

CITRONELLE WILDCATS

"Justin (Johnston) is an athlete. When I first got here Justin was not playing football. ... But about a third of the way through that season he asked, 'Can I come out and play?' I said, 'Come on, son.' ... It's the best move that young man's ever made, because he's a player." — Coach Rusty Funk

Johnston belongs on football field

BY TOMMY HICKS
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Those who watch Citronelle's Justin Johnston on the football field see a player completely in his element. He moves around the field with ease and always seems to be in the right place at the right time. He is an attacker on defense, using his instincts to anticipate and make plays, while on offense he provides that big-play possibility any time the football is in his hands.

And to think, he almost skipped football to concentrate on baseball.

Citronelle head coach Rusty Funk is certainly happy Johnston chose to add football to his to-do list in terms of athletic endeavors. Funk always saw the athleticism with which Johnston carried himself but Johnston had to decide that football was for him before Funk and Wildcat football fans could get the opportunity to see just how good he could be in the game.

"Justin is an athlete," Funk said. "When I first got here Justin was not playing football. He is Ryan Bruner's half-brother and his freshman year he said, 'I'm just going to be a baseball player.' But about a third of the way through that season he asked, 'Can I come out and play?' I said, 'Come on, son.'"

"If a ninth-grader is like, 'I don't know if I want to do it or not,' and then they want to try, I'm going to let you come out. It's the best move that young man's ever made, because he's a player. As a sophomore he was starting in the secondary and this year as a junior he's going to be starting on both sides of the ball — in the secondary and on offense. He's a tremendous athlete and he's not big but he plays big."

And Johnston plays important roles for the Wildcats. His experience, even as a junior, will be a big plus as Citronelle lost a few players, including Bruner, who held leadership roles on last season's playoff team. Secondly, his talent level also provides punch to Citronelle's hopes of returning to the playoffs this season.

The starting lineup of a year ago in the secondary returns intact and it is one of the areas of strength for the Wildcats this season. Johnston said he and his teammates in the



defensive backfield are ready to step forward and do their part in aiding the team's success.

"I think we've got a whole lot more discipline and we're fundamentally better," Johnston said of the secondary. "I think we got a whole lot better this summer, coming in and working out together. I think we have shown that we want it a whole lot more this year."

"Last year's group got our minds together and a lot sharper and we believed that we could really do it. This year we're coming in to make things right again."

As for his own play, Johnston said he has worked toward becoming a better player and better teammate.

"I've been on the varsity for a year and I've gotten fundamentally better and my mind is a lot better and I just feel so much better that I can do it, that I can help the team," he said.

As for the defense in general, Johnston said, "I think we're quicker off the line and fundamentally better and the secondary and linebackers are doing what they're supposed to do, with everybody playing their roles."

In Class 5A, Region 1 play, where the Wildcats reside, many of the opponents employ a spread offense that relies heavily on the passing attack. As a defensive back who will face those teams, Johnston said he likes the challenge that dynamic provides.

"We prep during the week and the scout team helps us a lot to prepare and make sure we're in the right position and we're not out of position," the 5-foot-10, 165-pound Johnston said. "Practicing against our offense helps them to throw different things at us and keeps us on our toes and ready to play."

The success of last season continues to drive this year's team to match that success, Johnston said.

"Before last year, I don't think anybody thought we could do it (win)," he said. "But last year's team taught us that we could do it and we could make it and it made everybody's mind stronger to just come out here and do it, just play."



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