

SARALAND

Spartans facing ultra-tough schedule

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If the Saraland Spartans earn a spot in the Class 6A state football playoffs this season they will have made earned that spot. Playing in Region 1, one of the toughest regions in all of AHSAA, means its members must run a gauntlet of tough games throughout the year.

It also means there are eight other teams, many of them quite talented, with the same goal, which suggests there will be some pretty good, solid football teams that won't make the playoffs as only four teams from Class 6A, Region 1 earn berths in the postseason.

It is Saraland's immediate goal to be one of those four teams, but in order to be one of those teams the Spartans must play well and consistently in the regular season against some strong competition.

A nine-team region — Saraland, Daphne, Robertsdale, Gulf Shores, Blount, Spanish Fort, St. Paul's, Baldwin County and B.C. Rain — makes it difficult for teams to reach the playoffs; four get in, five will sit out the postseason.

Saraland head coach Jeff Kelly knows the task is tough, but said he likes this year's team. At the same time, he noted each game must be played with the same intensity and focus, regardless of the opponent and the opponent's history or record.

The Spartans' schedule has some tough spots along the way, especially at the end.

They will open the season Aug. 24 against Andalusia at home. Andalusia was 12-2 last season and reached the semifinals of the Class 4A state playoffs. Next up on Aug. 31 will be the B.C. Rain Red Raiders, a 1-9 team a year ago, but a



Photo by Todd Stacey/Call News

Saraland linemen battle each other in a blocking drill.

team that will be led this season by new head coach Rock Cauley, the former Murphy head coach. Rain is expected to be an improved team this season.

September features a road trip to Daphne on Sept. 7, a home game against Baldwin County on Sept. 14, a visit to Robertsdale on Sept. 21 and a home game against LeFlore on Sept. 28.

Daphne, under the leadership of former Alabama player Kenny King, is playing well of late. The Trojans were 8-3 last year and lost in the first round of the playoffs. Baldwin County finished 7-3 a year ago but failed to make the

playoffs out of Region 1, while Robertsdale failed to win a game a year ago and will be led this season by first-year head coach Chase Smith, the former offensive line coach at South Alabama. LeFlore, 3-7 last season, is expected to be improved this year.

A home game against Gulf Shores is set Oct. 5; the Dolphins were 3-7 last season. On Oct. 12 the Spartans start a tough three-game stretch of games to end the regular season when they visit St. Paul's. The Saints were 14-1 a year ago and won the Class 5A state title for the third time in four seasons. They were bumped up to Class 6A this year by the AHSAA's competitive balance factor.

Saraland will take a needed breather on Oct. 19 before heading to Blount on Oct. 26 to take on the Leopards, who were 6-5 last year and lost in the first round of the playoffs. That sets up the regular season finale at home against the Toros of Spanish Fort, who posted an 11-2 record last season and reached the quarterfinals of the 6A state playoffs.

In all, five of Saraland's opponents this year reached the playoffs last season, with one winning a state title, another earning a spot in the semifinals and a third reaching the quarterfinals. The Spartans' opponents were a combined 65-49 overall and posted a combined playoff record of 10-4.

WILLIAMS: Receiver 'creates doubts' for opponents

FROM PAGE 48C

If there's something that (receivers) coach (Brett) Boutwell says that I did wrong (when watching film of a practice session or game) then I have to come to the field and try to correct it and make it better and run the route the way it's supposed to be run."

Usually, it's a good bet Williams was running the correct route.

"Jay has always been a good player," Saraland head coach Jeff Kelly said. "He's got some tremendous ball skills and just the way he sets up routes. He plays that position with a deep understanding of what it takes to run routes, what it takes to create separation, what it takes to get open. There are a lot of guys who can run a curl route or a slant route of whatever, but he's able to do a lot of little things, those nuances, that create doubt in the mind of a cornerback.

"You may find a guy that maybe can run a step faster than him or whatever, but he's the guy that wants the ball. He's a guy that has really improved. We talk in school terms and I really think he is sort of playing the wide receiver position at an AP level. He understands things that not many high school kids understand.

"If you watch him, he'll do a lot of different things with his routes that cre-

ate doubt in the minds of cornerbacks and gets them on their heels. And the next thing you know, he's broken off a slant or a dig or an out, one of those things that they don't know is coming."

It is Williams' attention to detail, as much as his natural athletic talent for the position, that makes him an elite receiver, Kelly said.

"He does a great job of mixing those things up. I'm really proud of Jay," Kelly said. "Coach Boutwell has really done a great job with all those receivers, especially Jay. He has really — from a ninth- and 10th-grade kid who was always a good player but probably didn't love all the other stuff as much as he probably could have, whether it was the extra work or the weight room stuff — he is now a really mature young man who is a leader on this team that the players respect for as hard as he has worked. I'm just as proud to see him evolve and mature into one of the few leaders on our team on stuff that's not ball related."

But the "ball-related" stuff is pretty strong too. Williams was a key target for former quarterback Jack West, who is now at Stanford, and he's expected to be a primary target for new quarterback Brett Nezat as well.

The transition in quar-

terbacks is made easier by the presence of Williams and other on the receiving corps who have big-game experience and know the Spartans' offensive goals.

"It's good," Kelly said. "Jay understands it. He and Daniel Taylor, who may be the most overlooked player on this team, they both have a tremendous understanding of what we want to get done. They have helped bring along Nezat a lot quicker, talking to him about what they are seeing or what they think about this coverage route or scheme. Both of those guys have really expedited the development of Nezat and they have a good feel and understanding right now."

Williams said the change in quarterbacks isn't as big a deal as some might make of it.

"It's about the same pressure as last year, we just have to work with a new quarterback," he said. "We just have to keep working with Brett on our connection with each other and everything should be smooth."

As for the Spartans' potential overall, Williams said he and the rest of his teammates have high expectations for the upcoming season.

"We can be great, this offense can be great," he said. "We have a good core of running backs and a good quarterback and good

receivers. And the offensive line is good. The defense is real good too."

He is aware of his importance to the equation, but he said he is also mindful that he has a lot of help around him on both sides of the ball from his teammates.

"Basically, I just need to show up every game and do my job and try to help us win a state championship," Williams said. "It's going to be a challenge, but we just have to show up every game and if we do we'll be where we want to be."



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