

CITRONELLE WILDCATS

Jonathan Orso stands out

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It's impossible not to notice Jonathan Orso on the football field. He moves with fluidity, has the strength and instincts to make plays — and in fact he is one of Citronelle's top playmakers from his defensive end position — and there's the simple fact he stands 6-foot-3 and weighs 250 pounds.

So it is hard to imagine his beginning with the Wildcats, when he didn't think anyone was taking notice of him, when he briefly considered quitting the team. He started out as a quarterback candidate when Ryan Bruner ended up earning the job. So he concentrated on defense. And he grew bigger and stronger and more confident as he went along, leading up to today, when he is the unquestioned leader of the Wildcats' defense and college scouts are keeping close tabs on his play, with some scholarship offers already in hand and others expected to be delivered as the season progresses.

It marks quite a change for the senior.

"I'm happy with how things have turned out," Orso said. "Now there's college interest and I've gained a lot of weight. My freshman year when I came in I probably weighed about 180 pounds. Now I'm at about 250. That's definitely a change. It hasn't been difficult (putting on the added weight and muscle). I feel myself getting bigger but as I'm gaining weight, I go through agility training and it doesn't slow me down; it actually helps me.

"I'm definitely a lot stronger. I'm stronger this year than I was last year and hopefully that will show on the field this year."

Orso paved his way to his current status with a stellar junior season, teaming with Justin Roberts and others to lead the Wildcats' defense in a playoff-earning season and a 6-5 overall record, a solid turnaround for a team that was winless in 2014 and had just two victories in 2015. Now he must take on an added role for the Wildcats, that of leadership.

"Definitely having to step up and be a leader by being a senior (if the biggest change)," Orso said of the expectations for him this season. "It's weird because I remember it like it was yesterday coming in here as a freshman and having to learn from everybody else. But it's been easy (being a leader) because we have a lot of leaders on this team.

"I know I can't take any plays off because I know the younger guys are going to be watching me. I have to give 110 percent on every play and

hopefully the younger guys will see that and they'll give 110 percent as well."

Head coach Rusty Funk said Orso has taken to the leadership requirements well.

"Right now he's stepping up, but he's not stepping up with his mouth," Funk said. "Some people think to be a leader you have to have a mouth. He's leading by example, which is what we need. We need kids to show the other kids and to lead by example. I think he is doing a great job of that right now."

Having his teammates see how he performs on the field is a pretty good form of leadership as well, Funk said. And when Orso is on the field, he gets attention.

"He's 245 pounds and as strong as an ox at defensive end," Funk said. "If John does not want you to block him, you're not going to block

him. He's one of those type kids. When he's playing full speed it's impossible for you to take care of him."

And that's the kind of thing college scouts, who are showing up at Citronelle practice sessions and Wildcats' games with more frequency of late, love to see. It's why Orso is one of the players in this region who is attracting a lot of attention.

"It definitely changes things, knowing that you always have eyes on you and you can't take any plays off," Orso said of having college scouts evaluate his performances, both in practice and in games. "You have to be a leader because colleges look for that."

Funk suggests more scouts should make their way to Citronelle this season to take a look at his defensive leader.

"He does have a good future," Funk said. "He has a few offers from some smaller schools and he's got some offers from what I call some prestigious academic schools, because John is a great student. I know Yale in the Ivy League is interested in having him come there and Navy is trying to get him. It's pretty nice. A lot of people think if you don't sign with a SEC school you're not a success, but that's not what it's about. John is a student-athlete. He's got a great future."

Orso said being part of last season's success continues to drive him and his teammates heading into this season.

"I just had to stay patient because I knew my time was coming," he said. "We had changes as a team too, dropping from 6A to 5A. But this year teams are going to be aware of us and won't take us as lightly, so I'm going to have to step it up a notch so that I'll be better this year than I was last year.

"Making the playoffs last year was different. My ninth-grade year we were 0-10 and then 2-8 and last year we made the playoffs for the first time in seven or eight years. The whole community was very excited. The community came out for a pep rally before the playoff game and that was a very good experience. It was great to be a part of. I can speak for everybody when I say we're making the playoffs again. We just hope we get past the first round this year and gain some momentum and see how far we can take it."

Orso admits the goal isn't a given based on the competition level of Class 5A, Region 1.

"It's definitely tough — 5A, Region 1 and 6A, Region 1 are definitely the two hardest regions around here," he said. "There's not a drop off in talent, it's just a reclassification. You still have to work hard every day and hopefully win some ballgames.

"I feel confident. We've got a long way to go but I think we're farther ahead this year than we were last year at this point."



CHS star
Jonathan
Orso

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