

Confident Mississippi State ready to contend in SEC West

By DAVID BRANDT

AP Sports Writer

STARKVILLE (AP) — Mississippi State isn't shying away from its status as a contender to win the Southeastern Conference.

Instead, first-year coach Joe Moorhead is embracing the sky-high expectations and is pleased that his players feel the same way. "Hype and confidence are two things that I don't worry about with the team," Moorhead said. "We are a very confident group, and I think we have a good reason. We have earned a right to be confident."

Mississippi State returns most of a team that finished with a 9-4 record last season, including a 4-4 mark in the SEC. Quarterback Nick Fitzgerald returns for his

third season as the starter after throwing for more than 4,000 yards and running for more than 2,000 over the past two seasons.

The 6-foot-5, 230-pound senior says he's fully recovered after suffering a gruesome dislocated right ankle in last year's Egg Bowl. He'll be surrounded by Aeris Williams, who ran for 1,107 yards last season and an experienced offensive line.

"I think we have all the tools and all the weapons we need to effectively run this offense," Fitzgerald said.

Mississippi State's defense returns eight starters and is particularly deep along the defensive line and in the secondary. Senior Montez Sweat led the team with 15½ tackles for a loss last year

and figures to get more opportunities to make big plays under new defensive coordinator Bob Shoop, who plans to use Sweat as an edge rusher on his four-man defensive line.

Senior safeties Mark McLaurin and Johnathan Abram return after ranking first and second on the team in tackles last season. McLaurin also had six interceptions in 2017.

The only major changes are on the sideline, where Moorhead takes over for Dan Mullen, who left after nine seasons to coach at Florida. Moorhead comes to Mississippi State after two seasons as the offensive coordinator at Penn State.

"The kids are doing a great job, the coaching staff is aligned,

everyone is pulling the rope in the same direction and it's a good reason for optimism," Moorhead said.

The Bulldogs open the season on Sept. 1 at home against Stephen F. Austin.

Some more things to know about the Bulldogs in 2018:

LOOKING FOR RECEIVERS:

Fitzgerald says Mississippi State might open up the passing game this season, but that's contingent on several factors. One issue is that Fitzgerald needs to improve on his 55 percent completion rate. The other is that the Bulldogs need to find some consistent receivers. Last year, no one had more than 27 catches. Candidates for a breakout year at receiver

include Austin Williams, Keith Mixon and Jesse Jackson.

FITZGERALD'S BACKUP

Fitzgerald's health will be a big cause for concern, especially early in the season. The Bulldogs can take comfort in knowing that backup Keytaon Thompson looks like he'll be a solid option if needed. The sophomore helped lead Mississippi State to a 31-27 win in last year's TaxSlayer Bowl, running for 147 yards and three touchdowns while also throwing for 127 yards.

RISING STAR

The 44-year-old Moorhead has had a quick rise to becoming a head coach in the Southeastern Conference. He had four good seasons as the head coach at FCS-level Fordham before joining the

Penn State staff as offensive coordinator under James Franklin. He had two excellent seasons with the Nittany Lions, building an offense around running back Saquon Barkley and quarterback Trace McSorley, before coming to Starkville.

CAN'T WAIT FOR SEPT. 29

It's going to be hard to find a seat at Davis-Wade Stadium on Sept. 29 when Florida comes to town. The Gators are led by former Mississippi State coach Dan Mullen, who left Starkville after nine seasons during the off-season. Mullen is widely respected in Starkville after his successful run with the Bulldogs, but many fans were upset that he left for another program in the SEC.

Ole Miss pushes past NCAA penalties, ready to rebuild

By DAVID BRANDT

AP Sports Writer

OXFORD (AP) — Mississippi's football program is still dealing with the fallout from NCAA penalties — including a two-year bowl ban — that were assessed last year following a long-running rules violations case.

But the Rebels stopped pouting about that a long time ago.

Second-year coach Matt Luke is in the midst of a rebuild that he hopes can vault the Rebels back into the Southeastern Conference elite sooner rather than later. The burly 41-year-old, who was an offensive lineman for the Rebels in the 1990s, relishes the challenge.

"There are no shortcuts and that's what you have to do if you want to be really good," Luke said. "You've got to roll your sleeves up and go to work."

Ole Miss showed flashes of the toughness Luke craves last season when it fought to a respectable 6-6 record despite coach Hugh

Freeze's stunning resignation just before preseason camp started. Luke took over as the interim coach and was rewarded with the full-time job after the Rebels beat Mississippi State in the Egg Bowl.

After signing a solid recruiting class, Luke says the positive energy around the program is palpable.

"You get the feel of guys working extra and doing all the little things that it takes to be a special football team," Luke said.

Ole Miss is expected to be very good on offense this fall thanks to the presence of senior quarterback Jordan Ta'amu, receivers A.J. Brown and D.K. Metcalf and an experienced offensive line. Brown is considered one of the top receivers in the country after catching 75 passes for 1,252 yards and 11 touchdowns last season.

The defense is much more unsettled and will be counting on several young players to improve, especially at linebacker. The Rebels do have some experienced

players in the secondary, including senior safety Zedrick Woods, who was fourth on the team with 64 tackles last season.

The Rebels open the season against Texas Tech in Houston on Sept. 1.

It'll be the first of several tests for Ole Miss as it navigates through the always-tough SEC schedule. Even though the Rebels aren't currently eligible for the postseason, players insist there's plenty to play for over the next three months.

"We're going to handle the 12 games we've got," Brown said. "Make the most of them."

A few more things to know about the Rebels in 2018:

TA'AMU' READY FOR ENCORE

Ta'amu took over at quarterback in the middle of last season after starter Shea Patterson's knee injury and performed much better than just about anyone expected. He completed more than 66 percent of his passes for 1,682

yards, 11 touchdowns and four interceptions. After Patterson transferred to Michigan during the offseason, Ta'amu is the unquestioned starter.

NCAA CASE NOT OVER YET

Ole Miss still has an outside shot at being eligible for the postseason this season. The program is still appealing its two-year bowl ban — arguing the second year was excessive — and the NCAA is expected to make its final ruling sometime this fall. Luke said there's no sense in worrying about the verdict: "We're going to play for each other and then if something else happens, it's a bonus."

IT CAN'T GET WORSE, RIGHT?

Ole Miss had one of the worst defenses in the SEC last season, giving up nearly 35 points per game. It's easy to say there's nowhere to go but up, but that might not be the case: The Rebels have to replace several

talented players from last year, including linebacker DeMarquis Gates, who led the team with 114 tackles. Also gone are defensive linemen Breeland Speaks and Marquis Haynes, who combined for 19 tackles for a loss, including 14.5 sacks.

NOT JUST BROWN

The 6-foot-1, 225-pound

Brown is considered an elite NFL prospect at receiver, but the Rebels shouldn't be a one-man show on offense. DaMarkus Lodge returns after catching 41 passes for 698 yards and seven touchdowns while Metcalf caught 39 passes for 646 yards and seven touchdowns.

New faces, same expectations for Southern Mississippi Golden Eagles

By DAVID BRANDT

AP Sports Writer

HATTIESBURG (AP) — Southern Mississippi faces the daunting task of replacing its star running back, top two receivers and multiple talented defensive players. Probably the quarterback, too.

From an outside perspective, it looks like the Golden Eagles might be in for a rebuilding year.

Third-year coach Jay Hopson isn't buying that argument.

"There's always a few spots where we need to stay healthy, but I'm pleased. This team has a lot of talent," Hopson said. "We just need to keep pressing and get better."

Sophomore Jack Abraham is the Golden Eagles' likely starting quarterback after senior Kwadra Griggs was suspended indefinitely earlier this month "pending resolution of a student conduct matter."

Hopson has not elaborated on

Griggs' suspension or if he expects him to be eligible at any point during the season. Griggs threw for 1,879 yards last season and was the only quarterback on the roster with FBS experience.

Abraham threw for nearly 3,000 yards last year at Northwest Mississippi Community College before transferring to Southern Miss.

"I'm just going out there and showing I can do the right thing every day," Abraham said. "Putting the ball in the right spots."

Southern Miss hopes that seniors Tez Parks and George Payne can help fill the void at running back after Ito Smith left for the NFL. The defense will lean on an experienced group of linebackers, including Racheem Griggs was suspended indefinitely earlier this month "pending resolution of a student conduct matter."

"We've got guys in certain spots where it's their time to learn it and learn it quick," Hopson said.

"That's always a battle in coaching. Sometimes you have everybody back, sometimes you've got to replace a few guys."

Some other things to know about the Golden Eagles in 2018:

REPLACING ITO

The Golden Eagles must replace several good players from last year's team, but the toughest to do without might be running back Ito Smith. The 5-foot-9, 195-pounder was taken in the fourth round of the NFL Draft by the Atlanta Falcons after a stellar college career that included 4,538 yards rushing, 1,446 yards receiving and 49 total touchdowns.

ANOTHER CHANCE VS THE SEC

Southern Miss is just two years removed from its last win against Southeastern Conference competition when it beat Kentucky 44-35 to open the 2016 season. The Golden Eagles

get another chance for an SEC win when they travel to face Auburn on Sept. 29

GETTING BACK ON TRACK

Southern Miss is going for its fourth straight winning season — a minor miracle considering how badly the program cratered earlier in the decade. The Golden Eagles went 0-12 in 2012 under coach Ellis Johnson before slowly rebuilding the program under Todd Monken, who went 1-11 in 2013, 3-9 in 2014 and then 9-5 in 2015. Hopson's been able to sustain that success through his first two seasons.

WELCOME BACK PICASSO

The Golden Eagles should get a boost in the secondary thanks to the return of senior Picasso Nelson. The 5-foot-10, 195-pounder missed all of last season because of an injury, but made more than 130 tackles over three seasons from 2014-16.

BEST OF LUCK
Jacob

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