat, to the point that no decision on a No. 1 at the position will be entirely permanent.

But with no far-and-away front-runner, the natural fit seemed to go with the status quo for both players.

"James has worked really hard this summer, and continued to get better," Lassiter said.

Teston, at 6-foot-2, 175 pounds, is a lefty with sound footwork, and a decent release, despite a long delivery. Like Sasser, multiple years running the offense from middle school to JV has put him in a position to step right in and play at a strong level.

Bleckley will look for the same consistency they saw as a junior and senior from Sasser in managing the offense, and making the key, simple throws he'll be asked to.

WR/LB Markeze Brown, So.

There were several wideouts who were regular targets for the Royals last year, among those Brown, who started at the base of the totem pole as just a freshman, but quickly worked his way into the main rotation with a combo of impressive size, quick feet and — of most advantage — excellent route-running chops. They also used him a good bit from out wide, and occasionally in the backfield, on sweep handoffs.

As just a sophomore, he enters 2021 as Bleckley's prohibitive No. 1 receiver, and may only just now begin coming into his own.

"I think he's going to have a really good year," Lassiter said.

Offensive line

It's no secret the Royals have some holes to fill after graduating Mims, a top lineman in school history, along with a three-year starter at center in Beau DuBois who was just as much a part of their success up front.

Those strengths made the ground game more of a priority in 2020 than it has been in more pass-happy seasons of late, but don't expect the Royals to go away from it with their top rusher returning and a reloaded O-line.

The new group, led by guards Zeb DuBois and Dawson Sanders, has looked good. They'll be younger at the surrounding positions, but have the talent, size and depth to remain strong at controlling the line of scrimmage.

"There are some new guys there, but they're a really cohesive unit," Lassiter said. "I think that's a spot for us that we feel really good about if no injuries come around."



Homecoming for Hardin, but tall odds in region title defense as Indians start over from square 1

By **CLAY REYNOLDS**
Sports Editor

In 36 years of coaching football, Ray Hardin has been around the block a few times.

The road, for him, has been less of a small, tight square and more of a drawn-out, winding loop that took quite a journey to get around. But if you keep pressing ahead, it always eventually leads you home.

The latest lap took about 11 years, but Hardin is back at Dodge County, where he graduated high school and coached as an assistant for a good portion of his career. The lifelong Eastman resident got the unexpected chance for a homecoming this summer, along with an opportunity he had long since written off to become a head football coach and athletic director, when the Indians tabbed him as the successor to Ken Cofer, who resigned late in the spring.

Doing so at his alma mater made the move an even more special one, although its somewhat abrupt timing gave Hardin little time for sentimentality.

"I get hired one day, clean out my desk the next day, then it's right to work," he said. "I haven't had time yet to even reflect on that, to go back with the old dream-come-true kind of thing, because I kind of shoved that thing aside some time back."

Hardin hasn't gone far since his last stint with the Indians in the late 2000s, in which he spent several years as head baseball coach. Between jobs at West Laurens and Bleckley, he continued to make his home in Dodge County, smackdab between Eastman and Cochran.

Cofer's departure added some additional turnover this offseason for an Indian program that had already lost a massive graduating class, including at least three college signees: Mikhail Carr (Valdosta State) Daylon Gordon (Georgia Tech) and Mason Mangham (Reinhardt). The transfer of returning QB Hunter Kirkley (Westfield) and senior linebacker Kade Harpe (Jeff Davis) did even more to put Dodge, after winning the region 3-AA championship, in rebuilding mode.

The Indians will look similar to what they always have schematically, out of an offense that's spread on the surface, but power in its DNA, and a 3-4 base D. But there will be a lot of wholesale change when it comes to the "Jimmies and Joes" on the roster.

DODGE
continued on page 19

DODGE COUNTY INDIANS



HEAD COACH Ray Hardin, first season
OFFENSE: Spread / **DEFENSE:** 3-4
2020 RECORD: 6-4 (4-1 region 3-AA)
LAST PLAYOFF APPEARANCE: 2020 (lost to Thomasville in second round)
RETURNING STARTERS: 3 on offense, 2 on defense

KEY LOSSES: RB/LB Daylon Gordon, WR/DB Mikhail Carr, WR/DB Keldrick Beck, QB Hunter Kirkley (transfer)

OPENER: Aug. 20 vs. Toombs Co.

KEY BALLGAMES: Sept. 24 vs. Bleckley Co., Oct. 22 at Northeast Macon, Oct. 29 vs. Washington Co.

THREE TO WATCH...

WR/DB Lamarie Mitchell, Jr.

Another of just a handful of returning starters on defense, Mitchell brings in a year or more of playing experience after seeing the field a decent amount as a freshman and putting in regular snaps at outside linebacker, in addition to receiver, last fall, earning first-team all-region selection for his role on D.

The 5-foot-9, 153-pound junior was a top-notch run stopper off the edge, showing off an uncommon patience with plays that helped him avoid getting picked up by blockers or overrunning ball-carriers with bad angles. And when chasing those runners down in the wide-open field, he rarely failed to run them out of bounds near the line or just downfield with a textbook tackle. Mitchell also picked up a few sacks and big plays in the kicking game, between stops on kickoff coverage and a blocked punt and recovery against Lamar County.

Look for him to continue his superb play in all those areas as he headlines the Dodge County defense this year.

RB/CB Demron Gordon, Jr.

He's the younger brother of Daylon, a 2020 first-team all-region pick and multiple-time all-state honorable mention at tailback who rushed for nearly 3,000 yards in his career, and is now on scholarship at Georgia Tech.

Demron spent most of his sophomore season on defense, where a pick six out of halftime to rob a touchdown against Dublin was among the moments that suggested a bright future in store. The depth chart was too crowded for him to carve out a starting niche last fall, but now with huge needs at running back, in the secondary and on special teams, he'll be counted on significantly in all three phases.

"He's stepped up," said head coach Ray Hardin.

Gordon will likely lead a committee of young rushers, which will also include Sherman Clay and Zion Williams as frequent ball-carriers, and try to do more ball-hawking as a regular defen-

sive back.

OL Cameron Gooch, Sr.

A starter at left tackle as a junior, he's projected to slide over and take the spot of 2021 graduate Patrick Stevenson at center this fall. And as probably the biggest of the men up front, Gooch will be both the leader and bulwark of an offensive line that has a high standard to live up to.

Dodge County has consistently been excellent up front, and Gooch's lateral speed on kick-outs, along with his strength at the point of attack, was a

key piece of a ground attack that helped the Indians rush for over seven yards per carry and ultimately win the region.

His responsibilities will change a bit inside, but Gooch will be expected to remain a reliable blocker to run behind and keep a clean pocket. And with an almost entirely new generation of skill players working in the backfield, his consistency will be instrumental if Dodge can find an early identity on offense.

THREE NEW FACES...

QB Duke Johnson, Fr.

As of the first week in August, when pads were being put on for the first time, Johnson had not yet officially been named the starting QB. But Hardin called him the "leader in the pack" of candidates to replace the talented Hunter Kirkley, who transferred for his junior season to Perry's Westfield School.



Photo by Clay Reynolds

The freshman has some size beyond his years, at 6-foot-3, and for a first-year at the position, is coming along in his progression better than average. He gets some decent zip on his throws, and through 7-on-7 season, had proven an ability to handle the pressure and make decisions at a starting level.

"He's taken it over," Hardin said of Johnson's mastery of the playbook. "We've had to, not force-feed, but just kind of manage what portion we give him right now. It's pretty tough to take on that task. With your quarterback, it's not just a position, it's a status. So far, he's shouldered it well."

TE/ILB Damarion Simmons, Jr.

One of several starters this fall who found the field in a backup role last year, Simmons will take on the responsibility of helping stop the run while navigating the minefield between opposing tackles. The 6-foot, 200-pounder is a weightroom monster who only continues to add to a build that's a natural fit for his position on defense.

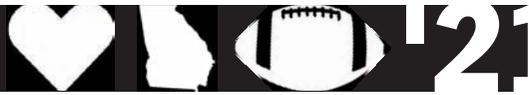
He's also slated to start offensively as a tight end, in a role where he'll frequently double as slot receiver or H-back, and provide a number of key blocks for those young running backs on outside and off-tackle runs.

ILB Jackson Bowen, Sr.

Opposite Simmons on the interior of the linebacking corps is a senior who will see his first regular action this year, but throughout the offseason has made a major impression on his coaches.

A defender who plays as smart as he does hard, Bowen has not only shown a talent for being in the right spot to make a play, but also for making sure his teammates are as well. At 5-foot-11, 190 pounds, he should prove a valuable piece for the Dodge County defense.

"My first three days with him watching him, seeing how he reacts and stuff, I said, 'This guy's another coach on the field,'" Hardin said. "He gets us lined up and in the right spots."



TRINITY
from page 4

more hard ones ahead.

The past year has been a rough one for the Crusader family, which in February lost its beloved head coach Jimmy Fields following a yearlong bout with Lou Gherig's disease.

The most recent football campaign, a second in back-to-back losing seasons, was winless, as recent sport-specific trends cause the program to continue losing competitive ground to many in its region and AAA classification, along with most at the top of the GISA's AA league as well. A revival of massive proportions is likely needed to begin reversing the pattern and bring the Crusaders back to their former days as a perennial state power in AA and, at a minimum, a consistent middle-of-the-pack team in AAA.

But the big picture is a concern for later, with the upcoming season knocking on the door and bringing its own challenges of preparing a team for the fall on a short offseason, and with a limited staff (at present, Trinity is working with just one full-time assistant and a handful of community coaches).

Marsh's energetic spirit has caught on through summer workouts, and the start of fall practice,

which he kicked off by bringing back a variation on the old-school football camp that red tape, for most programs, has put mostly out of use. The team and staff spent several days in a row shackled up on campus while holding regular practice, weight training sessions and team-building time.

He said the exhausting week, which included two joint practices, "brought the team together and closer," and has helped springboard them into the leadup to the regular season.

"I think to build chemistry, you have to overcome adversity together," he said. "This team, especially with the struggles they had last year, has been through a lot of adversity. So that's going to bring them closer together. They were already a pretty close group when I came in. We pushed them hard in workouts, in camp. We pushed them to their breaking point, I believe, at certain points. They overcame it, they got through it, and everyone's still here. I think it's even helped to bring them together. They've been working hard. They've been doing what it takes to succeed."

While the personnel pipeline feeding into future teams, particularly the current freshman and sophomore classes, will be a concern, Trinity's 2021 squad, all told, brings back a lot

from last season. The Crusaders are junior and senior heavy, and despite overall numbers that are still on the small side (just under 30), they have a great deal of returning experience. An influx of new players, between first-time footballers and others picking the game back up after some time away, has also helped out the Crusaders' depth on both sides and created some feisty position battles.

Last year's 0-9 season gives the Crusaders nowhere to go but up, although there remains a significant gap to close between them and the top teams on their schedule. And while nobody's ruling out a resurgence that would see Trinity grab some wins in games where they might be counted out, the schedule still does them no favors.

Marsh, for right away, is not focused on the scoreboard outcomes as much as he is having his team ready to play to potential and with its best effort. The rest, he said, will come as it may.

"You can't control a lot of it, who you're playing and that kind of thing," he said. "But you can control how you play... There's going to be times when you play somebody that's better than you, but if you take care of the mental errors, and you play hard, you're going to be in every game."

BLECKLEY
from page 14

long-running region championship hump (the school has never won one).

The route back to the quarters can't get any harder than it was from the position of fourth seed in 2020, especially if the Royals take care of more business in the regular season and ensure more of the playoffs will be at home.

Speaking of home field, Bleckley will enjoy some new digs this fall with the completion of some long-overdue stadium upgrades that, though they might not significantly up the advantage of playing at home, will make its game-night palace much more luxurious.

In a wave of new construction and renovation projects across the school district spanning the last two decades, Shelly Hayes Field was the last relic of the original 70s-era BCHS campus to get a facelift.

Part of a larger \$28 million construction project at the site, the renovations addressed several aspects of the deteriorating stadium, whose accommodations for both home and visiting teams have long been – shall we say – underwhelming.

The brand new field house, restrooms, concession stands, walkways, fencing and entrances included in the updates, not to mention a much-needed replacement for the crumbling visitor side grandstands and press box, will take the Royals' home-field amenities from outdated to state-of-the-art in short order.

"It's going to be a lot nicer than it's been, that's for sure," Lassiter said.

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2021 AREA SCHEDULES

DUBLIN
 8/27 Dodge Co.
 9/10 at Wheeler Co.
 9/17 at Swainsboro
 9/24 Dooly Co.
 10/01 at Hawkinsville
 10/08 Wilcox Co.
 10/15 at Treutlen
 10/22 Johnson Co.
 10/29 at Telfair Co.
 11/05 Montgomery Co.

EAST LAURENS
 8/21 Twiggs Co.
 8/27 Johnson Co.
 9/03 Bryan Co.
 9/10 Oglethorpe Co.
 9/24 Baconton
 10/01 Swainsboro
 10/15 at Vidalia
 10/22 at Bacon Co.
 10/29 Jeff Davis
 11/05 at Toombs Co.

TRINITY CHRISTIAN
 8/20 at Edmund Burke
 8/27 Westfield
 9/3 Gatewood

9/10 Briarwood
 9/24 at Brentwood
 10/1 at Tiftarea
 10/8 at Bulloch
 10/15 vs. St. Andrew's
 10/22 at Pinewood
 11/5 Frederica

WEST LAURENS
 8/20 Bleckley Co.
 8/27 Veterans
 9/03 Dodge Co.
 9/10 Bradwell Institute
 9/24 at Spalding
 10/01 at Howard
 10/08 Baldwin
 10/15 Perry
 10/29 at Rutland
 11/05 Westside, Macon

BLECKLEY COUNTY
 8/20 at West Laurens
 8/27 Wilcox Co.
 9/03 South Atlanta
 9/10 Vidalia
 9/24 at Dodge Co.
 10/01 Jasper Co.
 10/08 at Lamar Co.

10/15 Northeast
 10/22 at Washington Co.
 10/28 Southwest

DODGE COUNTY
 8/20 Toombs Co.
 8/27 at Dublin
 9/03 at West Laurens
 9/10 Fitzgerald
 9/24 Bleckley Co.
 10/08 at Jasper Co.
 10/15 Lamar Co.
 10/22 at Northeast
 10/29 Washington Co.
 11/05 at Southwest

JOHNSON COUNTY
 8/27 at East Laurens
 9/03 Wilkinson Co.
 9/10 at Wilcox Co.
 9/17 Treutlen
 10/01 at Telfair Co.
 10/08 Montgomery Co.
 10/15 Wheeler Co.
 10/22 at Dublin
 10/29 at Dooly Co.
 11/05 Hawkinsville

MONTGOMERY COUNTY
 8/27 Portal
 9/03 Treutlen
 9/10 at Dooly Co.
 9/17 Hawkinsville
 9/24 at Wilcox Co.
 10/08 at Johnson Co.
 10/15 Telfair Co.
 10/22 Baconton
 10/29 Wheeler Co.
 11/05 at Dublin

TREUTLEN
 8/20 Lanier Co.
 9/03 at Montgomery Co.
 9/10 Portal
 9/17 at Johnson Co.
 9/24 Telfair Co.
 10/08 at Wheeler Co.
 10/15 Dublin
 10/22 Dooly Co.
 10/29 at Hawkinsville
 11/05 Wilcox Co.

TWIGGS COUNTY
 8/21 at East Laurens
 8/27 at Wilkinson Co.
 9/03 at Greene Co.
 9/17 at Glascock Co.

9/24 at GMC
 10/08 Wilkinson Co.
 10/15 Crawford Co.
 10/22 Hancock Central
 10/29 Warren Co.
 11/05 at ACE Charter

WHEELER COUNTY
 8/20 Telfair Co.
 8/27 Glascock Co.
 9/03 at Portal
 9/10 Dublin
 9/17 at Dooly Co.
 9/24 Hawkinsville
 10/01 at Wilcox Co.
 10/08 Treutlen
 10/15 at Johnson Co.
 10/29 at Montgomery Co.

WILKINSON COUNTY
 8/27 Twiggs Co.
 9/03 at Johnson Co.
 9/10 Irwin Co.
 9/24 at ACE Charter
 10/01 GMC
 10/08 at Twiggs Co.
 10/22 Crawford Co.
 10/29 Hancock Central
 11/05 at Warren Co.

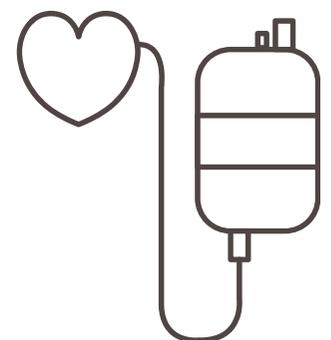


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Senior-laden Eagles set sights on strong season

By **CLAY REYNOLDS**
Sports Editor

For football programs, particularly at smaller schools, enjoying continuity from season to season comes down to a roll of the dice. Sometimes, as luck would have it, you wind up carrying over lots of talent and experience. Others, massive graduation and attrition can leave teams starting almost from scratch.

Every now and then, though, you hit it real big. And Montgomery County's latest turn at the craps table rolled the equivalent of double sixes.

The Eagles were fortunate to lose next to nothing this past offseason. Their class of 2021 included just five seniors, of those five, only three who played any type of regular role last season and two who suffered season-ending injuries.

That has the bulk of a team for MoCo that won six games and gained the program's third playoff berth in four years – to the tune of nine returners on each side – back and ready to roll this fall. Turnover, on the whole, was limited for many programs in region 4-A. But the Eagles bring back easily the most experienced team out of all of them.

The rare luxury has them set up for some big things in 2021. And third-year Montgomery County head coach Tim Suttles is already beginning to see the effects that continuity is having on the makeup and progress of his team as the season grows near.

"The game experience that our team has played as a whole has certainly had a positive impact on how practices have gone," he said. "You've kind of got some leadership built in from kids who have started 20-plus games as some sophomores and juniors who are seniors this year. They've been able to develop the last two years, and they've got some leadership qualities that are helping carry the team right now."

MoCo, after about two

MOCO

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MONTEGOMERY COUNTY EAGLES



HEAD COACH: Tim Suttles, third season (11-10 career)
OFFENSE: Spread / **DEFENSE:** 4-4
2020 RECORD: 6-5 (4-4 region 4-A)
LAST PLAYOFF APPEARANCE: 2020 (lost to Pelham in first round)
RETURNING STARTERS: 9 on offense, 9 on defense

KEY LOSSES: ATH/DB Kristian Boyer, WR/LB Wesley Hutcheson, WR/DL Andrew Weeks
OPENER: Aug. 27 vs. Portal
KEY BALLGAMES: Sept. 10 at Dooly Co., Oct. 8 at Johnson Co., Nov. 29 vs. Wheeler Co.

THREE TO WATCH...

QB Bo Davidson, Sr.

When his Montgomery County career is done, Davidson will take his place as one of the school's top quarterbacks, if not players, of all time. The four-sport athlete, who excels at baseball, golf and track the rest of the year, has likely got the stuff to go to the next level somewhere with any one of them.

A flamethrower on the diamond, he resembles a right-handed Tim Tebow in pads, with a long throwing motion but more than enough zip and strength to deliver the ball accurately. His size makes him tough to tackle on the run, and his quickness in evading the rush and making plays on the scramble ain't too shabby either.

The career stats include 2,735 passing yards and 24 touchdowns, with an additional 13 scores on the ground.

Davidson has been the Eagles' full-time QB for two full years, although a start of their playoff game as a freshman makes him for all intents and purposes a fourth-year starter heading into his senior season. And as such, he's turned into a "coach on the field" for the offense. The skill set is one shared by plenty of QBs at the high school level, although Davidson's combo of football savvy and experience set him well apart in his ability to excel.

"He's been in some big-time roles," said head coach Tim Suttles. "He's got three career playoff starts, and a lot of mileage with his feet and his arm. He knows the offense as good as any coach on our staff, so when you have a guy who's leading the huddle that knows the offense as well as he does, it's a definite bonus."

ATH/OLB Brandon Denmark, Sr.

Besides Davidson at quarterback, MoCo's go-to player everywhere on the field possible is the small, but dynamic Denmark. The tale of the tape on the reigning region 4-A Athlete of the Year is a mere 5-foot-6, 158 pounds. But don't be fooled by the dimensions. The fourth-year starter, who runs a 4.51 40, can often make the on-field impact of an entire 11.

"I tell you what, dynamite comes in small packages," Suttles said. "The thing about recruiting is a lot of colleges are just gonna look at his measureables and pass him right off. But there's gonna be somebody who studies his film enough that can see that he can play ball no matter his size. He will go

after it. It doesn't matter where you put him or what assignment, he just goes all out at all times... And I'm not even gonna say I wish he was six inches taller or 20 pounds heavier. I'll take the package Brandon Denmark is in right now. I'd take five more of him."

There is no area of the game he's not a factor, and there's a career stat list the length of a CVS receipt to prove it. For starters, he's gained close to 1,800 all-purpose yards with 13 touchdowns. That mix comes as both a rusher and receiver, but also a punt and kick returner, on which he averages 15 and 17 yards per try.

How bout on defense? He's made 187 career tackles, 21 sacks, 28 tackles for loss, one interception, six forced fumbles and three recoveries. And if that's not enough, he's also handled punting duties, to the tune of a 35-yard average with 14 kicks placed inside the opposing 20. On rare occasions he was even asked to kick PATs, and knocked through all three of them.

Denmark caught four touchdown passes against GMC in the Eagles' scrimmage game Aug. 13, so safe to say he's got some even more outstanding things in store for his senior year.

ATH/DB Xavier Brantley, Sr.

He fits a much more traditional mold, but has an equal wow-factor in his explosive playmaking on offense, where he's gathered a career 700 receiving yards and 12 offensive touchdowns in two varsity seasons.

Brantley, at 6-foot-1, 180, is just a tick faster than Denmark, giving defenses twice as much to worry about containing when both are lined up at receiver. He brings some additional length and a nice vertical to go with his speed, making him a threat to not only beat defensive backs downfield on go patterns, but also to go up and win balls when he gets there. If the Eagles run some similar looks to last year, they'll direct-snap it to him a decent amount as well.

In other departments, he adds six career interceptions, and at least one touchdown return of a punt, kickoff and pick. His big-play ability on offense and versatility everywhere else has picked him up a handful of college offers, Mercer and Georgia Southern among them.

More should be on the way if Brantley can duplicate the numbers and highlights he was able to produce earlier in his career.

"He's a big-time playmaker for us," Suttles said.

THREE NEW FACES...

RB/DL Javeon Telfair, Sr.

There aren't a whole bunch of players in the Eagles' starting lineup this fall that haven't already made a name for themselves, but several previous underclassmen will be moving into some expanded roles who are expected to grow their impact.

One of those potential breakout players is Telfair, who in addition to snaps at tight end will line up opposite Denmark on the defensive line. The 5-foot-9, 183-pounder had a solid 2020, forcing two fumbles and picking up four each of sacks and tackles for loss.

Because teams are likely to focus on his counterpart in protection, Telfair will continue to get the favorable matchups that allow him to make plays.

WR/DB Nishawn Wise, Sr.

He's another contributor from last season whose contributions could easily be missed amid a sea of quality performances from players all over the field on the MoCo defense.

Suttles said there's a case to be made for the 5-foot-7, 144-pound cornerback as the best all-around

DB on the team. His talent for playing bump-and-run gave the Eagles tremendous incentive to stay in the aggressive man-to-man coverage they love. And Wise, who proved a frustrating matchup for any receiver split his way, rarely got beat by wideouts who won an outside release.

The senior, as part of a solid and experienced secondary overall, will be one of many challenging obstacles to completing passes that teams will have to work their way around.

"A lot of the time, he's tested because Xavier Brantley is the opposing corner on the other side, so they steer clear of Brantley and throw at him," Suttles said. "He had so many



Photo by Payton Towns III

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pass breakups last year, and played great coverage, so I hope people continue to do that."

RB/ILB Darius Wells, So.

He had a whopping 88 total tackles, seven for loss, starting 11 games at inside linebacker in just his ninth grade year. Not bad for a first try.

Wells is 5-foot-11, 193 pounds, and could no doubt credit his above-average physical maturity with helping him survive the varsity fray. As more of his experience and development kicks in, he should continue to blossom into a top-end defender.

"In our region, if you can withstand playing inside linebacker throughout the season and not have to miss any time, that lets you know you're a pretty good player and pretty tough," Suttles said. "To do that as a freshman is pretty special."

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decades of so-so to underwhelming success in football, has in the last handful of years returned to near the prominence of the 1980s when it was coached by midstate legend John M. Peacock. Under Suttles and predecessor John Bowen, the Eagles have won five or more games in four consecutive seasons, three times making the playoffs.

The next step, in building on that consistency, would take Montgomery County into territory the school would consider historic: A win total exceeding its recent high mark of eight (2018), a deeper playoff run or an end to a 24-year

region championship drought dating back to 1987, which was the Eagles' last state quarterfinal bid.

The 2021 Eagles, led by a handful of seniors like Bo Davidson and Brandon Denmark who are athletes that will go down among some of the greatest in program history, seems to have strong chance at tasting that level of greatness.

If they're to do so, it'll start with surviving the gauntlet of region 4-A, in which last year they were effectively overpowered by all three of the teams (Dublin, Wilcox County and Johnson County) that finished above them.

Catching one or more of those clubs and improving

that standing, if not contending for the more ambitious goal of an outright region championship, are ends within reach. But understanding the depth of the league, simply duplicating the status quo would make for a worthy accomplishment, too.

"Making the playoffs as a 4 last year was a great accomplishment," Suttles said. "And if we have the chance to do that again this year, it will be a great accomplishment."

No matter what, the Eagles have a ton to look forward to, with a volume of returning experience and a general lack of gaping holes anywhere on the field that should give them a chance to win every game.

The challenges will come,

and likely a few games that get away, but to a certain extent, MoCo's destiny for 2021 will be entirely within its control. And that's a great place to be.

"I'm not going to sit here and say I don't have any concerns," Suttles said. "But we don't have a spot that I say, man, we're just extremely weak in this area. I'm always concerned about the COVID issue and being able to play the full season, I wish that were completely a thing of the past. But I'm excited about the season... I'm excited to see how this team develops together throughout the season and the opportunity to play and chase the goals we've set."

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"We're kind of still piecing that puzzle together," Hardin said.

And overall numbers, for Dodge, are also suddenly a challenge. For a AA school of its size, the well-below average turnout of just over 40 players for the fall has put a definite strain on the roster.

"There are lots of kids we're asking to

go both ways," Hardin said. "That's torturous with the heat and humidity those first few weeks. But so far, they've come in and worked and been a great group to be around."

Plenty of hurdles stand between the Indians and a return to their form of 2020, especially in an equally competitive region that looks to be wide-open again.

Hardin, who's setting his focus on both the long-term and immediate future of the

program, takes a realistic view of the situation, as well as the standards he and his team will be held to.

And he knows well that, at Dodge County, those tend to be a notch or two higher than just anywhere.

"There's an expectation in this community that they want you to win," Hardin said. "And so you better work, you better get after it."

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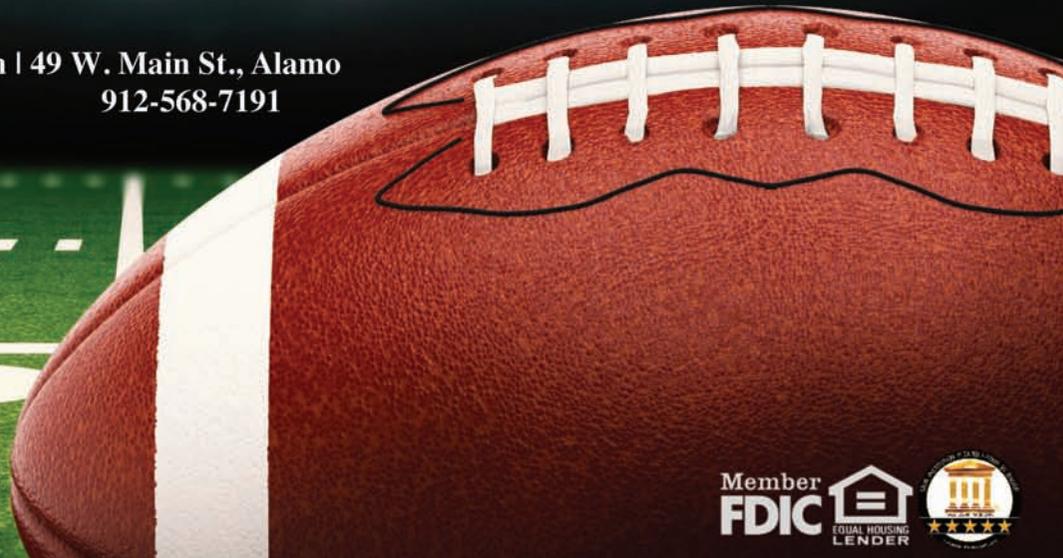


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Viking bounce-back starts with small steps

By CLAY REYNOLDS
Sports Editor

TREUTLEN WIKINGS



In one of many oddities tied to the 2020 season, Treutlen finished winless in region play, but only wound up next-to-last in the final eight-team standings. It was Wheeler County that, in the official count, played the role of caboose after forfeits of four real-time region wins, one of those a technical victory for the Vikings in spite of 56-32 losing result in their actual game.

The matchup was, in hindsight, one of Treutlen's best games of the year, featuring a season-high in both scoring and offense along with a third-quarter comeback that gave them every shot of stealing the rivalry win. But in a

HEAD COACH: Steve Versprille, fourth season (9-21 at Treutlen, 13-27 career)
OFFENSE: Spread / **DEFENSE:** 4-2-5
2020 RECORD: 2-8 (1-7 region 4-A)
LAST PLAYOFF APPEARANCE: 2009 (lost to Wilcox Co. in first round)
RETURNING STARTERS: 6 offense, 5 on defense

microcosm of the season that it was, the Vikings continued to be plagued by inopportune defensive breakdowns and a nasty habit of fumbling in plus territory. Both helped Wheeler explode for 450 yards of offense and pull away in the high-scoring affair.

Competing in region 4-A

this fall won't be any less of a challenge for Treutlen, but before the Vikings can worry about beating other teams, they have to first work on not beating themselves.

Head coach Steve Versprille is clear-sighted about his team's place in the region landscape, and said they are making their con-

KEY LOSSES: OL/DL Ben Foskey, OL/DL Harlan Mullis, ATH/LB Logan Hughes, RB/DB Jeremiah Miller
OPENER: Aug. 20 vs. Lanier Co.
KEY BALLGAMES: Sept. 3 at Montgomery Co., Sept. 24 vs. Telfair Co., Oct. 8 at Wheeler Co.

cern going into the fall not about the giant leaps, but the small steps that can make them incrementally better.

Erasing all eight of the region losses from their 2020 record is admittedly not a realistic goal, but the Vikings have made a point of starting that process by erasing both the memory of last season's

struggles and the negative patterns underlying it. They're hopeful that might also give them a shot at erasing a few of those losses this season, one at a time.

"Our players don't want to feel that again," Versprille said. "They don't want to have that feeling that they had last year. They want to build and become better, and that's what they've done all summer long, in the weight room and the offseason. They've worked hard."

The 2021 Vikings are unlikely to be a vast improvement over last year, but they have taken some noticeable steps forward. A decidedly experienced roster returns right around half its starters

TREUTLEN

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THREE TO WATCH...

OG/DT Je'Rian Johnson, Jr.

At 6-foot-1, 255 pounds, he'll be one of the biggest and strongest players on the entire field for the Vikings, who year to year are blessed with a select few athletes of his physical caliber. Johnson's impact going both ways as just a sophomore last season earned him the team's Player of the Year award.

His contributions as a rising junior will continue to be valuable, and it doesn't hurt that he's also one of the team's best at keeping his head in the game and finding his way to the right places on the field.

"He's a smart kid," said head coach Steve Versprille. "He knows how to play football, and plays both sides of the ball. He does a great job for us."

This fall, he'll play on both the inside and outside of Treutlen's three-man front on defense, serving as the epicenter of its pass rush and run defense. While that's his best fit on this particular roster, Johnson — for another team — could also easily play in coverage as he did occasionally this summer as a linebacker in 7-on-7, with speed and overall athleticism that can free up his coaches to get creative and take his defensive assignments outside the box.

But at the end of the day, they'll need him most where he can be as effective as anyone in beating blocks at the point of attack, and also winning those matchups as a blocker on the other side as well.

ATH/SS P.J. Smiley, Sr.

This year's Treutlen defense takes very much of a hit-you-in-the-mouth approach, and Smiley, a striker who covers ground and seeks out ball-carriers quite well, is the reputation-setter in that department.

He's played all over the field in his Viking career so far, and as the roving safety in Treutlen's nickel defense, will be all over the



Photo by Clay Reynolds

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field making tackles this fall as well, and often leaving a mark when he does.

"He comes down and he hits hard," Versprille said.

Offensively, the 6-foot-1, 180-pound senior will fit into a variety of roles, as a primary wideout but also an enticing option in the ground game. His prior quarterbacking experience adds to that versatility should the Vikings need, or choose, to tap into it.

TE/LB Danny Clements, Sr.

He's next on a long list of players who can do many different things on defense, where he's spent time in seasons past at various linebacker slots and also put his hand in the dirt. Wherever he's lined up, Clements has proven to be great at fighting his way through blocks and getting in position to help out on tackles.

And he shares a relentless streak with many of his teammates that, despite an overall lack of depth and quickness, helps them play cohesively and make their

opponents work for first downs.

On offense, the 6-foot-2, 214 pounder is a broad passing target, but too well-put-together a player not to try and have block down front too, making him a quality fit for the Vikings' tight end position. He'll also help out a good bit in the kick-in game.

THREE NEW FACES...

Two potential starters at QB

There's been a certain impermanence to the quarterback position for Treutlen in the last handful of seasons, with a carousel of signal-callers that have worked behind center but not many who've stuck there and held the job down for more than a half-season at a time.

Logan Hughes, who graduated this spring, had the lion's share of snaps last year. In the search for his replacement, the Vikings opted to go with two young contenders in freshman Jordan Coney and sophomore Jamil Daniels. Both are

small-ish, but able to move around nicely, and also a touch raw. Their competition has been a tight one, and in view of the handful of turnovers committed in scrimmage action, may ultimately come down to handling poise under pressure.

"They're kind of neck and neck right now," Versprille said.

For now, the slight edge in experience and performance goes to Daniels, despite an ongoing battle with nagging injuries. It's likely both will continue to see some early-season game time as the race shakes out.

OL/LB Jake Brooks, Fr.

One newcomer to Treutlen's senior-laden front seven this fall will be this freshman who's done nothing but impress since beginning his first season of high school. Though he's not quite as tall as those playing around him on defense or along the offensive line, the 5-foot-8, 186 pounder has executed well enough to go toe-to-toe with all of them.

Versprille said Brooks graded out as

well as anyone on defense during the team's competition at the Jeff Davis half-pad camp this summer, and that his staff is expecting some similar play from the freshman as he jumps right into the main rotation on both sides in his first varsity go-round.

WR/DB Kolby McClendon, So.

A player making his first foray onto the varsity field this fall, McClendon caught some eyes in the Vikings' preseason outing against an East Laurens team that overmatched them in many areas.

The 5-foot-8, 154-pound sophomore was in on a good number of plays, as he and several others in the secondary bit down aggressively on perimeter runs and made the key tackles to keep East Laurens yardage to a minimum.

One of the younger and smaller members of its defense, McClendon's efforts could be a big plus for Treutlen as it looks to find consistent execution and build the depth it will sorely need to face many of the loaded teams in region 4-A.

Dogs' depth, speed will add spice to 4-A race

By CLAY REYNOLDS
Sports Editor

WHEELER COUNTY BULLDOGS



Last season was a campaign as tumultuous as it was encouraging for Wheeler County, which took a major jump forward, but also some steps back.

A fresh wave of young talent and the arrival of new head coach Thomas Smith from nearby Robert Toombs, where his nine-year run featured two region titles and one GISA state crown, catalyzed some excitement that translated to the field in the early going. The Bulldogs reeled off four straight wins in a sizzling start to the regular season, and after a two-week COVID interruption and a couple of expected losses to region champ Dublin and runner-up Wilcox County that knocked them down a peg, rebounded with a win over rival Treutlen to put them at 5-2 and in line for a playoff berth with three games to go.

But things came undone when they were hit with a GHSA penalty over a player eligibility snafu that required the forfeit of four of those prior five wins, and Wheeler County lost its remaining three in a skid to the finish line.

In the official count, it was a one-win season, but anybody

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HEAD COACH: Thomas Smith, second season (1-9 at Wheeler Co., 65-57 career)

OFFENSE: Spread / **DEFENSE:** 3-4

2020 RECORD: 1-9 (0-8 region), 5-5 overall before forfeits

LAST PLAYOFF APPEARANCE: 2016 (lost to Greene Co. in first round)

RETURNING STARTERS: 8 on offense, 7 on defense

KEY LOSSES: ATH/DB Josh Williams, WR/DB Quinshad Edwards, LB Kole McDaniel, WR/DB Keenan Bryant

OPENER: Aug. 20 vs. Telfair Co.

KEY BALLGAMES: Aug. 20 vs. Telfair Co., Sept. 17 at Dooly Co., Oct. 29 at Montgomery Co.

THREE TO WATCH...

QB Jacquez Kincy, Sr.

He had some outstanding games as a junior, and second-year starter, throwing for a season total of over 1,600 yards and 17 touchdowns. In a vacated win over Treutlen, he also broke the school's single-game passing record with 370 yards.

The 5-foot-11, 170-pound senior, returning as the region's first-team selection at the "ATH" position, won't play exclusively at quarterback, although plans are for the Bulldogs to use him there a good bit. Kincy will also split out

wide or line up deep, with rising sophomore and heir apparent at QB Rhett Rodgers also



Photo by Clay Reynolds

taking some reps behind center.

"We'll move him around a little bit," said head coach Thomas Smith.

Wherever he is on a given play, he'll no doubt be an important piece of an offense that looks like it will be just as athletic and wide-open as it was a year ago.

WR/DB Brandon Smallwood, Sr.

This 6-foot-1, 170-pound wideout was on the receiving end of plenty of those Kincy touchdown passes a year ago, and likely the key that made Wheeler County's passing game so formidable.

He's a take-the-top-off deep threat, and a guy who can make defenders miss and spring a big play from wherever he makes the catch. Though Smallwood's height is not imposing, he's got great awareness, above-average ball skills and instinctive route-running ability that are bringing some college attention his way.

Also a dangerous punt returner on special teams and erasing tackler from the free safety position on defense, he'll be one of only a select few athletes in a largely two-platoon depth chart who rarely leaves the field.

"He's probably the only guy we've got that's going to be playing both ways," Smith said. "He's getting recruited a fair amount."

The offensive line

They're some big boys.

For a team with way more size and speed than you can ever expect to have at such a small school, the Bulldogs have been blessed with some exceptionally large players up front, and also a good bit of depth. The line, replacing only one senior from last year, brings back all five of its 2020 starters, who are also each pushing big plates in the weight room.

"Coach Drew (Collins) has done a great job with them," Smith said.

The most intriguing prospect of the group is the 6-foot-4, 295-pound left guard Bryce Miller, a Recruit Georgia preseason all-stater as a rising junior. At right guard is the senior, 6-foot-2, 260-pound Shawn Johnekins, who also clears the way up the middle on the inside zone like an earth-mover.

One who'll also likely be recruited as an

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O-lineman, but not necessarily needed there all the time this year, is 6-foot-4, 240-pound junior Tylon Gorham, who will play primarily defensive end, as well as some MIKE linebacker and tight end.

Region 4-A, across the board, won't be short on top talent in the trenches. But the Bulldogs, as one of several teams with plenty of beef down front and an aim of being physical, should have more than enough to hold their own.

THREE NEW FACES...

RB Jay Faison, Sr.

He sat out last season after transferring from Telfair County, but will step into the rotation in the offensive backfield this fall to help fill the void of 2020 utility backs Landon Bell and Josh Williams, who both graduated. Faison will be another arrow in Smith's offensive quiver as a complement to the electric Jason Culver on the ground.

Not much is known about his football skills, although the rising senior was routinely a double-digit scorer when suiting up for the Trojans during their 2020 basketball season.

This season will represent his first action since becoming a Bulldog, although Wheeler County coaches seem excited about the playmaking ability he'll bring to the table.

DL Teejay Wilcox, Sr.

He had some high moments last year, in many games giving offenses problems when he forced his way into the backfield for sacks and tackles for loss.

The solid tackler's stock continues on the rise after a solid offseason in the weight room, which is a common theme for most on that side of the ball for the Bulldogs. The 6-foot-4 lineman will spend most of his time trying to set the edge at end in the Bulldogs' three-man front.

LB LaMarcus Woodard, So.

There were plenty of freshmen who wasted no time cracking the playing rotation for Wheeler last year, and Woodard was among the most impressive when all was said and done. His rise on the depth chart came later in the season, when he started a handful of games toward the end of the year.

The 5-foot-9, 175-pounder has good size for an underclassman, although a few extra inches and pounds as he continues to grow wouldn't hurt. His sprinter speed makes him a factor in most plays, and his strength, tackling technique and knowledge of the system are starting to catch up with that raw ability.

His work building up to a promising sophomore season should make him a reliable starter in the front seven.

"He has had a really good offseason," Smith said.

TREUTLEN

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on offense and defense, and a collection of multi-year players like Trace Peeples, Danny Clements, P.J. Smiley and others who know their way around the field.

Treutlen was clearly outmanned overall in its scrimmage at East Laurens, but during portions of the game proved it could match the Falcons' speed and physicality in stopping the run. And pound-for-pound, the Vikings should hold their own against most teams they'll play in the trenches.

Despite two quarterback candidates who are first-time varsity starters and likely to face a learning curve early on, but their passing game also showed signs of promise in about as involved a 7-on-7 season as they've had since Versprille arrived.

"We throw the ball really well," he said. "I think our passing game has come around to where it's a threat now."

Though Treutlen's overall numbers are on the lean side compared to more bountiful harvests in recent years at neighbors Wheeler and Montgomery, its team has a quality makeup from top to bot-

tom. In addition to being senior-laden at many starting positions, the Vikings have added a talented crop of freshmen who won their middle school region title a year ago, and though few have cracked the varsity rotation yet, they are making their presence felt in practice and position rooms.

Versprille said he was also impressed with the work ethic and dedication all of his players showed in attacking this year's summer program, which had close to perfect attendance.

It's a tough region to hang in, but Treutlen has too many of the right things happening at the right time not to see some progress this fall. Looking to the leadership and hard-nosed effort of their upperclassmen, the Vikings should have the tools to punch well above their weight.

They've got winnable games on the schedule, and are confident they can grab a few of them if they play their best. The scenarios are many, but the only outcome of a 2021 season they'll find disappointing is the status quo.

"They want to be here," Versprille said. "They want to get better and they're doing what they need to do to get better."

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Warriors hit reset with young, but promising team

By CLAY REYNOLDS
Sports Editor

The last several seasons have been some tough ones for Wilkinson County football.

Suffering in overall numbers and talent, and only just last season finding some relief in their stiff region competition, the victories have been hard to come by – numbering just 10 since the Warriors' last winning season in 2015. And a year ago, the strike of the COVID-19 pandemic seemed to ruin what was shaping up to be a strong season.

Wilco's overall numbers suffered as much last fall as anywhere due to the pandemic. Its total roster size has rarely eclipsed 40, but decisions by players not to come out due to the times took an even bigger toll for 2020, as that number dipped to a critically low 21.

The season, all things considered, still went well. The Warriors finished the regular season 2-8, but made it to the playoffs. They traveled to take on top-seeded Bowdon, and fell 35-6, but got a fulfilling taste of postseason football.

"It was really great for our kids," said head coach Keldrick Burke. "That was a major boost."

This fall, things have rebounded, with numbers back in the upper 20s, but at the same time that a large class of seniors has graduated.

"We lost a lot," Burke said. "It's going to be one of those years."

Some of Wilco's same struggles will continue this fall, although the new wave of athletes breaking in seems to bring some promise of competitive days ahead, perhaps soon.

"We're really young, but I don't look at us being young as a bad thing, because I think we've got a lot of guys who are really fast and really physical, and we get to watch them play for the next 2-3 years."

WILKINSON COUNTY WARRIORS



HEAD COACH: Keldrick Burke fourth season (5-24 career)
OFFENSE: Shotgun Wing / **DEFENSE:** 4-4
2020 RECORD: 2-7 (2-3 region 7-A)
LAST PLAYOFF APPEARANCE: 2020 (lost to Bowdon in first round)
RETURNING STARTERS: 3 on offense, 4 on defense

KEY LOSSES: QB/ATH Dexter Walker, WR/DB Brandon Wilcher, RB/LB Marquavious Jones, OL/DL Ashton Grable
OPENER: Aug. 27 vs. Twiggs Co.
KEY BALLGAMES: Sept. 24 at ACE Charter; Oct. 1 vs. GMC; Oct. 8 at Twiggs Co.

THREE TO WATCH...

A veteran O-line

There's not much returning experience at any position for the Warriors this year, but the exception is the offensive line.

The towering tackle Ashton Grable is gone, but Wilco will have back starting three of its other regulars from a year ago. And for an offensive backfield that's almost entirely brand new, that forward continuity should prove valuable.

"Most of our experience is up front," said head coach Keldrick Burke. "We had to play a lot of guys early on last year. And they're still young."

The seniors Jaden Stevenson at center, also a defensive tackle, and 6-foot-1, 247-pound guard Luke Miskimen, who will go the other way at defensive end and handle several special teams chores, anchor the middle with great size and strength.

Brashawn Grimes is also a rising junior who returns having logged some quality time in the trenches.

"Those guys up front are really going to carry us," he said. "They have a lot of playing experience on both sides of the ball."

RB/DB Martavious Fox, Sr.

Other than offensive MVP Dexter Walker, Fox was likely the fastest member of last year's team, on which he carved out a key role at cornerback with the addition of some occasional touches on offense as well.

Leading into his senior season, the 5-foot-8, 140-pound senior has trimmed down a touch, and added to his speed.

The Warriors will need that explosiveness to come through as they turn to him as their main big-play threat at wingback, while also entrusting him with some of their toughest assignments in coverage.

"He's really gotten a lot faster," Burke said. "We're excited about him."

RB/ILB Siconius Sinkfield, Jr.

He started as a sophomore and emerged late in the year as one of Wilkinson County's most prolific tacklers, impressing his coaches enough to earn a share of the defensive most-improved player award. Against the better teams, matching speed from sideline to sideline was an issue overall for the Warrior defense. But when it came to wrapping up and making stops on penetration and runs up the gut, Sinkfield often got the job done.

A year later he'll now be relied on to step up as a leader within the rebuilt defensive unit, while also chipping in some carries offensively at running back.

THREE NEW FACES...

FB/DE Jordan Jackson, Jr.

He suffered an unfortunate ACL tear during the first game of his sophomore season, going down for the year just as he was preparing to explode. The excellent pass-rushing and run-stopping end was coming off a superb season as a freshman, when he burst onto the scene and helped lead the team in sacks and tackles for loss. He weighs in at 6-foot-2, 230 pounds as he gears up to make his return, and pick up where he left off.

"Last year would've been his coming-out party, but the first game, he went down with an ACL injury," Burke said. "He's still in the recovery stages. The doctors won't release him till mid-August. We'll protect him as much as possible, and ease him back in. But he's going to be a big player for us."

Before the setback, Jackson was on a trajectory for huge things as a defender, with his quick first steps going inside and out that frustrated many O-linemen. And he still might be.

His 2020 role will also feature some carries at fullback. Running downhill, his speed's not much. Jackson is very much a battering ram who'd like to clear out a few yards at a

time, with no true breakaway gear. But he can be tough to tackle for those undersized defenses, especially the ones who can't hem him up in the backfield.

Wilco may also split him out to block, and send him out of the backfield on routes from time to time as they've done in the past to create a mismatch. But for injury reasons, they won't be able to make him a workhorse — or at least not immediately. Still, he'll try to carry as much of the load on either side as he can.

ATH/SS Garin Adside, So.

A player Burke calls a "Swiss Army knife," Adside's array of skills will be showcased by the Warriors in plenty of places over the three phases. The starter at safety has what it takes to play at any of the three running back spots, and potentially some at quarterback as well.

As a freshman on defense, he would most often walk down to patrol the line of scrimmage, picking weak spots on blitzes or around the edge to zoom into the backfield for a quick sack or tackle. That nice speed should add something to the offensive package, however his coaches decide to use him on that side of the ball.

"He's pretty much an athlete that can do anything," Burke said. "We'll see a lot of him."

QB Jaidyn Pennington, So.

He was the heir apparent, as the freshman second-stringer behind Walker at quarterback last fall, but faced a true competition to win the job over the summer. Pennington, at 5-foot-7, 165, still has a lot of developing to do physically and in his mastery of the system, but as a sophomore gives his coaches lots of reason to be encouraged about his long-term potential.

"He's gonna be that game manager for us," Burke said. "He sat behind a senior quarterback last year, and got all the second-team reps. Now, as a sophomore, he's ready to take over and run the offense."

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who was there to see it unfold in real time walked away knowing the Bulldogs played some solid football, however little of it will live on in the record books.

Considering much of their

starting lineup was first-time players, a good many freshmen, the initial success turned some heads.

The 'Dogs seem to have just as much going for them in 2021.

Their starting lineup a year ago was led by a handful of senior standouts, but at its core

was made up of freshmen and sophomores who remain on the young side, but are all back in place.

"We started six freshmen at a couple points last year, so we've got some guys that are still learning," Smith said. "But they're way farther ahead than

they were last year."

The Bulldogs will have several players with some blinding speed and, as a whole, above average size. They will also be remarkably deep.

While not quite as loaded as some in region 4-A, Wheeler County should be a club to be

taken seriously as a playoff contender again, with every opportunity to be disruptive and sneak in as an outsider if they can get the key wins on the back end of the season.

"This year, we just want to do a better job of making sure we finish," Smith said.

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