

CITRONELLE WILDCATS

“Seeing how much we improved last year it makes me feel, as a player, so relieved that we can win. We know we’re not just boys anymore. We know we can play with these people (in Class 5A, Region 1).” — Citronelle senior linebacker Jackson Lee

Lee grows with the Wildcats

Senior linebacker is eager for the season — and quest for playoffs — to begin

BY TOMMY HICKS
tommyhicks@thecallnews.com

When he looks around at his teammates on Citronelle’s starting linebacker unit, Jackson Lee doesn’t see any familiar faces this season. But he’s good with that. He has learned that while the other starting linebackers have departed, leaving him to lead the group, he is comfortable with those who have stepped into the vacant spots.

As has always been the case with Lee, he has prepared himself to do what is necessary to help the Wildcats enjoy a successful season. As a varsity player since his freshman year, the 5-foot-10, 180-pound senior has experienced a continuous growth with the program, individually and as a member of the team. So he is ready to make his senior season a good one and, hopefully, another step forward in success.

He’s also ready to accept the leadership requirements of his role and to do his part in improving his play. He said he sees the Wildcats performing better as a whole on defense this season and he’s eager to get the season and the quest for a return to the playoffs under way.

“I think it’s just more like a mental game (improvement of defense) since last year we had such a good defense, a solid defense,” Lee said. “We had a good defensive line and really good linebackers. The defensive backs were young but they were good. I think this year we’ve got that mindset that we know we can be good; we’ve got a lot of returners on defense. It’s just that thing that we believe in ourselves now.”

That is a confidence level that took a few seasons to achieve.

“My first year we were 0-10, my second year we were 2-8,” Lee said. “It was really a struggle as a young man coming up through football because it was difficult to see how much progression could happen. And seeing how much we improved last year it makes me feel, as a player, so relieved that we can win. We know we’re not just boys anymore. We know we can play with these people (in Class 5A, Region 1).”

The emphasis on defense started with the arrival of head coach Rusty Funk, who enters his third season at the helm this year. Lee said it has been a noticeable difference, but it is one that had to be earned, had to be experienced.

“I think it’s like, Jonathan (Orso) moved from an offensive position to a defensive position and now we have some big guys playing defense,” Lee said. “And it’s really that feeling that I know I can count on that other person.”

“I know when I’m in the middle or on the outside – this year we’ve got some young outside linebackers — and early in the spring and summer I was really worried, honestly, because I was afraid I couldn’t count on those guys. But through the summer they’ve really improved and in the secondary, even the young up-and-comers and young defensive linemen are really stepping up and I feel that I can trust them on a Friday night.”

Coach has confidence in him

Funk is certain he can trust Lee to give his best every game and to step forward and be the type of leader that is needed from the linebacker position.

“Jackson Lee is a senior returning linebacker, the only linebacker returning, who played next to Justin (Roberts) the past two years and we expect a lot out of him,” Funk said. “He knows he has big shoes to try to fill and everything. He’s one of those guys who is there every day and he’s a very smart football player and extremely coachable and learning what he’s supposed to do.”

“He’s not the greatest athlete – you’re not always going to be the greatest athlete – but he’s one of those kids that is always where he’s supposed to be, and those are the kids you need. He picked up a lot from Justin. Justin just had instincts; he didn’t take many false steps. You might try to fool him and the next thing you know he’s on the ball, so Jackson learned a lot from playing next to Justin.”

Now use those instincts

But now it’s on Lee to make those plays and use those instincts.

“Being in the middle is difficult now because there are so many teams that are going to a spread offense,” Lee said. “There’s not really, with the exception of Vigor (in Region 1), teams that really run inside the tackles as much. So being spread out is difficult for a middle player because you really have to read the entire field, between tackle to tackle and guard to guard.”

“I really worked hard on my recognition. When people come out on offense and get in a strange formation the other guys can look at me and I’ll have the play called and get us in the right set. That really gives me a sense of leadership. It puts a lot of pressure on me, but I like it because I know people can count on me. I’ve played three years of high school ball and I’ve seen a lot of formations and things and I think I’ve really improved in that sense.”

“That experience really just lets me know that there’s nothing an offense can do that I haven’t seen. It lets me know they might get me with a trick play or something, but if they come out in a straightforward formation a time or two or three times a night I know I can come up with something that’s going to give us an advantage.”

One thing Lee and his teammates hadn’t experienced prior to last season was participating in the state playoffs. That experience has created another source of confidence for the Wildcats, Lee said. And it was a pretty cool experience, too.

“It was a great feeling having the entire community come out and support us after we played good against Vigor,” he said. “We lost, but we played good and I think that game really let them know that we were a good football team and we could compete. By the time we got to the playoffs it was so cool to see how people cared about us again and to have the whole team come together; we weren’t selfish people anymore, we really cared about our brother next to us.”

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