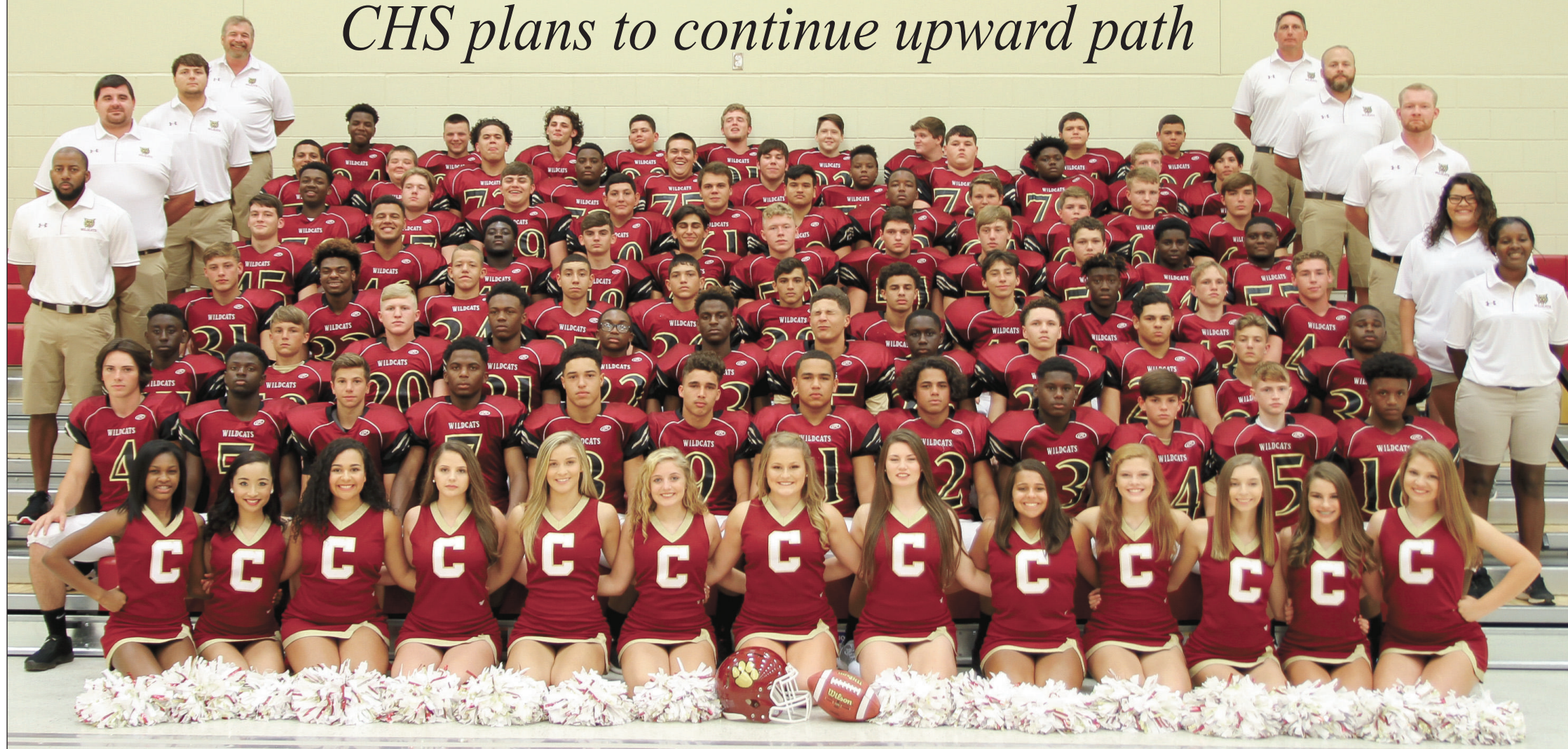


# CITRONELLE WILDCATS

## Wildcats want more

*CHS plans to continue upward path*



The 2017 Citronelle High School Wildcats

Citronelle photos by Bonita Roberts/Call News

## Success breeds confidence as the team learns winning ways

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Winning has returned to Citronelle's football program, and as is usually the case when such a turnaround takes place, there's only one thing that will satisfy that feeling — more winning.

That is certainly the plan for the Wildcats, who in 2014 posted a 0-10 overall record in Class 6A of the Alabama High School Athletic Association. It wasn't that the Wildcats were winless, but the manner in which they found themselves in that predicament, being shut out four times and only twice hitting the season high in scoring 21 points.

It marked the end of Barry Gibson's two-year tenure as head coach and the beginning of the Rusty Funk Era.

The 2015 season brought a very modest improvement to 2-8 as a Class 6A team but last season the Wildcats moved down to Class 5A and improved their overall record to 6-5 overall and, for the first time since the 2008 season, earned a berth in the state playoffs. To say that achievement was met with great interest and support throughout the Citronelle community would be a vast understatement.

To say the expectations for this year's team are even higher would also be an understatement. But that sentiment is held not only by those who cheer on the Wildcats each Friday night, but by the Wildcats themselves. Success breeds confidence, and there is confidence among the Citronelle players and coaching staff, not cockiness, mind you, but confidence.

The 2017 season is one in which the Wildcats are looking forward to experiencing.

"They've been in it," is how Funk phrased the Wildcats' experience of the past two seasons under his leadership, noting they have struggled from a winless team to a two-win team to a playoff team, steadily growing with each season.

And while Funk applauds the confidence his team has achieved, he also insists there be a measure of caution.

"We've got several returning starters and returning players and we've got some young guys that have moved up that did a good job in our JV program last year. So we're deeper in our skill positions than we've ever been," Funk said. "Everything there is going to be good. We're not real deep on the line, but on our defensive front we're pretty good, at least with the starting group, then it kind of falls off a little bit. But as the younger kids get more experience we'll be OK."

It must be noted a pair of players who held key roles in Citronelle's success last season have departed, graduation mean-

ing the loss of quarterback Ryan Bruner and linebacker Justin Roberts, players who were the leaders of their respective units and players who produced, both in practice sessions and under the lights of Friday night games.

Funk suggested those types of players aren't replaced, but there are those who are ready to step into the roles they held and place their stamp on those positions and in terms of leadership. Overall, this year's team as a strong bond, perhaps even stronger than existed with last season's team, and there's the confidence factor to be considered as well.

Players on this year's team have said almost to a man the goal this season isn't just reaching the playoffs again, but winning in the playoffs and advancing deep into the playoffs.

On Sept. 1, that quest begins.

As the Wildcats move toward that season-opener at home against Class 6A B.C. Rain, the search for a starting quarterback continues. Funk said Carson Jarvis and Jamarus Robinson are battling for the starting nod but he hasn't reached a decision on who will get the nod. He did say he would prefer not to go with a two-quarterback system, so choosing one to lead the offense is the goal.

"I'm going to make a decision and try to stick with one," he said. "Right now, we're practicing both of them and trying to see how it goes. I enjoy the competition and they do too. And they need the competition, they need someone pushing each of them. Both of them are going to play no matter what, it's just a matter of who is going to be the quarterback."

The group behind the quarterback is solid and will feature several contributors, Funk said of the running back corps. "At running back we're deep," he said. "Joe Jeffrey Hutcherson is back as our main back; he did a good job for us last year. And you've got Justin Johnston and Daniel Manley and we've got Brandon Washington and several others who run the ball very well. We're good at the skill positions. We're not bad. We've got some great receivers and some good backs. Our backs, we use them as running backs and receivers. We feel very good about our receiver corps and our backs."

On the defensive side of the ball there is talent and more depth at most of the positions. An there's Jonathan Orso at defensive end who is receiving a lot of attention from college scouts and will be the leader of this year's defensive unit.

"I think our front four looks good and our linebackers are relatively inexperienced," Funk said. "Jackson Inex is the only returning starter (at linebacker) so we've got some work to do there experience-wise.

Our secondary is back complete with some extra players to help out, so we're deep there again. We feel pretty good there. We've got John Orso and Mickey Reed anchoring that defensive front you're not bad."

And there's the confidence factor to consider as well. Earning a spot in the playoffs

out of Region 1, one of the toughest regions in Class 5A, helped spur on this year's team through summer workouts and into fall drills. But there's also another factor to be considered when evaluating this year's team, Funk noted.

See **WILDCATS**, 3C



Coach Rusty Funk

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