

FAITH ACADEMY

French returns to ‘special place’

BY MARK R. KENT
mkent@thecallnews.com

MOBILE — Jack French has won 258 games, lost 114 and tied two over 34 years in a lengthy football coaching career that stretches over decades and 13 schools. He adds another to his long list as he prepares for his first season as head coach at Faith Academy.

There are four state championships in Mississippi on that list. At Baldwin County, he raised a team out of the middle of the pack to new levels of respectability.

At Baker, he took a program that had never gone much of anywhere and made it into a power with a loud and animated following. Baker’s success has continued after his departure and a retirement that, it turned out, wouldn’t last all that long.

He can speak with a homespun tone almost reminiscent of Will Rogers, but with enough of Billy Graham mixed in to make sure you know he recognizes there are powers far bigger than football that guide and coach him as well.

At his introduction to Faith Academy last November, on the day he was named head coach, French said, “Even though I have prayed ever since I retired, that if God was going to put me back in coaching, that perhaps it would have to be the most special place.

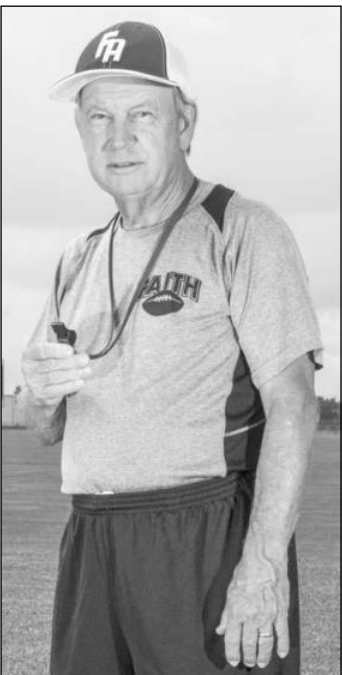
“God has led me to believe that Faith is the most special place that I could have possibly ever imagined.”

French, on that first day under Faith’s roof, also made a decision that is proof positive of character, when he announced Jeff Estes would remain on staff as his assistant head coach.

It was Estes who, in the season just finished, may have saved Faith’s program altogether when he took the head coaching position on very short notice and led the Rams to a season far more respectable than its 3-7 record might indicate.

“He’s a good man, and these kids are lucky to have him,” French said of Estes.

“I was all the way out of retirement,” French said when the Rams came calling for him. “I was just about as retired as a man could get. I finally got convinced that they wanted me, for one thing. My job at



Coach Jack French

Baker was a dream job because they were completely, 100 percent, everybody wanted to start winning.

“This program’s not completely down. At Baker there was no place to go but up. Here, if you’re not careful, you haven’t hit the bottom yet, so you have to guard against that.”

He also has another admonition for his team. “We’ve got to quit being afraid of being successful. Once we get past that, we’re just like everybody else. This is a great area to play high school football in. I think we’ll be like everybody else once we reach that point.”

French has an ease with talking to people that not that many men have. On the day of one interview, he was preparing for what is a challenge for any coach — a parents’ meeting with every level of football at the school, right down to early middle-school age.

It’s no doubt those parents will get to hear his pleasant blend of Will Rogers and Billy Graham.

“The Lord has blessed be, even in the bad times,” French said. “He has been very good to me. He’s been close, and maybe even closer in the bad times. I have to give Him credit. If anything good happens, it’s because of Him. I’m obviously not a better coach than anybody.

“I’m a little bit past those 14-hour days and riding that tractor. Some of the things I used to do, fortunately, I don’t have to do them at Faith. I’m down to those 10-11-hour days, so this is the best part-time job a fellow could ask for.”

Faith ‘quick guard’ Sullivan frustrates defensive foes

BY MARK R. KENT
mkent@thecallnews.com

MOBILE — Imagine yourself, for a minute, as an outside linebacker in a game against Faith Academy.

The ball gets pitched to a running back who accelerates for the corner. Your eyes light up and you’ve got the running back in your sights. You accelerate for a big head-on collision.

That’s when you feel the pop.

No, you didn’t get pancaked, but something equally bad just happened. You’ve been spun out of the play, suddenly a helpless spectator. The running back zips by, turning the corner downfield onto half an acre of real estate you were guarding just a few seconds ago.

Now your coach is screaming at you to chase the running back down, but it’s too late, almost like the bronco-buster who closes the corral gate after the horse got loose.

You just met Lue Sullivan, the designated quick guard for the Rams.

The crowd roars its approval for the running back, who’s getting all the attention downfield. Few in the stands may have noticed Lue’s hand in it. But you can rest assured his coaches noticed.

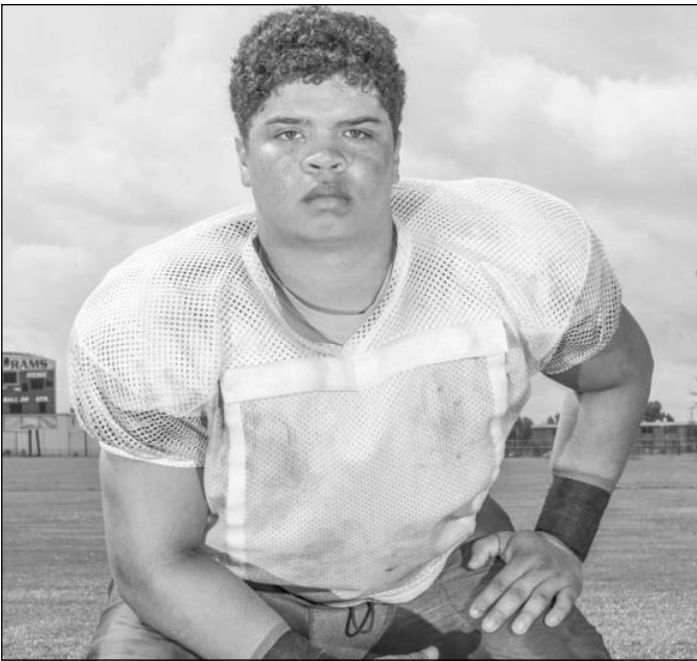
“Quick guard” is a relatively new term for what NFL television analysts have for years referred to as the pulling guard. For Sullivan, it is a new position this year and something he has found challenging after two seasons at other offensive line slots.

“Sometimes it’s easier and sometimes it’s harder because I have to be faster. It’s easier on pass protection, but on running plays, they depend on me,” Sullivan said.

Sullivan, a senior, has been a Ram for five years, first putting on the uniform in eighth grade, but he didn’t start getting major playing time until his sophomore year.

Sullivan attributes a lot of current state of readiness to the lessons interim head coach Jeff Estes taught him in 2017. “He showed me how to become better on no preparation and making the most out of my opportunities.”

Coach Jack French “has brought us a lot closer together, like a family,” Sullivan said. “Before, we were all spaced out some. We came to football, we practiced and played on Friday. He’s made us all closer. We run together — we run a lot together — we know each other



Faith Academy’s Lue Sullivan

and make each other accountable.”

Before, Sullivan said, Region 1 opponents often thought of Faith “as just another win. But now I think we can beat anyone on our schedule if we all come together as a team.”

With or without football, Sullivan definitely has college on his radar, with South Alabama, UAB and Birmingham-Southern College among others showing interest. He has an eye on a computer science career and is giving some consideration to going into the military to pursue computer science as well.

Sullivan said his strongsuit academically at Faith is math.

French has been impressed with Sullivan’s talents.

“Lou may be a little under-sized for an offensive lineman, but he’s very strong and a very determined young man,” he said. “I picked him off the film last year as the guy who blocked the hardest.”

So, if that’s you thinking you’ve got an easy shot at that sweeping running back, and all of a sudden you feel that boom, and the guy with the ball zips on by out of reach, it very well may be that you just met Lue Sullivan.

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