

# WASHINGTON COUNTY

## WCHS: Bulldog players and coach Roberts have high expectations of success

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“You have to be ready for them and be ready to adapt,” he said. “The biggest thing that I learned was the expectations of the kids. I was concerned — your senior running back gets hurt before the first game; your freshman running back steps up, does a good job running ball and he gets hurt in Week 3; your outside linebacker goes out Week 1; your freshman running back was also a corner and your senior running back was also an outside linebacker.

“We had guys dropping like flies and they didn’t bat an eye. I expected to have to come in and rally the troops and these kids were ready. They didn’t need it and they were ready to compete. That was something that was more of a relief last year. You didn’t have to coach that. They wanted to play and they wanted to play hard and they wanted to win. That was exciting to be around.”

Other areas need some work, though, Roberts admits.

“Both sides of the ball we were pretty predictable at times last year, but part of that was injuries,” he said. “I learned you’ve got to mix things up and not be predictable. Sometimes even if a play isn’t the best play for us you have to run it just to keep people honest. That’s something we’ll look to do on both sides of the ball this year.”

This season, Roberts expects the Bulldogs

to perform at a higher level on both offense and defense.

“We were drastically different last year when we lost about six starters, so it’s going to be similar to what we wanted to do last year,” Roberts said of the Bulldogs’ offensive approach this season. “We’re changing some blocking schemes. Last year we became almost a full, gap-blocking team and a lot of that was due to what they had run; they were used to using the power run and lead and all of that stuff, so the only zone stuff we ran last year was stretch and getting to the edge.

“They ran it well, but we didn’t want to get into inside zone and how to deal with different fronts with me coming in as late as I did (as head coach). I think I was the third or fourth coach for some of those seniors (last year) and it was at least the fourth offense that they had to learn, so I didn’t want to change it up too much.

“This year, we’ll be a little different. We really want to work on developing our passing game so we’re going to come out with the mindset to throw the football, knowing that we’re always going to be a running football team. But we’ve got to implement that on our terms and not the other team’s terms. We’re going to look to throw the ball a little more and a little more effectively, and we did that some last year.

“Citronelle week (last season)

we came out — and I think we had three more kids out for the Citronelle game so we were a lot smaller up front —so we said let’s throw the ball around some and see what happens. Elijah (Johnston) did pretty well with it last year and we’re looking to come out and throw the ball some this year and have some success. We’re always going to lean on the running game but we want to establish that passing game too.”

During the spring the Bulldogs experimented with running a version of the veer and triple option but Roberts isn’t ready to head that way at the moment. Maybe.

“I was kind of leaning that way, but with so many guys playing both ways there are so many ball-security issues (based on fatigue) that if it’s not something that you can do 100 percent and do it full-time, you’re best to just leave it alone,” Roberts said. “I’m not ready to commit to it full time, so I’m better off just to leave it alone. We tried it in the spring, which I liked doing because we’re going to run some similar stuff and it’s a similar concept for the quarterback with the reads and things like that, ball security. But I think at this time it’s better to move on and try to spread them out a little bit and get some running lanes.”

Roberts said there is talent on the offensive side of the ball.

“I’m real excited about (running back-slot receiver) Caleb Ladrner. He’s probably shaved two-tenths of a second off his 40 (time) from the end of last season and he’s gotten a little stronger,” Roberts said. “I’m really excited to see what he’s going to do. At the end of the day the offense is always going to lean on the offensive line and that’s a group for us that’s probably going to be fairly young as far as starters. It’s going to be mostly juniors up front and guys who didn’t start for us last year.

“We have an all new offensive line, so the pressure is on them; if they execute, we’re going to be fine. As long as they keep working, we’re going to have some growing pains with our youth but we’re going to have probably two sophomores and a freshman starting or at least in the regular rotation and we’ll have several other freshmen rolling over into that and a couple of seniors so to me it’s going to be about the development of those guys up front. If they come through ... we’ll be fine.”

The quarterback spot is always a key for any team and Washington County should be in good hands there. While the starter has likely been decided, there’s still a couple of what ifs? That must be noted.

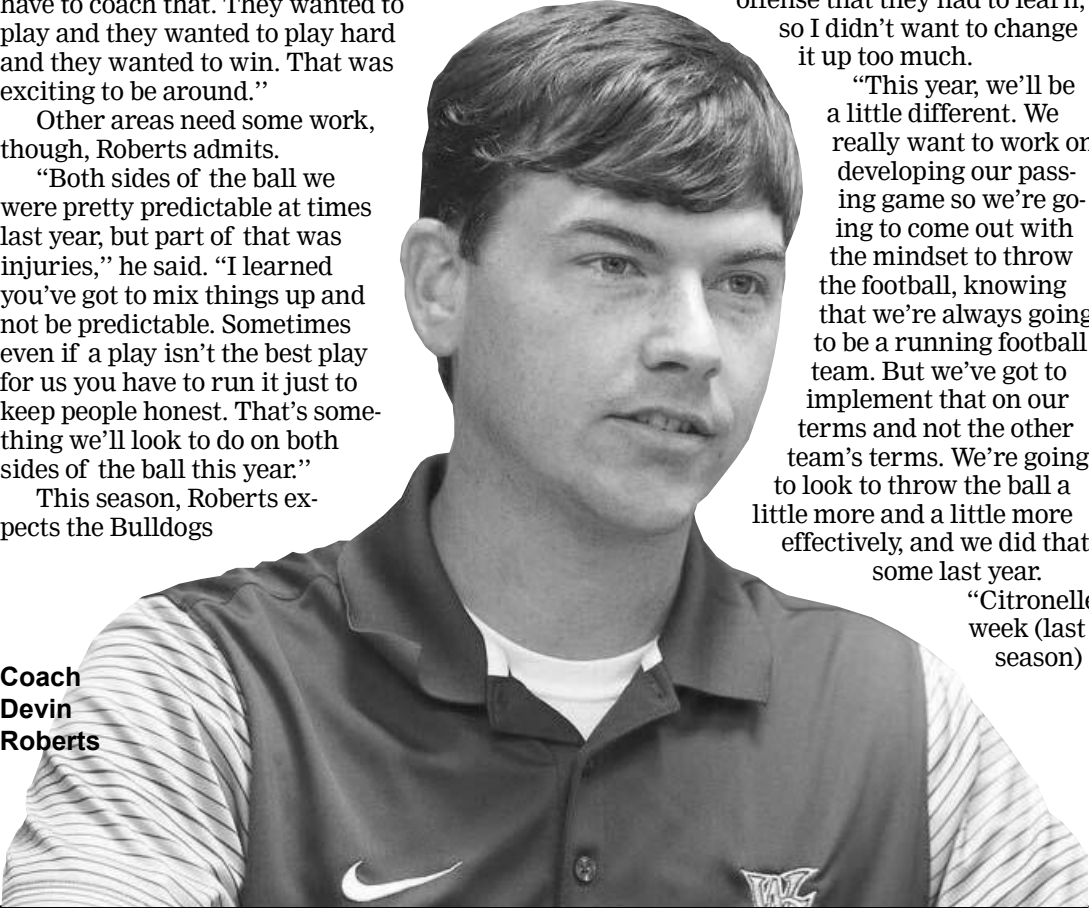
“We’ll battle to the last day,” Roberts said. “Elijah Johnston, he’ll be back this year and he’s obviously a really good player and he’s going to help us out wherever he’s at. He’s probably going to end up being the starting quarterback and that’s going to give us some more flexibility with guys who can do other things.

“I’m excited about watching him there. Dakota Ready

can step in and do it as well and Luke Gunter is a younger guy who will be backing them up there. Elijah is a playmaker. He’s our guy there. Dakota is a guy who can come in there and do it, but we’re really excited about having Elijah (6-foot-2, 180-pound sophomore) there.”

The Bulldogs’ defense should be solid this season, Roberts said.

“Defensively, Dalton Woodyard is going to be the guy who makes it tick against the running game and Dakota Ready will be the guy against the passing game,” he said. “They will set the pace for us and Matt Smith will play a big role too. Against the passing game, everybody has to step up. We’re not going to line up and just man (to man cover) people. That’s a team concept and everybody has to do their job. Woodyard needs to be our leading tackler and Willie McGinnis has looked really good for us so far at inside linebacker.”



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