

BRYANT HURRICANES

Bryant has fresh hopes with new coach

by MARK R. KENT
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BAYOU LA BATRE— No one needs to sugar-coat the situation in recent years with the Alma Bryant Hurricanes football team. The 2-28 record over the past three seasons speaks clearly enough. So does the lack of a playoff appearance since 2013.

The school and principal Doug Estle are trying to do something about it by bringing in a coach — a new coach for the Hurricanes, but not new to football or new to the challenges life can bring. Enter William Hoehn.

So you will know when you meet him, his surname is roughly pronounced “Hayne.”

He’s a South Floridian by birth, a one-time star linebacker at Piper High School in Plantation, Fla., not far from Fort Lauderdale. Play at Piper and you have to tangle with the Miami high schools, the same ones that also produce frequent Hurricanes, in this case Miami Hurricanes.

He played college ball at the NAIA level at Lambeth University in Jackson, Tenn., after serving a hitch as a United States Marine. A nice wood-cut version of the Marine emblem sits proudly on Hoehn’s desk.

He’s actually a two-branch service veteran, having later done a term in the Army as well.

Once done with the service, Hoehn started his high school coaching career just up the road from Lambeth in Jackson, and later he coached at highly competitive schools in northern Virginia.

From there came a coaching position at Hattiesburg High School in Mississippi before going to W.S. Neal High in Brewton.

Hoehn has been on the Bryant campus since the spring and conducted what he feels was a satisfying spring training session.

He said he likes what he sees in much of the young charges who will wear the navy blue for Bryant this fall.

The offense will run out of pro multiple sets, he said. “We have the ability to move at a fast pace when we choose to do so. And we have the ability to slow it down. It all depends on what’s going on during the game at the time,” Hoehn said.

The offense will feature Ry’jai Bowie as quarterback. Bowie on occasion last year displayed brilliance, and he’s good as an open-field running threat. Dylan Nealy is a fine all-around athlete who can also play quarterback but is a wide receiver and occasional runner. Hoehn said he is one of the Canes’ top athletes and he’s an excellent basketball player as well, and he excels in the classroom.

“Dylan had a good spring and he’s had a good summer,” Hoehn said.

Look for Peyton Russell and Ced Johnson to take most of the reps as running back. The offensive line, Hoehn said, should be much improved and there will



William Hoehn

be some genuine size down in the trenches as well. Matthew Long is 6-foot-2 and 340 pounds, while Aaron Enley is about 6-3 and 330. “They’re big kids, and they have good quickness for their size,” Hoehn said.

Hoehn is also pleased with the spring he got out of several defensive prospects, particularly defensive backs Hunter Krause and Jaylan Dixon, linebacker Gavin Barbour and defensive lineman Darione Cooper.

What Hoehn said is a work in progress that will not be fully sorted out until the season gets under way is the special team alignment, particularly the punter and placekicker.

Other seniors expected to be on the squad this year include linebackers Billy Wilson and Nathan Young.

Hoehn said he is getting help from a number of the members of the soccer team who are interested in donning helmets and pads this fall. He said he wasn’t ready yet to point out names of any frontrunners for the position; he’d rather let the preseason training and practices sort out who’ll kick after touchdown and who’ll kick it away when the offense is stopped.

Hoehn said he’s seen film on most of the teams the Canes will have to face this year and he’s fully aware the climb to the playoffs in a nine-team region will take going up a lot of rungs. Class 7A, Region 1 has produced the south representative to the state championship game the past two years.

After a preseason match-up at Faith Academy on Aug. 24, the Hurricanes open the regular season on a tough note right out of the chute, going to Ladd-Peebles Stadium on Aug. 31 to play Murphy.

Robertsdale, a non-region opponent and the one team the Canes beat in 2016, visits Bryant on Sept. 8, and then Foley comes in on Sept. 15.

Two road trips follow, to Mary G. Montgomery (Sept. 22) and to non-region opponent Baldwin County (Sept. 29). Then the schedule turns even tougher: The Hurricanes host McGill-Toolen on Oct. 6 and Baker on Oct. 13 before road trips to rival Theodore on Oct. 19 and to Fairhope on Oct. 26.

A Nov. 3 home game with Davidson wraps up the regular season, and if there are enough victories in there to get the Canes back into the playoffs, those would start in the stretch between Nov. 9 and Nov. 11.

One place for an incoming coach to familiarize himself with what he faces is the film room, and Hoehn said he has put in the necessary time to familiarize himself with the string of adversaries on Bryant’s schedule.

“I reviewed all the game films from last year. I am not the only new coach in the region this year. MGM has a new coach, Murphy has a new coach and McGill has a new coach, so there’ll be ample time to watch the film of those folks,” Hoehn said.

Hoehn said the community has also shown considerable support for him as he has started to get the program going the way he wants it to be run.

“So far folks have been very helpful. We’ve had a lot of positive support and input. We have a very active booster club that has been well organized,” the coach said. “They’re excited, and they’re a group of folks who want to do good for the kids.”

BAKER HORNETS

Hornets aiming high, even to Tuscaloosa

by LEEQUINTON BLACKMON
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Baker finished last season with a 6-5 record and grabbed the third seed in the tough Class 7A, Region 1 race. But Hornets head coach Danny Smith said he has much higher expectations for his team as he enters his third season in charge of the program.

“As long as I’m the head football coach at Baker, we’re going to set the bar high,” he said. “I want to win the region and be Region 1 champs. Along with that, I want to go far in the state playoffs. It’s not just about making the playoffs. We want to be Region 1 champs and go deep in the playoffs, and hopefully get to Tuscaloosa (for the state championship game).”

Smith said he knows getting to Tuscaloosa for the title game is going to be difficult, as they would have to get past Region 1 foes McGill-Toolen and Theodore among others, but he said he’s confident in his team.

“We’ve got a good nucleus of kids coming back,” Smith said. “We’ve got six starters coming back on defense and we’ve got four on offense. I feel like on the defensive side of the ball, we’re going to have a little bit more team speed and we’re going to be a little bit more athletic. On the offensive side of the ball, we’re going to be a little bit bigger up front and have some bigger running backs. I just feel like this year, especially on the offensive side of the ball, we’re going to be able to line up and come right at some people.”

Baker is hoping to use more of a bruising, downhill rushing attack, as the Hornets try to replace last season’s star running back, Tre McMillian. The job of replacing McMillian isn’t going to rest on the shoulders of just one guy. Smith says junior running backs Fernando Billups and Joshua Pruitt will both carry the load.

“Losing guys like Tre McMillian and (quarterback) Darius Bracy is tough,” Smith said. “They were two really key components of our offense last year. But we’ve got a couple of kids coming back at running back that I really like. Billups and Pruitt bring a different skill set to the team this year. These two guys are a little bit bigger type of back and they like to run the ball downhill. They’ll run over you in a heartbeat, and we’re excited to



Danny Smith

have those guys.”

Both Billups and Pruitt are more than capable of being the lone, every-down back, but Smith says they’ll have to split the carries if Baker is going to be as successful this year as he hopes they will be.

“In 7A football,” he said. “You’ve got to have depth. I think that’s one of the things we have going in our favor with two kids like that. We’re going to have a two running back system. We’ll go with the hot hand when the time comes, but we want to rotate those guys in and out. I want to have both of those guys fresh in the fourth quarter. And I just think that you have to have depth and be healthy, if you want to go deep in the playoffs.”

The defense will be led by senior defensive end Colin McCants. McCants, who is former Alabama star Keith McCants’ nephew, isn’t just living off of his uncle’s name. Smith says he’s a player that’s quickly made a name for himself heading into his senior year.

“Colin has really had a great offseason,” Smith said of the 6-foot-3, 250-pound edge rusher. “He’s a smart player and has really good technique. That’s actually one of his best strengths. We really expect him to anchor that defensive line and be one of the leaders on that side of the ball.”

Baker will begin its season by immediately jumping into region play at home against Murphy. The Hornets will play four of their first five games at home and finish the season with a total of seven home games. For a team that has set the bar high for themselves this season, Smith is hoping this rare schedule of seven home games pays off in some wins for his team.

“I feel like any time you play at home, it’s going to give you an advantage,” he said. “We have some tremendous support out here in West Mobile, and people out here love Baker football. The kids are very excited about being able to play in front of their home crowd, and it’s just very fortunate how the dominoes fell in place this year with Saraland changing things up. We were able to move Murphy up to Week 1 and bump Jeff Davis down to Week 6, and I like that. I wish every year we could play seven games at Baker. I know that’s not the case, but we’re just very fortunate we get to play that many games at home this year.”

B.C. RAIN RAIDERS

Surprising Raiders could get even better

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B.C. Rain surprised quite a few people in the Mobile area when it went 5-5 in its first year in Class 6A last season.

To be sure, there were some close games that Rain won, and there were some times the Red Raiders were on the wrong side of blowouts. But, to hear head coach Tellis Stone tell it, Rain should be a better team in 2017.

“I think we let one or two games get away, but to go 5-5 with the bunch we had, with a sophomore quarterback, a freshman nose guard and a couple more freshmen out there on the field, that’s something to build off of,” he said. “That’s a foundation; what we’re trying to do is put our team in a position where our opponents respect us every Friday night.”

“Some teams took us by surprise and some kids were shocked when we went from 5A to 6A. Now, we’ve got one season out of the way (in 6A) and we need to raise our work ethic up, too. The guys understand that and took that into the offseason. We worked in the weight room, it carried over to spring training and the guys showed up every day.”

B.C. Rain is one of the smaller 6A schools, and as such, doesn’t have the luxury of having a large squad like Blount or Daphne, which would typically field 90-100 players.

“At our school, I think that we’re a 5A school playing on a 6A level,” Stone said. “So, you’ve got to get your guys physically ready, you’ve got to get them in shape because we have four or five guys who are playing both ways. Some of the guys that are on some of the Class 6A, Region 1 teams play offense or defense and don’t play on special teams. They get to rest their guys and we have to go out there and get it. That’s one thing we had to do in the offseason, get in more work.”

Cliff Powell, now a junior, returns at quarterback for the Red Raiders. Over the past couple of seasons he has gotten used to the pace of the game.

“The game has slowed down for him a lot,” Stone said. “When we played Cliff as a freshman, he made some freshman mistakes. We expected that and we knew we were going to take some growing pains when we started him in 5A football. You can see the progression that he has made during his freshman and sophomore years.

“You can see him run up to the line of scrimmage, calling out the different coverages and he’s at the point now where we can send him to the line of scrimmage with not only one, but two plays and let him check and put us in a position to be successful.”

Then, there’s senior athlete Nicholas Safford, who plays every skill position on offense. He will likely spend the majority of the time at receiver, but will also play safety on defense and slot, sometimes at quarterback.

“He’s one of the best athletes in Mobile County, if not in the state,” said Stone of Safford. “A lot of people didn’t know about him, but when he went over to St. Paul’s, his recruiting picked up, and now he has about six or seven offers. ... We’re excited for him and his future.”

The offensive line, though, is a question mark, with only one starter returning and four new faces up front.

“We’ve got four guys (up front) who have never played a varsity game,” said Stone. “They have no game experience, so we’re going to go as they go.”

Defensively, the key player to watch is sophomore nose guard Carlos Johnson.

“As a freshman, I saw Carlos do some things that I’ve never seen a freshman do in a while,” Stone said. “He made Mobile County Defensive Lineman of the Week twice. He had something like 67 total tackles, six and a half sacks, five forced fumbles, and that’s amazing as a freshman, performing at a 6A level against the offensive linemen we see on Friday night.

We’re excited to have Carlos for three more years and we want him to continue to get better. He’s in the weight room more and he’s going to draw double-team more than he did last season, so we’re working on that with him. We’re excited for him.”

Stone said despite being in the always rugged Class 6A, Region 1, his team has a chance to make the postseason.

“They’re not satisfied,” he said. “They know they let one (win) get away this past season, and I can tell you the difference between this year’s team and last year’s team is that in a 7-on-7, we lost in the championship game, and we had three guys crying. That tells me they have a passion to win, and to see that in a 7-on-7, it lets me know they’re hungry for the playoffs.”



Tellis Stone