

# SATSUMA GATORS

## Knapp: 'I eat and breathe football'

Lineman has seen city's transformation of gridiron culture

BY DARRON PATTERSON  
Call News Correspondent

Chandler Knapp has grown a lot. No, not because he walked into Satsuma's locker room as a wet-behind-the-ears, 190-pound freshman three years ago and is now a 6-foot-1, 310-pound behemoth.

Nope. Knapp will tell you, his growth took place all between his ears.

"When we were freshman we had no offensive line coach," said Knapp to a room of sportswriters seemingly captivated by his effervescent personality at high school media day.

"We taught ourselves, basically, but when coach Thomas got here in my sophomore year he taught me how to play offensive line."

Thomas is Satsuma's inspirational head coach Justin Thomas, who has begun building something special in Gatorland.

"It's changed a lot, the culture has changed," said Knapp, who'll move over to the defensive front this season after starting three years on offense.

"The culture our freshman year was we'll just go out there and give it our all, throw what we had at (opponents) and if it

worked, it worked.

"But since coach Thomas has moved in, from Year 1 ... to (Year) 2 ... to (now) (Year) 3, we finalize our gameplan every Thursday, and we know when we go out there we're going to give our best for that coaching staff."

In 2015, Thomas' first as Satsuma boss, the Gators took a step backward from the 6-4 season previously carved out in Class 5A under Scott Rials.

They ended 4-7, but the change was just getting started, and Knapp saw it coming.

"In my freshman year, you didn't hear anybody talking about football in the hallways (at school). Nobody was coming to the games on Friday night.

"But my junior year that place was packed every Friday night and it's alive!

"I just love to play football. I eat and breathe football. It can be hot some days on that field ... burning up some days. But it's a great atmosphere here now, and we've got amazing support.

"They've got a Lions Park and they've got little league football going on there now. It's changing the community.

"You hear people talking about football

now instead of just baseball."

Knapp said the outlook this year is lofty, but attainable.

"When we made the playoffs and went up there to St. James in Montgomery, our guys got relaxed," he said of the 49-21 first-round loss last season.

"This year, our goal is to maybe host a playoff game and win it. That's our expectation and that's what we've got to do."

He knows his coach expects nothing less.

"Coach Thomas will tell you life's going to throw stuff at you, but you just deal with it, put your faith in God and just keep going.

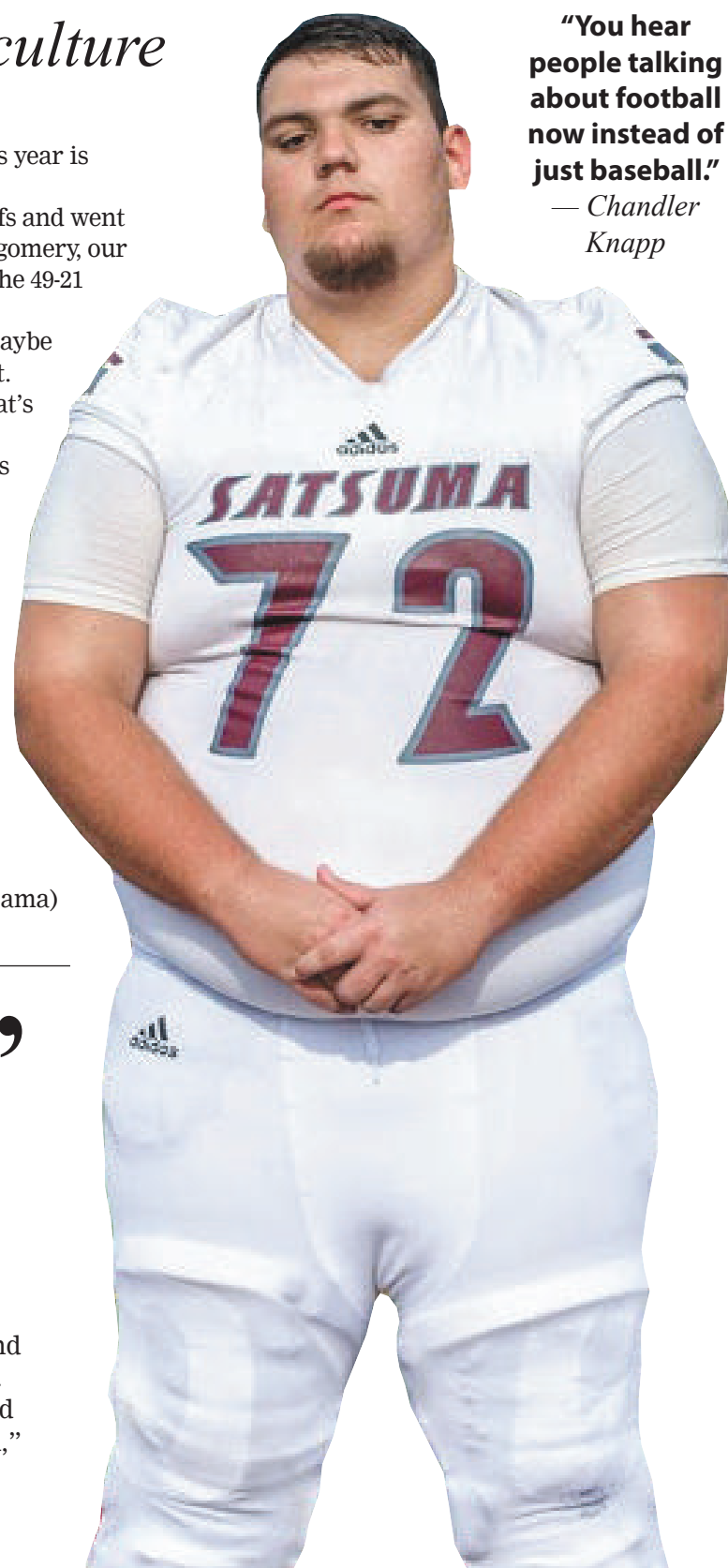
"Our expectations are you just go out there and do what we got to do."

And where does Knapp, personally, go from here?

"If I can continue playing football, I will. But, if not, I'm going to enroll at South (Alabama) and go into pre-medicine."

"You hear people talking about football now instead of just baseball."

— Chandler Knapp



## Moon is proud of Gators' 'super physical' defense

BY DARRON PATTERSON  
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As far as Steven Moon is concerned, the season could've started in December.

That's how long he and his new Satsuma teammates have been waiting to get a new season started ... them to find how much they've improved and for him to see how much he can help.

"Everybody on the field tries hard non-stop and the defense is super physical," said the 6-foot, 218-pound Mary Montgomery transfer, who'll start at one linebacker spot in Satsuma's 3-4 defense.

Moon thinks something special is happening in Satsuma and he can't wait to find out just how special.

"All the linebackers are big, and we've got some lockdown corners.

"One thing is for sure, everybody has some fight in them and nobody is running on us."

That last thing, the attitude about nobody running on them, is music to Satsuma coach Justin Thomas' ears because he had a front-row seat for one of the area's premier rushing performances last year, and it came against his Gators.

It was the fourth game of the season, the Gators were 2-1, feeling good about themselves, their new stadium was packed and the crowd was alive because UMS was in town.

When it was all over, the Bulldogs' Michael Matthews had run for 236 yards and a pair of touchdowns in a 21-7 UMS win.

Apparently, Moon's new teammates have done a good job of indoctrinating him, because he already knows which game to circle on his calendar.

"UMS," he said emphatically of the Sept. 22 road game.

"We want to win that game. We want to win all our games, but that game has become a rivalry and we want to play well in it.

"I think we've got a good shot at 'em."



Satsuma linebacker Steven Moon.

Moon says he's energized by what he's seen so far since coming to Satsuma and is even more impressed with what he's gotten from head coach Justin Thomas so far, too.

"I like the whole community, everything about it. Everybody is just family.

"And coach Thomas — all our coaches — are always going to be there for you. Everybody on the team looks up to him."

When he hasn't been working out this offseason, Moon has used the outdoors to take his mind off football, but only briefly.

"I love the outdoors," he said. "I like to hunt and fish, and just get outside.

"But I love football and I can't wait to get started," he said. "We're looking forward to winning."

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