

CITRONELLE

Hutcherson is 'something special'

BY TOMMY HICKS
tommyhicks@thecallnews.com

Everybody is talking about Citronelle running back-linebacker-punter Joe Jeffrey Hutcherson; everybody, that is, except Joe Jeffrey Hutcherson.

Hutcherson is a quiet — OK, very quiet — leader when it comes to being interviewed about himself and his accomplishments and how the Wildcats will look to him in a big way on both offense and defense this season. And yes, as a punter too, though because of his importance in his other two roles his punting duties may be limited.

He's happy to talk about his teammates, the Wildcats' chances in Class 5A, Region 1 and his coaches. But talking about himself? Not so much.

Luckily, his head coach is more than happy to spend time talking about the 6-foot-0, 205-pound senior who has caught the attention of college scouts.

"Joe Jeffrey is something special," Citronelle interim head coach Jason Barnett said. "He's a great kid, not just an excellent football player, but a great kid. I'll give you an example of what I'm talking about. I was out here (recently) working on the football field sprinklers and he and one of the other kids rode by and saw me and they stopped by and said, 'Coach, do you need anything?' I made a motion like bring me something to drink, just kidding around. They came back with a big fountain drink and a two-liter bottle of Dr. Pepper so I could refill as I went through the day. That's the kind of kid he is.

"He does not have a selfish bone in his body and he's the ultimate team player. He wants everybody else to be successful. Now, he wants himself to be successful, but he cares more about them than he does himself a lot of times.

"He's just as happy if another kid breaks an 80-yard run as if he had done it himself. The leadership quality — he's going to be our No. 5, the Alan West Memorial recipient. He's going to be that kid for us. He's been here all four years and I don't think he's missed a handful of workouts in four years. Even when he couldn't drive (to the workouts) he was here every day. He's humble and he doesn't talk a lot, but when he does, those guys listen. When he opens his mouth, they know something's coming and you better pay attention to it."

His teammates respond to Hutcherson's efforts. Offensive linemen want to block for him and defensive linemen want to do their

jobs to open a path for Hutcherson to make tackles. His teammates in the secondary are happy to have him in front of them and his quarterbacks are happy to have Hutcherson to hand the ball off to or throw him a pass out of the backfield.

Hutcherson is going to be on the field a lot of the Wildcats, and he is expected to be involved in key plays on both sides of the ball. What are Hutcherson's expectations?

"My expectations for the season is to make it to the playoffs and if we do that, then we want to win the championship. ... I feel like we're coming together pretty well and if we keep working like we're working — we work out a lot — we should be pretty good."

And how high is his confidence level? "It's pretty high. I think we have a pretty good team," he said. And his own confidence level? "I really can't tell you how I feel." But he did add, "I feel very comfortable."

He said being a leader — by actions, if not by his words — is a responsibility he takes seriously. "If they have a good leader to follow they'll do good too," he said of trying to be a positive influence for his teammates through his play and how he carries himself.

From here, Barnett will have to do the talking concerning Hutcherson, and he's happy to take up the task.

"You could see it (that Hutcherson would be a solid player) when he was younger," he said. "You could tell he had the ability. Could he harness it and do it every down? He had it and you would see flashes of just how good he could be, but could he sustain it? He got in the weight room and really changed his body. He's gotten so much stronger and so explosive. He's a confident kid, but at the same time, he's not that confident."

As it turns out, joining the track and field team has played a key role in building Hutcherson's overall confidence, including the confidence he takes with him on the football field. Barnett explained that Hutcherson became interested in the shot put almost by accident,

that he had not taken up the sport until last year and had a natural gift for it.

Not only did he step to the forefront for Citronelle in the shot put right away, but he quickly became a state championship contender. "He didn't really know what to do," Barnett said. "He stood over in the section with the kids they had never seen before. He'd never thrown so he had no chart on what group he should be in, so he was in the first flight. He was beating their throws by 20 and 30 feet, and he's asking me, 'Coach, am I doing that well?' And I said, 'Yes, Joe Jeffrey, you're doing that well.'"

"Then the second flight comes up and he's throwing it as far as they were and he started getting some confidence, like, 'Wow, maybe I am kind of good at this.' He got his confidence up and then he made it to the state (championships) in the shot put and he also made it with the 4x100 (relay team). He was the second leg and you could see then — and I could see it against St. Paul's (in football last season) — just how fast he really was. He was staying with the other kids that we knew we really fast.

"When he ran track, the first leg might be behind, but when he got the baton it was like a cannon went off. Boof, he's was gone. He just shot out of there. He ran his first 80

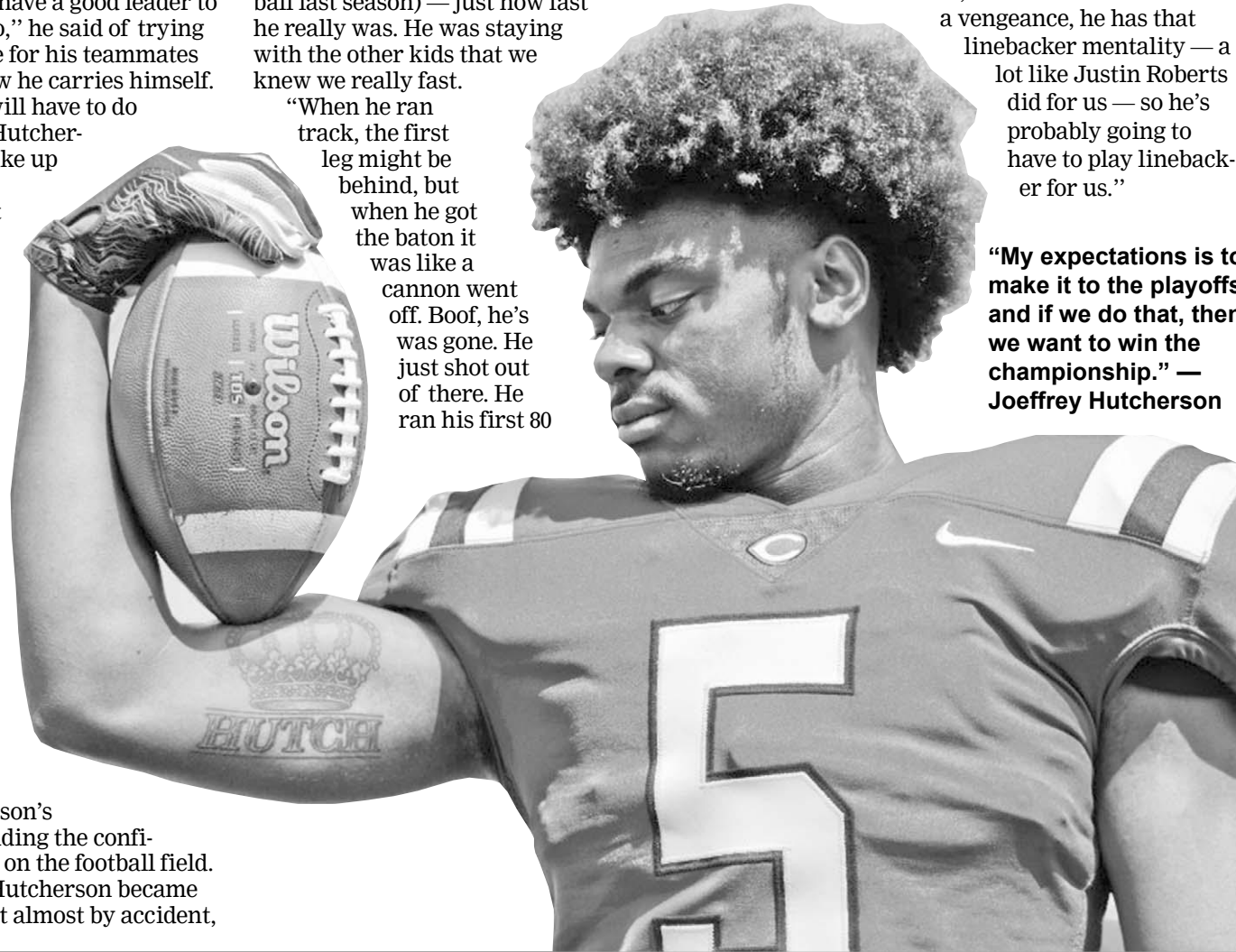
meters faster than anybody in the state probably. The last 20 he might drag off a little bit, because he is a bigger kid than some of the others, but he started getting confidence.

"Now, with the (college) coaches coming around and calling him and things of that nature, he has really stepped his game up a little bit. He's had flashes, so I hope we're sitting here in a few weeks saying, 'See, I told you so. Look at what he's capable of.'"

West Alabama has offered Hutcherson a scholarship and there is interest from several schools, including South Alabama and Southern Miss. Most are looking at him as a running back, but he's equally adept at linebacker.

"He suits us better as an outside linebacker because of his ability and speed and he's able to run people down," Barnett said. "He's actually pretty good as a coverage linebacker; he's really a safety, if you want to know the truth, but he tackles with such a vengeance, he has that linebacker mentality — a lot like Justin Roberts did for us — so he's probably going to have to play linebacker for us."

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