

MOBILE CHRISTIAN LEOPARDS

Mobile Christian has more good athletes

BY MARK R. KENT
mkent@thecallnews.com

MOBILE — After a season that saw Mobile Christian come within a game of winning a state championship in its first year as a Class 3A team, many of the Leopards' fans are wondering what the 2017 team might do for an encore.

Head Coach Ronnie Cottrell is more of a realist, fully aware that the brutally competitive nature of Region 1 in 3A may limit the Leopards' encore chances, or even deny them altogether, depending on how the season unfolds.

"This region is like the SEC West of Class 3A," Cottrell said, making reference to the always-rugged half of Southeastern Conference college football.

Still, with as many as 10 starters returning and a good contingency of people moving up, Cottrell feels that MC is going to make its mark once again. One star that's off to college, and already making himself noticed on the depth charts, is offensive standout Troy Young, who is now an Arizona Wildcat.

Assistant coach Archie Wright, the offensive coordinator, will still have some fine athletes to work with. Two offensive linemen expected to have big years are Michael Prince (6-foot-0, 250 pounds) and

Mario Locke Jr. (6-0, 270). Senior Sam Ladnier (5-11, 176) is expected to lead a deep corps of wide receivers including sophomore Eric Poellnitz (5-11, 172) and senior Keith Gallmon Jr. (6-0, 191). Gallmon is also expected to be a star-quality free safety.

The Leopards will have a college-sized quarterback in junior Alex Moore (6-3, 200) while junior Cam Alexander (5-7, 167) will be called on to line up either at running back or as another wide receiver. Cottrell said MC has run a spread offense for some time, with three and sometimes four wide receivers in the formation.

There should be some spirited competition for remaining starting positions on both the offensive line, at tight end and in the skill positions before the season kicks off, he said.

"Look at this right here," Cottrell said, pointing to his assistants to a set of stats projected onto the wall. "This is what I am truly proud of." He noted that, on defense, the Leopards have been 51-1 since the 2000 season whenever they have held opponents to 10 points or less. That includes 5-0 dur-

ing last season's 13-2 year, including a 21-7 playoff win over Straughn.

Defensive coordinator Gus Smith will have plenty of returning starters in the mix for this season. One is Gallmon, the two-way star. Andres Fox (6-5-236) and junior nose guard Tarelle Lett (5-11, 262) will be on the defensive line, joined by Wyatt Bosarge (6-1, 221), who moves across from the offensive side. Inside linebacker Jake Brooks (5-8, 195) and outside linebacker Trent Avery (6-0, 192) bring a lot of experience with them.

Judd Duke, who is expected to play some safety, is also the kickoff specialist, and Cottrell said he has consistent talent to reach the end zone every time off the tee. Brooks also is a key double-duty man on special teams, with the key but often-overlooked job of long snapper.

Consider how many high school games are won and lost on missed kicks started by an errant snap, or punt attempts that turn into disasters, and one can easily appreciate Brooks' experience and consistency. Cottrell said this will be his third year as the long-snap man.



Ronnie Cottrell

MURPHY PANTHERS

Murphy outlook fine with flock of seniors

BY MARK R. KENT
mkent@thecallnews.com

MOBILE — If you think driving from downtown Citronelle to Murphy High School in a Friday afternoon superstorm is as perilous as running a fourth-and-one play straight at former Panther Neil Farrell, well, new Murphy head coach Muskingum Barnes can top that.

"Sixty below," Barnes said, noting the coldest it got while growing up in an Air Force family that for awhile was stationed at Eielson AFB outside Fairbanks, Alaska. Sixty below. Mercury freezes at minus 39. At minus 60, a water balloon thrown out the front door will be solid ice before it hits the ground.

Add to that the bizarre winter fogs composed of suspended ice crystals and the 2½-hour sunlight and aurora-filled nights in December at Eielson, and it makes for one of many experiences that uniquely qualify Barnes as the Panthers' new mentor and successor to Rick Cauley.

For Barnes, the wealth of life experience that led him to the head coach's office on Clairmont Street, combined with a wealth of rising seniors (upward of 25 and possibly as many as 30), should give him and the Panthers a good chance at a successful season.

In 2016 Murphy went 6-4 in the regular season in the rough-and-tumble Class 7A, Region 1. It took a last-week win over non-region rival Vigor and a host of other mathematical circumstances to get the Panthers that fourth and last playoff spot.

The playoffs lasted just a week, as Murphy fell to Central Phenix City after a 250-mile road trip across the state.

While being realistic, and knowing he is one of four new coaches in 7A, Region 1, Barnes is still optimistic that the team's chances are good. But he starts with one major caveat.

"We have to block. Our offensive line is young and will be the key. If they don't block well, we're not going to be that good," Barnes said. What the team appears to have is a wealth of skill position players.

The Panthers' RPO (that's run-pass option) style offense will feature Maurice Robinson as the quarterback. There are a few teams who'll recall not being able to handle him at all last year, especially when he read-options his way out of the backfield into open space.

But Barnes notes defenders need to concentrate on more than Robinson's legs if they want to slow Murphy down. "Add to that, he's got a really good arm," Barnes said.

The potential receivers and running backs make up a considerable group, Barnes said. They include A.J. Lewis (WR-TE, 6-foot-4, 215 pounds), Michael Jefferson (WR, 6-4, 184) and Breland Manley (RB, 5-7, 175 and a sophomore) should lead the way in the skill slots.

The defense, Barnes said, will have a good number of experienced players returning, even if Farrell has graduated and now at Barnes' alma mater of LSU.

Look for Trayvon Ross (OLB, 6-2, 195), twins Jaylen Adams (FS, CB, 6-1, 170), and Juju Adams (OLB, 6-2, 190), Maurice Agee (5-10, 170), Norman Weaver (DE, 6-2, 217), Kendall Adams-Young (MLB, DE, 5-11, 245), as well as John Patterson (5-8, 185) and Chase Wilson to anchor the D for the 2017 Panthers.

"Last year we had a really big defensive line and linebackers; this year we won't be as big, but this group knows how to run to the ball," Barnes said.

Special teams still has some slots to fill, but the leading candidate for kicker appears to be Carter Cochrane. And Barnes recently got some needed help when an experienced long snapper, Chase Spankler, transferred into Murphy when his family moved to Mobile from Colorado.

Barnes realizes that no one is guaranteed to be either in or out of the playoffs in the large Region 1, which has nine schools. "It isn't like other regions; here you have four that make the playoffs and five that do not. In a seven-team region (such as 7A, Region 2), four get in and only three go home," Barnes said. Barnes also noted that, with McGill-Toolen as the representative both years, Region 1 produced the state finalist in 2016 and the state champion in 2015.

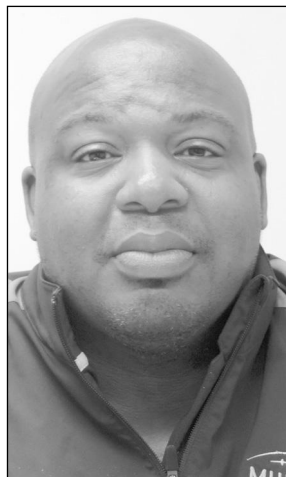
The Murphy schedule this year is a bit of an oddity, with only three official home games (Alma Bryant, Mary G. Montgomery and Fairhope), although the Davidson game is an ersatz home game, since both schools share Ladd-Peebles Stadium as their home field.

But outside of a 50-mile ride to Foley, the Panthers won't have to go far from Midtown Mobile for the rest of the regular season. Baker and Saraland are the next two longest road trips, which will also include McGill-Toolen, Theodore and Vigor.

Those journeys are shorter than the long one that brought Barnes to the head coach's office at MHS. A Biloxi native who travelled extensively in childhood during various Air Force tours, Barnes graduated from Moss Point, Miss., High School and then got a full scholarship to LSU, where he played for the Tigers from 1997 to 2001.

He worked a year in New Orleans and then six on the football staff at St. Paul's before he spent three years on Mike Gottfried's Teen Focus youth mentoring program.

From there it was three years as director of parks and recreation at Moss Point before he was asked by Cauley in 2014 to become an assistant at Murphy. When Cauley left Murphy, Barnes became the head coach.



Muskingum Barnes

ST. LUKE'S WILDCATS

St. Luke's experience brings hope this fall

BY MARK R. KENT
mkent@thecallnews.com

MOBILE — A strong uptick in front-line experience, combined with the experience of a coach who has worked in winning programs most of his career, are the things that should give the St. Luke's Wildcats a chance to improve after a pair of identical 2-8 seasons.

Last year's Cats had just two seniors, but this year his squad of 41 in grades 7-12 will have nine, with most of those already having starting experience. Add to that a number of underclassmen who have already logged in starting seasons, and there is a potential for upward mobility in the tough Class 2A, Region 1.

"Eight of the nine seniors have been playing with us for the last two years," coach Ronn Lee said. "So they've been on the field."

Lee is fortunate to have an offensive line that is mature and experienced from tackle to tackle. Four of the linemen are seniors, and the one junior, center Nick Etheridge, has two years of starting experience to his name already.

Flanking Etheridge will be guards Hunter Patterson and William Brandyburg, while Max Franklin and Lincoln Hannons will start at tackle.

While Lee's spread offense doesn't normally feature a tight end, it does feature an extra blocker in the backfield in fullback Kendarius Floyd.

In many offenses, Lee said, "the full-back-type kids are gone, and we're fortunate to have him."

Jermaine Brown, a junior, will start at quarterback for the second straight year after spending his freshman year as a slot receiver.

Hardy Demeranville and Trey Bunch, a sophomore, will be the primary wide receivers, and Lee can play mix-and-match with the three good running backs he has available. They are Jacorey Jacobs, John David Neutze and Michael Winston.

"We are primarily a run-oriented offense because of the big three backs," Lee said.

"We're unique in what we do, because our offense is based on the single-wing. With the basis of the running game and combining with the spread which I've been running for years, it has turned into a pretty unique offense."

St. Luke's uses a 3-5 defense that has many of the offensive players going both ways, but Lee plans to deploy his defense by platooning several positions, so that few of the players will be out on the field for every snap.

Stefan Ward is the nose tackle, with Etheridge backing him up. Patterson, Franklin, Hammons and Demeranville

will take over the punting duties for Bo Horn, who's now walking on at Auburn.

The 2016 season would easily go as any coach's dream, even if the opening and closing games didn't go the Leopards' way. Mobile Christian had a season-opening win over Lighthouse Christian Academy (Fla.) taken away on a forfeiture, but MC then ran the table on its region and regular-season schedule.

The Leopards, 9-1 going into the playoffs, knocked off Straughn (21-7) and Montevallo (36-14) at home before traveling to Oakman and winning 44-12. The semifinal victory over Gordo, 21-14, featured what Cottrell said was the best showing of support all year for the team. "You couldn't find an empty seat in the stadium that night," Cottrell said.

Poellnitz pulled in a 42-yard scoring pass to give the Leopards an early 6-0 lead in the title game, but Piedmont scored the next 15 points and didn't look back, eventually winning 22-12. It still must be noted that Mobile Christian not only moved up a classification, but it went unbeaten among its new region competition and then gave the 3A defending champions a game before bowing out.

How many times do you see that in high school football?

make up the end corps, with any two on the field while the other two wait to spell them.

Brandyburg is the middle linebacker and the one player Lee said rarely gets off the field at any time. Tristan Watts (also the backup quarterback) and Qanya Gamble are the primary inside linebackers, with Winston and Floyd at the ready to give them a breather.

Ryan Hunt and Luther Odom will be the outside linebackers, with Jacobs and Neutze as their insurance players.

Quentin Carr, a senior, will be a corner-back, with Bunch as his backup, while freshmen Kristian Hudson and Joshua Neutze will alternate at the other corner.

Junior Charles Yates is the free safety, and if you think the starting quarterback gets a ticket to watch while the defense is on, think again. Brown has the assignment as Yates' backup.

Special teams will feature Parker McPhail as the place-kicker and the kickoff man, while Watts is the punter. The ever-critical long-snapper job goes to Patterson, while Bunch is the holder on field goals and points-after.

Lee said all of the skill position players will have opportunities to return kickoffs and punts.

The Wildcats may have a nice practice facility on campus behind the athletic complex nicknamed "The Cage," but the team does not have an on-campus stadium. St. Luke's has to pack up and go to West Mobile Park, about six miles away, for its home games.

It's a small stadium but intimate, with what Lee describes as a "true family atmosphere. You'll see whole families out, and the younger kids you can find behind the seats throwing footballs around."

Lee played at Satsuma High School and graduated there in 1978. A head injury prevented him from pursuing football after Satsuma, so he attended Mobile College and got a degree in business administration and English, and later earned another in physical education. After his college years, he said, he also spent some time working in sales.

McGill-Toolen head coach Glen Yancey gave Lee his first coaching job as a defensive backs coach with the Yellow Jack-ets. He then assisted under Joe Dean at Fairhope, at LeFlore with Yancey and then back at Fairhope under Rick Cleveland.

In the middle 1980s he was offered his first head coaching job at Grand Bay, the school that was later blended with Alba to become Alma Bryant.

Lee then went back to the Gators as a head coach for seven years before Murphy head coach Jim Sudeiha hired him as the Panthers' defensive coordinator.

The following year, Lee succeeded Sudeiha as head coach.



Ronn Lee