

MARY G. MONTGOMERY VIKINGS

Wilson: MGM must learn 'to finish'

'I definitely feel like we're making strides' in program's standards

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Last season was one of what could have been for Mary G. Montgomery.

The Vikings were just one win away from making the Class 7A playoffs in 2016, but it all slipped away in the regular season finale against Class 7A Region 1 foe Baker. MGM had taken a one-point lead with just over two minutes left in the game, but Baker quarterback Darius Bracy came back and connected with Tre Von Taylor on a 64-yard touchdown pass. The ensuing 2-point conversion gave the Hornets a 35-28 win.

To make matters even worse, the Vikings were eliminated from playoff contention after Theodore defeated Foley that same night, forcing a three-way tie for fourth place in Region 1. After the tiebreaking system was applied, Murphy — a team that MGM defeated 27-17 midway through the season — wound up with the fourth playoff spot, leaving the Vikings with a 5-5 record.

Things such as that are why new head coach Chris Wilson — who spent two years at Straughn after accumulating a 57-12 record at Washington County — is putting an emphasis on finishing strong in games. He said that the sting of the Baker loss has motivated the team over the summer.

'Same mantra'

"I think that they responded like a lot of young people would," said Wilson. "I think their level of maturity has grown as the summer has progressed. I think they were very disappointed last year, but I think it all comes out to the same mantra we talked about as a coaching staff — you've got to finish.

"We're talking about things we're doing at practice and we're doing it 90 percent of the way and not finishing, and it's just like that game. They all know basically the play that it came down to, and it stuck in their heads. They were there, and they live it every day. And basically, if things had happened a little bit differently, and if things would have been



The Mary G. Montgomery running backs.

done fundamentally correctly, things would have turned out differently, but it didn't.

"That's a microcosm of what they've been going through as a community, as a school, and as a football program, and we've got to finish and be more mature about those decisions we're making on and off the field."

Wilson, who is the fifth head coach for MGM in the last five seasons, said that since he's arrived on the Vikings' campus, it has been a busy time trying to get settled into the school and getting the team together.

"It's been hectic, and there's been a lot of changes and a lot of moving parts," said Wilson. "There have been a lot of new coaches and a lot of new administration. You're having to create a rapport with the kids, and having to install not necessarily plays, but beliefs and things that we're trying to stand for as far as the program and moving in that direction.

"It's just been very busy, just trying to get things organized and in place. We're getting there. It's a constant process, but now I definitely feel that we're making strides. I was

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— MGM coach Chris Wilson

explaining to them last week that I finally feel like we're actually pulling in one direction."

If Wilson is going to get the Viking program on track, he'll have to do it with a lot of young players. Most of the skill players on offense — notably quarterback Cullan O'Shea and wide receiver Orlando Doss — have graduated. There is only one offensive line starter — Michael Mills — returning.

Jacoby Daniel — one of the few seniors with any game experience—is the projected starter at quar-

terback.

"He's taken quite a few reps at quarterback for the last couple of seasons, but this year he gets his chance to step up at being the starter," Wilson said.

On defense, the leader is Thomas Griffin, a senior outside linebacker/defensive end.

"He (Griffin) is an extremely solid player," said Wilson. "He's one of these guys that I want to field the football team with. They are solid, they are not necessarily starters, but they do everything you ask them to do. He's a great

team player, and he's going to do whatever it takes to make the team successful. We have the skill, it's just a matter of getting the reps and the experience to get the guys in the right spots to do the jobs and know what they are doing.

"When you look at the sheet, we have very few people coming back. We have tons of talent with the sophomore level on down, but some of our upper-classmen, we're not quite there. That's going to be a Catch-22 with us—we're going to be extremely talented as far as our sophomore and freshmen, but we're going to be growing up."

There are 85 players in grades 10-12 on the Vikings squad right now, but there are also 55 players on the freshman squad. There are 44 sophomores and 55 freshmen.

"That's almost 100 kids in two classes," said Wilson. "The goal is to grow them as football players academically, create an environment that we want them to be in at Mary Montgomery where they can serve the community."

After the season opener at home August 25 against UMS-Wright, the Vikings have four straight Region 1 contests against Theodore, Fairhope, Murphy,

and Alma Bryant. Wilson knows that a good start will be crucial to the team's success.

"These first two or three games," he said, "are going to be extremely important to test their maturity, how much they can handle, and how much they can gauge how many guys we can get ready to contribute to this team and provide us with some more depth and some more stability at all of our positions.

Tough region

"This region is no different than any region I've been in in the past eight years. It's very tough, and obviously you've got teams that have had historical seasons, and right now we're just taking baby steps. We're trying to get to a winning season and going to the playoffs. We have to be realistic in our expectations.

"We have to set our goals high, but we have work to do in many, many areas. We have to get these sophomores and underclassmen ready to compete—not only this year, but in the following years. They have to understand what the system is, and to believe in it, and to basically have some security in their thoughts."

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Good luck VIKINGS on your 2017 season!