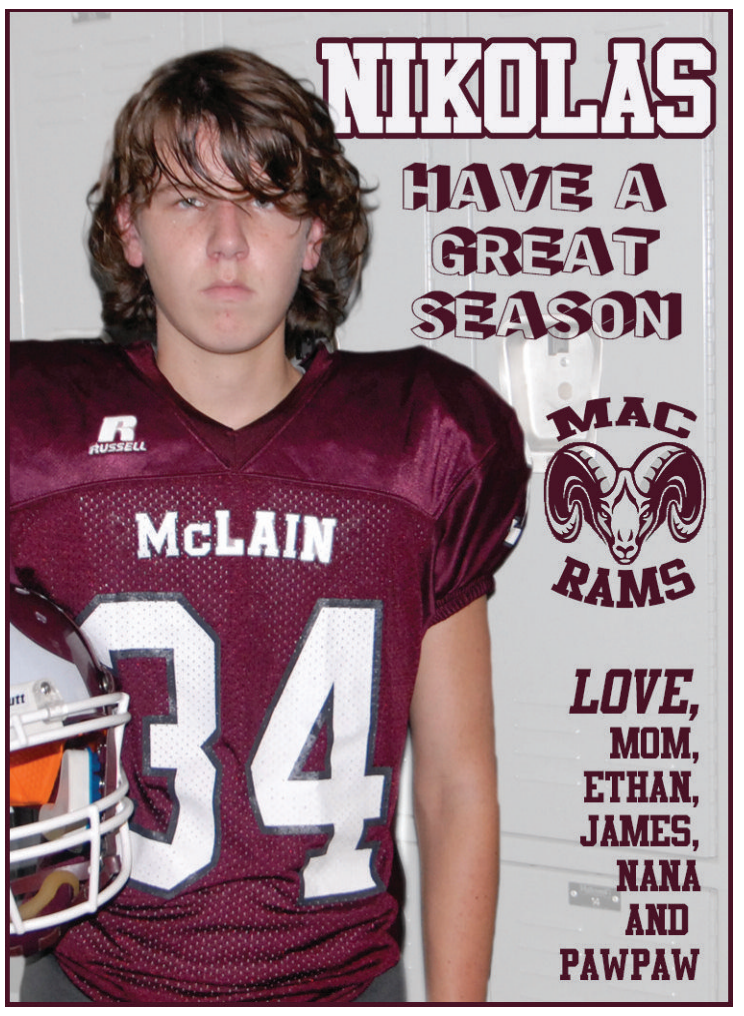
Photo by Russell Turner

GCHS came into the 2017 campaign inexperienced at almost every offensive killed position. The offensive line is one of the exceptions as it features several returning lettermen. Junior center Hayden West is shown here helping his teammates pinpoint their assignments during the Wildcats' 12-0 win over West Lauderdale in the season opener.



Offense coming together slowly, but surely for Cats

Coach King happy with development of offensive weapons

By RUSSELL TURNER
Herald Staff

During his career as an offensive coordinator Coach Mike King has become accustomed to his teams putting up big offensive numbers. Despite a high level of inexperience on the offense entering his first season as a head coach, King expects to do the same thing at GCHS.

Through two games the numbers haven't been overwhelming. However, the Wildcats have been able to do enough offensively to earn two wins and King believes bigger things are just around the corner.

"We're getting close," King said. "We have to clean things up and stop hurting ourselves with penalties and turnovers, but we're getting close."

Quarterback looked to be the one area where the Wildcats would be set in 2017. After a stellar freshman season, last year's starter Jaden Walley appeared set for a big year leading an up-tempo offense under a new head coach known for attacking opposing defenses. But, Walley's family moved to Harrison County and he and his younger brother, Justin, are lining up for the D'Iberville Warriors this fall.

Fortunately, King was told to expect the move and was able to spend time in the spring looking for someone to lead the Cats' offense this fall. He zeroed in on senior Derrick Grice early despite the fact the senior-to-be had never taken a snap at quarterback. Grice appeared set to anchor the defensive backfield, but ended up taking the majority of the snaps with the first offense during spring drills and summer workouts. He entered fall camp as the clear starter and has shown a lot of promise at the position thus far.

"Derrick had zero experience at quarterback," Coach King said. "What he may lack in arm strength he makes up for by being very athletic, smart and accurate with his throws."

King felt confident Grice had the skill set to be successful. He just needed a scheme and a plan he could feel comfortable in. Finding the right person to add depth to the position wasn't as easy and King ended up turning back to the defensive side for help.

King said he spotted starting middle linebacker Noah Mitchell throwing and running with the football on one of the last days of spring workouts. He started working with Mitchell in the summer and thinks he has found a guy that can not only be the backup starter, but also bring a little different skill set to mix from time to time.

"Noah took zero snaps during the spring," King said. "But, I have been really pleased with his progress."

"He can throw the ball well, but can also lower his shoulder and push the pile, which gives us a different look and different options. How we use him will be limited some due to his value on the defensive side of the ball. I can't take him away from the defensive side to focus strictly on quarterback, but he is getting work and we have confidence in him."

With neither quarterback having ever taken a varsity snap, King and his staff scaled down the offensive scheme and focused on the basics.

"The things we installed in the spring and worked on all summer are the same things we've been focused on this fall," King said. "We put too much on them at times, but once we pared things down and simplified things it started to click and both are getting more comfortable every day."

The system appears to be working. Grice seems comfortable leading the offense and had a solid showing in the season-opening win over West Lauderdale, although the arm strength did come into play on two interceptions he threw in the Knight's endzone. He had a costly turnover in the endzone against George County and gave up two interceptions in that game as well. However, in both games he also made some very good passes and did a great job keeping plays alive and keeping his eyes downfield for open receivers – which was good enough to lead his team to wins.

Grice put up 226 yards on 20-of-33 passing against West Lauderdale with two touchdowns. He was 13-or-23 for 169 yards and two touchdowns

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