

SATSUMA GATORS

Expect the ‘Wild Gator’ and other magic acts at The Swamp this year

BY DARRON PATTERSON
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If Satsuma had been looking for assistant coaches this off-season, David Copperfield could've easily gotten a job.

Having lost 18 seniors, including their starting quarterback, head coach Justin Thomas needed a magician more than another assistant to help plug holes in his roster.

And when he says: "We're experienced in some positions, but not in others," he ain't just blowing smoke.

If Satsuma hopes to improve on last season's 6-5 finish that ended unceremoniously with a 49-21 first-round 4A playoff loss to St. James in Montgomery, you can point to Thomas' reconstruction job as a key.

He has shifted players from offense to defense, and vice versa, brought back players who didn't play at all last year and will start a player at safety who plays so viciously that Thomas has to keep him from hurting his own teammates in practice.

Meanwhile, on offense, he'll run some "Wild Gator," occasionally using one of the team's fastest players at quarterback when the situation dictates.

And he might throw in some funky defensive coverages, just to keep opposing quarterbacks guessing.

For starters, junior Nick Abernathy (6-foot-1, 175 pounds) is the quarterback after having spent the last two years leading the junior varsity.

Thomas says Abernathy is talented, but relatively untested, so they'll have to do some "creative things" to help him out, including rollouts, bootlegs and play-action passes.

Junior Zack Mixon (5-9, 175) will start at running back, but 10th-grader Peyton Thomas (5-11, 190) will also see time there, with senior Alec Wade (5-8, 155) and junior Hunter Jednat (5-10, 160) as receivers.

Thomas says Wade is scary fast, and "has good hands."

Starting guards junior Zack Brown (6-1, 265) and senior Hunter Odom (5-9, 225) have both been moved over from the defensive line, while junior Deion Pickens will see action at wide receiver, running back and quarterback when they go to that Wild Gator formation.

"If he stays healthy he will be very good," said Thomas of Pickens.

The defense might very well be the biggest rab-



Satsuma Gators who will be counted on this season are, from left, Peyton Thomas, Bryce Weaver, Hunter Jednat, Nick Abernathy, Alec Wade and Zack Mixon.

bit the coaching staff has pulled out of its hat, getting two Mary Montgomery transfers who'll start at linebacker: senior Steven Moon (6-0, 218) and junior Bryce Weaver (6-0, 240). They will plug in next to juniors Harlan Lee (5-9, 185) and team captain Justin Duke (6-0, 190).

Duke is this year's Johnny Poole Award Winner, annually given to the player most admired by his teammates.

He will wear the coveted No. 1 jersey in memory of Poole (1949-2007), Satsuma's biggest fan for many years despite his special needs.

Sophomore Robby Cooley (5-8, 275), whom Thomas says is "tough to block," will start at nose guard, with senior Austin King (5-9, 225) at one defensive end spot, while fierce battles are being waged for the other DE position.

Conner Pierce (6-2, 180) will start at one safety.

Thomas says the junior with "good ball skills" played as a freshman, but sat out last season to concentrate on baseball.

He'll line up alongside senior James Ward (5-9, 155), whom Thomas says "plays safety so violently I have to reel him in during practice sometimes."



Linebackers for the Satsuma Gators.



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