

SARALAND

SPARTANS: Kelly sees plenty of talent and depth for this year's squad

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play. Several players from that team have graduated, opening opportunities for others to step forward this season.

"We've got some talented guys and we've got some depth in some spots," Kelly said. "I feel like the running back situation is good and the O-line has a chance to be the strength of our football team. You probably don't see that on paper but by the time we get rolling I think they've got a chance to be the strength of our team."

"We've got four or five running backs that have all played a bunch of ball and we have the ability to keep some fresh legs in there, so that's going to be a helpful thing having some depth there. That gives us the flexibility to move some guys around and do some things."

Defensively, the play the Spartans get up front will be a big factor in determining the success of the unit this season.

"We've been talking a bunch about putting more pressure on the quarterback," Kelly said. "We've got to be more aggressive and be more active in terms of how we bring pressure. There may be some opportunities for us. We need to affect the quarterback."

"We've been good there, but we haven't made a ton of big plays defensively and we feel like that's an area where we need to get better. We have the second-



Coach Jeff Kelly

ary that can cover, but we need to make every quarterback we face a little uneasy. I feel like if we keep working we'll have a chance to do that."

There's also a commonly overlooked aspect of the game in which the Spartans will be breaking in new talent.

"One of the biggest things we have to replace from last year is Justin Harper, our kicker and punter," Kelly said. "He did all of it — kickoffs, place kicker, punts. We're going to have some folks there and we'll be just fine. That's a point of emphasis right now."

This will be Kelly's eighth season as head coach of the Spartans. He has fashioned a 60-25 overall record in the seven previous seasons that includes a 38-17 mark against region opponents and an 8-7 record in the playoffs.

He has been through the difficulty of a tough region lineup and knows that is what his Spartans will face again this season.

"It's always been tough and it's getting tougher," he said. "You look at who went out and who came in and I think everyone will say that last year everybody said that if it wasn't the toughest it was one of the toughest regions in 6A, and this year there will be some really, really good teams that won't make the playoffs."

"There will probably be two or three pretty good teams that won't make the playoffs. It puts a lot of pressure on you to be ready to play every Friday night. You're going to have wars week in and week out and you've got to be ready for them. You've got to stay healthy and you've got to play great defense."

The difference in being a playoff team and one that doesn't make the post-season can be razor thin, Kelly said. Saraland's 2017 season is proof of that, he noted.

"I think last year we were a really good team," he said. "We were so close to being a lot better. If you look at our season, we were 7-3 in the regular season and finished 8-4 overall. In the regular season we were 7-3 and we were two plays from being 9-1. We were also two plays from being 5-5. The second round (playoff) game we lose at the end of the game, basically on the last play of the game."

"So what I hope our

guys have learned is that the difference in 5-5 and 9-1 could be as little as four plays like it was last year. So you've got to do the little things and you've got to finish games the right way. The difference, especially when you're playing in 6A, Region 1, the difference in winning and losing is so small.

"Most of your games are going to come down to the wire. So you've got to be in great condition,

you've got to be mentally tough, when you're tired you've got to be able to play under pressure. Last year, as good as we were, and I think if we could have gotten to the third round game (of the playoffs) last year, I feel like if we could have gotten to that game that we had a chance to win that game. We were playing well. But even with all that being said, if two plays go a different way during the season we could

have been 5-5 and out of the playoffs. So, you just have to strap it on and get ready for the ride."

Kelly said he felt this year's team, which will be young in some spots, including the offensive line, is a team that understands it will have to play hard each game and it can't look past any opponent on the schedule.

"I'm excited about the season, I really am," Kelly said.

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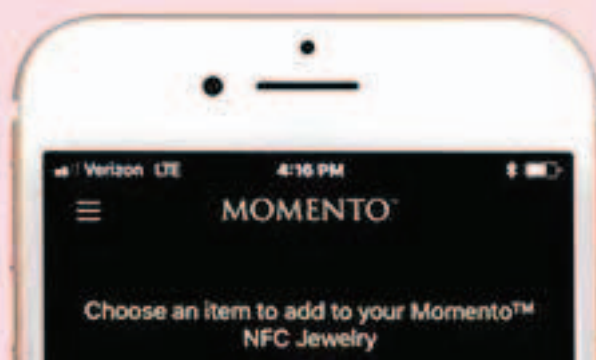


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