

## Mississippi College Choctaws football optimistic about season

By Mike Christensen

At first blush, there would appear to be reason for concern at Mississippi College as it heads into the 2017 football season.

The dual-threat starting quarterback from last year is gone, as is the wide receiver some believed to be the best in the conference. Eight other starters are missing, too, from a team that went 3-7, gave up a lot of points on defense and faces a schedule with just four home games.

MC coach John Bland, entering his fourth season in Clinton, isn't sounding any alarms. Quite the opposite, in fact.

"We've got more depth and quality talent at every position now than we've had before," Bland said. "We're a little thinner than we'd like to be here and there, but I'm feeling pretty good about it."

The Choctaws embark on their second season as a full-fledged NCAA Division II program with a roster that is close to having the maximum allotment of scholarships.

"We've built it up the right way," Bland said. "We'll match up better with the other teams in our league. We've leveled the playing field there somewhat."

The next step is getting results on the scoreboard. In three seasons against Gulf South Conference opponents, the Choctaws have only one victory, a 32-0 win over Shorter last November. MC lost close games last season to GSC powers Valdosta State and West Georgia, which was ranked No. 1 in D-II at one stage of the season.

It's a tough league, and in the 2017 preseason poll, GSC coaches ranked MC eighth among the nine teams.

The Choctaws reported for physicals on August 5, attended position meetings on August 6 and started two-a-day practices on August 7. The team's first full scrimmage is set for Saturday (August 19) at 8 p.m. as part of Choctaw Fanfare, with all MC fans are invited to attend.

The Choctaws return four starters and eighteen total lettermen on offense and eight starters and twenty-three lettermen on defense. Three players were named to the preseason

All-GSC team: tight end Arik Washington, defensive back Chris Manning and punter Matthew Turcotte.

Much of the focus in camp may be on the quarterback competition.

Sharone Wright, the team's top rusher and passer in 2016, is gone.

The top returning QB is junior Khiran Williams, who played in five games, starting one, and threw for 449 yards and a couple of scores.

Entering the picture in the spring was transfer Ty Jobe, formerly of Tennessee Tech.

Bland said he likes what both of them bring to the field in terms of talent and smarts.

Redshirt freshman Aaron Feazelle is waiting in the wings.

"I think we'll be as good as we've been at quarterback," Bland said. "Wright did a great job for us after we moved him from DB, but we're more experienced and talented as a group there than we were last year."

Bland also lauds the depth that has been built on the offensive line, where three starters return.

Leading receiver Marcel Newson

is gone from the spread option-style offense that averaged 23 points per game, but Bland said there is still a lot of talent in the receiving corps.

Chakel Gates is the top returning wideout with 20 catches for 226 yards in 2016; he might be in line for a bigger role with Newson gone. Washington, the All-GSC pick, caught 11 passes for 195 yards last year. Among the newcomers are a couple of intriguing juco transfers: 6-foot-7 Xavion Dillon from Southwest Mississippi and 5-8 Ja'Moz Mark from East Mississippi.

Back at running back is Alizee Chubbs, a 5-foot-9, 205-pound junior who rushed for 341 yards, averaging 4.5 a pop, with three TDs.

Two D-I transfers might contribute as skill players on offense, wideout Chad Cook from Southern Miss and running back Tiberias Lampkin from Mississippi State.

Leading the defensive returnees are a trio of DBs: Manning (70 tackles, three interceptions), Da'Quan Lewis (46 tackles) and Steven Bradley (44 tackles in seven games). Also back in the secondary is Reggie Bennett, a starter in 2014 and '15 who sat out last season, while transfers Blake Miller (Snow College) and Rudie

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