

# BLOUNT LEOPARDS

## New QB, same high goals for Leopards

BY DARRON PATTERSON  
Call News Correspondent

Lev Holly knew the question was coming sooner or later. So when someone finally asked, "How do you replace three-year starter and 6A Back of the Year Kadarius Toney at quarterback?" Holly pounced.

"We've been really fortunate that the Blount tradition has always been there's somebody (else) ready to go," said the third-year Leopards head coach to a room full of sportswriters at the Mobile area high school media day in early August. "If you look at the numbers Kadarius put up he was great for us, and we wish him well. He's going to do some great things, but part of coaching is you've got to be able to develop the next one up."

Under Toney, the Leopards were like a video game, averaging nearly 35 points per outing and being ranked either No. 1 or 2 in the state for seven weeks en route to a 10-3 record. But that "next one up" replacing now-Florida Gator Toney is senior Jacoby Davis, last year's starting safety, but squarely in the spotlight as Blount's main man in their pursuit of the 6A, Region 1 title this season.

"He's a baseball kid, with a live arm, and he is very athletic. He distanced himself (at quarterback) during the spring," said Holly of the 6-foot-3, 180-pound Davis. "He has a great mindset, really strong willed, and is a big film guy, a come early,

stay late kind of guy."

Davis will be backed up by Mary Montgomery transfer Jacoby Stovall and freshman Melvin Williams, whom Holly gushed about when saying, "He's going to be special. You'll hear his name before it's all over."

Blount was so close to a state title last year they could taste it before things came to a crashing halt with a heartbreaking 54-51 loss to Park Crossing in the third-round of the playoffs.

"We go down 17-0 and then go up 21-20," lamented Holly, his voice going somber in recalling that nightmare game in Montgomery. We come out in the third quarter, have the worst six minutes of the season, and go down 44-21. But before you look up its 44-44, then 51-44, 51-51 and we get (the ball) back with a chance to go down and score and Kadarius gets hurt. We throw an interception and lose by 3."

What did he learn about his team from that game?

"It taught me we have a bunch of kids who believe in each other, who've bought in (to the system) and a bunch of kids who believe in the process."

Among Holly's "believers" are seven returning offensive starters, among them



Lev Holly

a quartet of senior receivers opponents would be well advised to game plan for. Lanky Collins Woods (6-3, 190) leads the group of talented pass catchers, joined by incredibly quick Lebaron Jones (6-0, 158), steady Joshua Norwood (6-0, 175) and Jamarcus Powe-Mauldin (5-9, 165).

"They are not content guys, either," Holly said of his receiver's hunger to get better. "It's a great situation in terms of what we want to do as a mindset — use every inch of the field."

Senior center Jarious Bush (5-11, 305) anchors a big, athletic group of blockers that includes Ray Hunt (6-0, 285), Cameron Brown (6-0, 300), Kobe McCovery (6-3, 310) and Johnny Bonner (6-1, 295).

Defensively, Blount returns only five starters, including senior Kelsey Hill (5-9, 155), who can play all secondary positions and will be one of the rocks counted on. "He's a ball-hawking guy and a straight leader who will play at next level," said Holly of Hill.

Another Leopard who may be playing on Saturdays next season is senior Edwin Alvarado-Amaya, one of the state's best placekickers.

"He can make any kick from just about

anywhere," said Holly of Alvarado-Amaya. "We practice special teams daily and the special teams are kind of my baby. Edwin has been really good."

Still, with so much appearing to set up nicely for Blount to make another deep playoff run, Holly is cautious.

"Everything is still a question mark," he said with his trademark sly smile. "You've got to use this time to fill in the answers. Just like when you start taking tests, you have to study. And I think as coaches that's what we're doing as a staff. We feel like we've got some strong points, but we're not overlooking anything."

"I think the schedule kind of fits for us where we can get a lot of work in against great competition, but we've got a lot of answers to fill in about ourselves."

Those questions will be answered quickly when Blount opens with cross-town rival 5A Vigor, Aug. 25.

But the Leopards could very well be unbeaten by the time back-to-back games roll around against perennial state title contenders 7A McGill-Toolen on Sept. 29 and 6A region rival Spanish Fort on Oct. 6.

"A lot of teams talk about championships, but at Blount we talk about process," Holly concluded.

"We feel if you get to the point where you understand process, the championships will come."

## CHICKASAW

### Chieftains expecting to be much better

BY ARTHUR L. MACK  
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It was a real learning experience for Chickasaw in Class 2A last season, having to play six games on the road and taking its lumps.

Not only that, the Chieftains finished 2016 with a 2-8 record, including a six-game losing streak. One of those losses was a heartbreaking 34-30 loss to Highway 43 rival Satsuma, in which Chickasaw had the upper hand before losing on a 75-yard kick-off return by Justin Tindle with 57 seconds left in the game.

Chickasaw head coach John Beverly remembered that game quite well, hence the emphasis on special teams during the summer.

"We really wanted to harp on special teams this summer," he said. "We had a great gameplan against Satsuma last year and we wound up losing it with 57 seconds left on the clock because of a special teams letdown. So we focused on special teams this summer and we really did a great job with that."

As such, fans could see a vastly improved Chieftain team this season.

"No doubt about it," Beverly said. "Our kids have worked extremely hard, even during the offseason, and the expectations are high. They put that on themselves and they committed themselves to work hard, get in the weight room and go out and get in condition to take heed to what we're doing defensively."

"So the mindset of our guys is that we're in a great place and we'll put a product out on the field that's going to be really, really good for our school and our community and make a really solid showing this season."

Beverly said being in a new classification last season was an eye-opener, to say the least.

"It was tough," he said. "As a team, we didn't know what to expect, but now we kind of know how to grow, so we really understand what it means to play 2A football in south Alabama. Our kids are up for the challenge, and they're going to be really up to it."

"Spring went very well. We had 46 kids out, so the coaches did a really great job in getting out in the hallways and getting kids. We got our fair share out. We had great participation over the summer and our kids have gotten bigger, faster and stronger. It's what you expect for a football team in the maturation process during the spring."

"The good thing is that we will have six home games this year. Last year, it was tough, because of being in a new region and being on the road six times. Now that we know the competition, we know what to expect and with what the guys have accom-

plished over the summer, we'll fare very well in what we do this fall."

Beverly has seven returning starters coming back on offense, which gives him a lot of hope for this season. One of the key returners is quarterback AJ Phillips. Other starters include running backs Trey Evans and Trent White-Jones.

"We've got some good senior leadership," Beverly said. "We have a good offensive line and we have two really good running backs that are seniors coming back, so we're really excited. There's going to be strong competition at the receiver slots. Right now, James Chandler is looking really, really good, and Paul Lewis, who is a junior, is looking really good as well. We've got some strong guys who can play some huge roles for us."

Beverly said the offensive line is the best he has had during his time at Chickasaw. Two seniors, Xavier Wilson and David Florence, are the leaders of that group.

"They are spearheading the whole thing," he said. "Our entire line is over 210 pounds, so we should get a good push with those guys. They've been working extremely hard to become a cohesive unit to move in the same direction and I'm proud of what they've been able to accomplish during the summer."

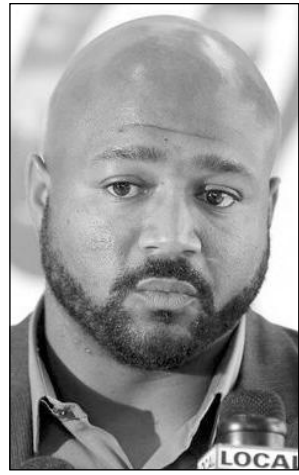
Defensively, eight returning starters should give the Chieftains a big boost for 2017. The same goes for special teams.

"Our defense is outstanding, with seven of those guys being seniors," Beverly said. "A lot of those kids have been playing since the eighth grade and I'm really excited with what they've been doing. They're big, fast and strong."

Among the returning starters are linebacker Fontaine Green and strong safety Dorian Jones. Then, there's a newcomer, Xavier Lester.

"Xavier is a transfer from the state of Mississippi," said Beverly. "We were lucky to land him, and he's a playmaker on the defensive side of the football."

Chandler should make a lot of contributions in the secondary, along with Evans, who will play corner, and Phillips, who will play free safety. Paul Lewis is projected as a ram/jack position player who can play a lot of positions, including in the box and over the top.



John Beverly

## COTTAGE HILL

### Cottage Hill's feeling of confidence grows

BY TOMMY HICKS  
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There is a new confidence, a new approach at Cottage Hill Christian following last season's 4-6 campaign. Now, that's not a record most teams or fan bases would celebrate, but for the Warriors, who had won just four games combined in the four previous seasons, it marked a step forward.

That's certainly how head coach David Peebles, who was in his first season as Cottage Hill's head coach last year, views the season.

He, like the players and Warriors' fans, believes this season could provide yet another step forward. Certainly Peebles likes what he sees heading into the 2017 season.

"I think we're going to be extremely fast on defense and physical," he said. "I think on offense we have a lot of playmakers coming back between Reggie (Rayford) and a lot of other skill guys that we have coming back. They are very dynamic, but on offense it's going to come down to five senior linemen."

For Cottage Hill, the old advertising slogan "It's what's up front that counts" holds true, according to Peebles.

"We've got five seniors that have good size for the first time in a long time at Cottage Hill," he said. "Really on offense, it's going to kind of swing with them. I feel like they've had a good summer but in order for us to be able to maximize the capabilities of those skill guys we're going to have to hold our own up front and I think it's trending in that direction. I think we'll be fast and physical on defense and we have a talented offense but those front five are going to determine the narrative for us."

The five offensive linemen in which Peebles is counting to step up their game includes RT Donovan Robbins, RG Ayden Lammons, C Jake Williams, LG Jackson Irby and LT Sam Thullesen. If they clear the way for the skill guys, this could be a solid season for the Warriors, Peebles said.

As for the skill positions, Peebles said Rayford is back at receiver and Flip Rudolph, a dynamic player last year, is also back, along with newcomer Josh Warren, who is one of the school's top basketball players who is giving football a try this year at receiver. Grant Woodruff and Cory Alexander, who was injured last year but has come back and had a really good summer, are also returning.

At quarterback, Brett Nezat from Faith, who's stands 6-foot-4 and weighs 224

pounds and is just a sophomore, transferred to Cottage Hill prior to the first day of school last year and just became eligible to play this season. "He has the potential to be a pretty good player," Peebles said.

Defensively, the Warriors are "going to be young but we're extremely talented and extremely fast and extremely physical," according to Peebles. "We've got a senior, Michael Ledlow, at one defensive end and Austin Howard, a junior, at the other defensive end. They are probably our biggest guys on defense. We've just got a lot of fast, aggressive athletes that are going to swarm to the ball. I feel pretty good about where we're at defensively. I think we've got a little bit of depth, and that's on both sides of the ball."

Peebles said another key is being able to designate some players as strictly offensive players or defensive players, which will allow them some rest during games. There's still a small roster, but the attempt to keep some players on just one side of the ball will help, he said.

The success of last year — after opening the season 0-2 the Warriors won three straight, though they lost the next four before winning the season finale against St. Luke's — has carried over to this season.

"I think (the three-game win streak) helped out a ton," Peebles said. "A lot of these kids at Cottage Hill have played for four years and gotten their brains beat out and never seen any positive gratification from football. That kind of wears you down and beats you down over time. To have an actual winning streak last year and for the playoffs to be a realistic expectation, I think allowed us to kind of turn the corner as far as the mentality goes and to expect to compete and win and expect to get a positive result when we work really hard."

"It's been good to see that in the kids. ... You could tell after the T.R. Miller game that we could compete and win. We're not a second-class football team, we're not second-class citizens and we can be just as good as we want to be if we invest the sweat equity into it."

"I told them there's just a different demeanor. Guys were upbeat and happy and flying around. They were excited about fall practice and excited about the opportunities they have in front of them. I just hope they can continue to see that positive gratification."



David Peebles