

CITRONELLE WILDCATS

Thanks to coach Rusty Funk, CHS program came out of a funk

by TOMMY HICKS
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The excitement that was generated last season by the Citronelle football team in the community was something that hadn't been felt in quite a while. And it was a momentum and excitement that grew as the season went along, especially when the Wildcats qualified for the Class 5A playoffs, the school's first playoff appearance since the 2008 season.

The success also marked a turnaround for the Wildcats, who as recently as 2014 posted a winless, 0-10 season.

Enter Rusty Funk, who took over the program for the 2015 season, leading Citronelle to a modest 2-8 record that season. But then came the 2016 season, and with senior quarterback Ryan Bruner and senior linebacker Justin Roberts leading the way, the Wildcats produced a 6-5 overall record and earned the fourth and final spot from Class 5A, Region 1 into the state playoffs.

It was a step forward that has created a return of the excitement and a boost in the expectations of both the team and the fans who follow the team.

'We've got the numbers up'

"I think it's very, very different," Funk said when asked the difference in the confidence of the team he inherited and the team that is preparing for the 2017 season. "The kids that we have out now, which is 85 out there right now, when I got here the numbers, we were struggling. We've got the numbers up and we have a great opportunity now with our younger kids.

"We have a great amount of our JV players and with our middle school; I think the middle school has 50 on their roster. Things are looking way up and the program itself is in much better shape than when I got here. And that's not just about me. I've got good assistants and a great administration that's working towards everything. We have a great middle school administration. All of that is a factor."

That's completely different from the program that was in place when Funk arrived. Asked if he saw the potential for success when he took the job, Funk said, "I looked at Citronelle as being a diamond in the rough. We've got the unusual part in Mobile County that we're the only school in the county that has a feeder system that only comes to us.

"We're sitting up here in the northern part of the county and it's a community school instead of a neigh-

borhood school. The growth factor up here — if they ever four-lane Highway 45 it's just going to explode. You look at all the factors and all of those things when you make a move."

Now the expectation level, which was understandably low following the winless 2014 season, is on the rise again, especially heading into this season, coming on the heels of last year's playoff appearance. The excitement that came from the playoff game, even though it resulted in a 35-21 first-round loss to Carroll, is still being felt today.

'Learned we can compete'

"It felt good (to make the playoffs), but I'm a realist and we dropped down from (Class) 6A to 5A," Funk said. "Now 5A is very strong at the top and 6A is strong from top to bottom. It made a difference there, but the thing about it is our kids learned how to play and they learned how to play together and actually compete with even the top-level 5A schools, which there's not a great deal of difference between top-level 5A and top-level 6A. So we learned that we can compete and that brought a lot of excitement back."

As for the reaction of the Citronelle community to the team's success a year ago, Funk said that was special feeling too.

"It was very nice," he said. "As a coach, let's be real, you're never satisfied. We went into a lot of ballgames that we did not win that we thought we should have won. We weren't scared of anybody and we played everybody, for the most part — in the first half we played very well, but we struggled in the second half.

"A lot of that was a confidence factor and a depth factor. We're a little deeper in some areas this year but the depth of our linemen is not very great right now and we're not very big. But the other side of that is I've got some great-looking freshman linemen right now, so the future for our linemen looks very, very good."

The same can be said of the future of the Citronelle program in general.

"Things are looking way up and the program itself is in much better shape than when I got here. And that's not just about me."

— Coach Rusty Funk



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Good Luck, Wildcats!



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