

DAVIDSON WARRIORS

Davidson retools with younger players

BY ARTHUR L. MACK
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It's never an easy task playing in a region like Class 7A, Region 1.

And for Davidson head coach Fred Riley, who lost a boatload of offensive starters from last year's 9-2 team, it could potentially be extremely difficult.

"Being in a nine-team region is tough," he said. "The biggest thing about our region was that last year, everybody had big senior classes. Everybody on this side of the bay lost their quarterback, and I think Fairhope and Foley have their starting quarterbacks returning.

"We all are, in some ways, starting over. It's going to be really interesting to see how everybody has solved their problems and if the JV guys have stepped into their new roles. You've got Baker and Murphy playing (each other) in Week Zero right off the bat.

"The thing about being in a nine-team region, after Week One, you're either first or last (in the region). You can see a bunch of teams being 6-4, 7-3 or 5-5 and being wadded up at the end, because I don't think any team (in our region), is head and shoulders above the rest."

As for Riley's team?

"Our team will compete," he said. "The best thing about our guys is that they are a competitive bunch of guys, especially in the skill positions. Our defensive front will compete, but right now, I'm not sure about the great competitive spirit in the offensive

line. We're still a little soft in that group right now — we don't fight and battle. We've got guys who play a lot, and they're young. We've got a little ways to go to get them a little more combative."

Junior Tim Johnson (6-foot-0, 178 pounds) has emerged as the starter at quarterback. He has looked strong during the summer and Riley said he did not miss a day during summer workouts.

"We had a battle between Tim and Leo Richards, and it was pretty even coming out of spring," Riley said. "But Tim separated from Leo in the summer and has won the starting job. The thing about it was that Tim did not miss a day. He came on days when we were off, and he got some guys together to do some work

"He's shown some great progress this summer, our team trusts him, and again, he's earned that trust by being here every day and doing what he has been asked to do, so we're looking forward to watching him continue to battle."

Anthony (A.J.) Williams is the only returning starter among the wideouts and running backs, and for Riley, that basically

means starting from scratch. Kolbe Blunt, the leading candidate for a starting running back position, played on the junior varsity last year.

"We always had one or two good guys (running the ball), but last year, we had four or five," Riley said. "We lost all of those guys (to graduation), and AJ is the only one returning who has scored a touchdown in his life. We'll have about four guys running the ball, but they're going to be rolling through there (the rotation) because they have a defensive position also.

"I don't see us having a 1,000-yard rusher per se, but I think we'll get our yards. They'll just be split up among a bunch of guys."

Dylan McBride, who was projected as the top offensive lineman, suffered a torn labrum over the summer and is not expected to return

to action until the season opener against Daphne. That means some others who were not expected to start will have to fill the void.

"In that group, we've only got one starter returning out of the top five," Riley said. "We've got big, pretty bodies, but they just haven't played a lot or shown battling

spirit, so we've got to keep throwing them in the fire and making them compete."

Defensively, Riley is a little more optimistic.

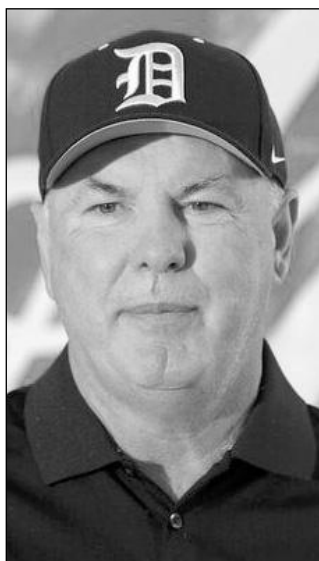
"We lost some guys, but everybody who is on the field defensively is either a starter or a rotational guy who was in the game last year," he said. "The difference is that defensively, we probably have five defensive linemen that we really feel good about, whereas last year we had seven guys that we were rolling through there."

Senior Jeff Marks (6-3, 260) is the leading returner on the defensive line and has received offers from Tulane and Purdue. Nose tackle Tyerik Williams (6-0, 270) and defensive end Darrion Coats (6-4, 230), also seniors, are also expected to make a big impact.

"When they line up, they look pretty, but we don't have a lot of them," said Riley.

The inside linebackers, Gabe Johnson and Cornelius Harris, as well as the safeties, Willie Manuel and Tyrese Douglas, are returning starters.

"They're going to have to keep us in some games," Riley said of the defense. "We've got to score some points defensively, and we're going to have to do some things in the kicking game. Kicking game wise, Joe Montano (a junior) will handle all of our kicking. He was an honorable mention all-state as a sophomore, and potentially he's the best kicker we've ever had."



Fred Riley

LeFLORE RATTLERS

Skill standouts may have Rattlers on rise

BY ARTHUR L. MACK
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After going 3-7 last season, which included a 2-6 record in Class 6A, Region 1, LeFlore feels it has a chance to get back to football respectability.

Coach Anthony Shamburger has good reason to be excited. The Rattlers held their own against Davidson in a recent OTA and have enough skill players to make a difference in a region that includes Blount, Saraland, Spanish Fort and Daphne.

"The kids played pretty well and overall I think we handled ourselves really good," he said of the OTA against Davidson. "We caught some passes and we dropped some, but it's something that we can look back on and go into camp and get better."

Shamburger said he feels LeFlore will be a balanced team, especially on offense.

"We have a 1,500-yard rusher coming back in D'Quan James and we've got a 782-yard rusher in Damian McMilian that will be back," he said. "We also have some kids from the basketball team that are playing wideout for us. That gives us a lift at receiver and we feel pretty good."

T'Jon Pheilion, last year's starter at quarterback, is also returning.

The offensive line was a work in progress during the spring, but is getting better.

"That is something that you have to work on during the spring and during the summer," said Shamburger. "It takes them a little while, but they're starting to jell and that is what we like to see."

Center Boss Davis, a senior, is the standout on the offensive line.

"He's a tough kid," Shamburger said of Davis. "He's showing a whole lot of

leadership and we like what he's doing on the offensive line."

On defense, Marquez Tatum (6-foot-2, 240 pounds), is the standout on the line at end. At nose tackle, Taj Lucy (6-0, 330) is also a big presence. Shamburger is still trying to find another man at the other end slot.

"We're trying to find some guys to compete at that spot," he said.

There has also been a lot of progress at the linebacker and secondary positions.

Some key returners at linebacker, notably senior Timatre Graham (6-1, 245), will provide a lot of leadership.

"He's a downhill player who's looking really good," said Shamburger of Graham. "We changed our scheme. We went from a four front to a three front this year, and we're going to use those linebackers and let them make plays for us."

In the secondary, Christopher Holifield is the top returning starter at cornerback. Holifield also plays basketball

and Shamburger said he was impressed with his work during the summer.

With the schedule LeFlore has, starting off with crosstown rival Williamson on Aug. 25, followed by successive 6A, Region 1 games against Saraland, B.C. Rain, Daphne and Gulf Shores, Shamburger knows his team has to get off to a good start in order to have a chance to get into the playoff picture. And with only 55 players out for the team right now, depth could very well be an issue.

"It's probably the toughest region in high school football in the state of Alabama," he said. "We're going to compete and it comes down to depth with us. With a lot of teams, it's going to come down to depth. As long as we stay healthy, we'll be fine."



Shamburger

McGILL-TOOLEN

Big Mc-T turnover, yet 'very similar' look

BY DARRON PATTERSON
Call News Correspondent

As in years past, a lot of teams will go into this season with a big circle on their calendars around the date they play McGill-Toolen.

And why not?

The Yellow Jackets have been king of Class 7A, Region 1 the past two years, going 26-2 in that span and winning a state title in 2015 before losing to Hoover in last season's championship game.

But with 19 starters gone from that team, including a whopping 10 from one of the state's best defenses, the only circling Jackets' opponents are doing are like sharks moving in for the kill.

"We're very similar (to last year)," said new head coach Earnest Hill who takes over following

Caleb Ross' departure for Opelika. Hill was the architect of McGill-Toolen's stingy defense those two seasons.

"In the past we've had four Division 1 receivers we could put on the field at any time, but this year we'll have a tight end here and an H-back there ... (and defensive coordinator) Alex Page is going to mix it up a lot.

"We're going to try to do the same stuff, just do it a little bit better," said Hill, a former Spanish Fort assistant who was also head coach at Greenville for three years.

Junior Sheldon Layman (6-foot-0, 184 pounds) takes over at quarterback, replacing magician-like Bubba Thompson, a first-round draft choice of Major League Baseball's Texas Rangers.

"He has the ball in his hands now," said Hill of Layman. "He's had a great summer. He's been sitting and waiting since he was a freshman. Actually, he didn't even play freshman football because we bumped him up to varsity so he could learn from the older guys.

"He's leading the team like we want the quarterback to do. He's a pocket guy, but if he has to run the ball he'll tuck it and run it," he said of Layman, who's already has scholarships offers from South Alabama and Southern Miss.

"Comparisons (to other players) will always come from past years, but we have a lot of new faces this year," said Hill.

Some of those faces may be new starters, but they played a lot last year: Running backs Bryan Hill (5-10, 175), the coach's son, and Khalil Nettles (5-9, 165)

lead a cast of seniors who saw extensive time as juniors.

Meanwhile, because of those now departed D-1 wide receivers Hill mentioned, wideouts Oakley Coleman (6-4, 170) and Turner McLaughlin (6-1, 180) didn't get much playing time, but it's their turn now.

Up front, center Trey Simpson (6-2, 250) will anchor an offensive line that includes guard Philip Rehm (5-10, 230) and tackle Donnie Brady (5-11, 250).

Steady senior Chase Mahler returns to handle placekicking duties.

"We've had a great summer," said Hill. "We competed a lot. The offensive and defensive lines went to D-line camp in Birmingham and I'm very proud of the way we competed up there. I got a lot of phone calls from coaches (around the state) and we're very proud of those guys.

"We also went to South Alabama's team camp with a lot of local schools over there and I thought we competed well there, too."

Defensively is where many eyes will be focused on the Jackets.

Gone is all-everything linebacker Carlton Martial, the defensive rock for two seasons.

"Nobody replaces Carlton," he said with awe in his voice about the two-time Coastal Alabama Defensive Player of the Year, now at Troy.

The play of senior Dees Trice (6-0, 170), juniors Chris Hites (5-10, 210) and Garrett Smith (6-1, 195) at linebacker will surely be scrutinized because of the high bar for the position set by Martial.

"They learned from Carlton. They know how to work and they know how to position their bodies," said Hill.

They'll be surrounded by senior defensive end Jonathan Rodgers (6-5, 200), senior strong safety Bryceon Massey (6-0, 185), junior nose guard Darius Cox (6-5, 300) and senior cornerback JaKorian Bennett (5-11, 165).

In 2015 the Jackets' defense gave up only 10.6 points per game and last year they were almost as stingy allowing 12.6.

"Last year we gave up two points too many," said Hill with a laugh. "If we'd stayed with the 10 (average), we might've had a chance, but we're going to do some of the exact same stuff. We're tweaking a little bit. We've got some more defensive linemen, so we're going to try to get in four-man stuff, but our base defense is 3-4.

"We're going to show you this, but when the ball is snapped we'll be in this."

The Jackets will be tested early and often. They open the season on the road at Spanish Fort and Davidson, which took them to triple-overtime last year, before hosting Murphy, Foley and Blount at Lipscomb Stadium.

What does Hill see as the key to this rebuilt team's success?

"Just being consistent," he said.



Earnest Hill

GOOD LUCK for the coming football season, area high school football teams!