

FAITH ACADEMY



The 2018 Faith Academy Rams

Faith Academy photos by John O'Dell/Call News

Hopes rise for Rams' contention

Two tough foes have left region, but Faith must meet the challenge with young players

BY MARK R. KENT
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MOBILE — Before the first kickoff of the season, the Faith Academy Rams may well, by default of sorts, have taken a couple steps forward toward the contender level in Class 5A, Region 1.

And as such, the school's first-ever AHSAA playoff berth may be in the Rams' future.

Gone from Faith's schedule are two region opponents who have always given the Rams trouble — Williamson and St. Paul's. The Lions have stepped down a classification to 4A, while the Saints, by AHSAA edict, now must compete in Class 6A.

So, with two teams the Rams have never done well against off the region schedule, is there room for Faith to move up?

If you ask the players and new head coach Jack French, they would say yes.

But first, there is work to be done and a lot of vacancies to fill in the starting lineup.

French came out of retirement to take the Faith job after a long and successful career in both Alabama and Mississippi coaching prep football. He is best remembered in this area for taking long-moribund Baker High School and turning it a few years back into a Friday night opponent worth fearing.

The first item Faith will have to contend with is the graduation of 16 seniors from

last year's 3-7 team.

This Rams team will be younger and thus need to be hungrier. Finding a fit at quarterback will be crucial, as Braxton Bell was one of the graduates last spring. But a quick look-in to a pre-full pad workout in late July showed a capable young arm with a lot of range on his throws in James Flynn.

If that name sounds familiar, here's why: He pitched the final inning of the clinching game in May for the baseball team in its state championship series victory over Russellville. The last projectile he hurled in competition was a pitch that got popped up into the infield, sealing the title.

"I've been pleasantly surprised," French said. "We seem to have plenty of football players coming. We understand this year we're down to eight seniors, and in the class behind them, 19."

French said during his retirement, the biggest thing he missed was "the before and after-practice and games, talking to the team." At Baker, he said, those talks would often be to as many as 130 players. So, when the Faith call came along, French said, "Here I am."

French sees the fact Faith's football program has not had the long-term success of teams in other sports at the school, particularly baseball, softball and basketball. The Rams have never made the playoffs in

football since switching affiliation to the AHSAA a number of years ago.

"There are a lot of people at Faith that like football. We're close to loving football, but we've got to have some good things happen," he said.

French said the apparent strengths of the upcoming Rams team include Flynn and his receivers, who performed well at 7-on-7 competitions over the summer.

French, who admits he still isn't sure "what 7-on-7 means," said he is encouraged by what he saw. "We've got to find someone to block for them, and if we can, we should have a pretty good offense."

One of the linemen given a major amount of the responsibility is guard Lue Sullivan, who has been switched to the quick guard position, the guy you'll see pulling down the line to block ahead of a runner sweeping or to take out an outside pass rusher.

Running back Tim Cody, who had a 600-yard season with five touchdowns a year ago, is the top prospect to tote the rock out of the backfield for the Rams.

Defensive lineman Chris Battiste is considered the top prospect among the defenders.

"Defensively, we do have a lot of question marks, and we'll have to put a lot of young guys there, but on the other hand, as the

season goes on and the weather gets cooler, some of those good offensive players are also good defensive players," French said.

"We have the necessary brilliance, provided we can move the line of scrimmage from time to time," French said.

Faith opens and closes the season against Mississippi opposition. The Aug. 24 game is at Bogue Chitto, and Bayside Academy comes in for a non-regional game on Aug. 31.

There's a road region game Sept. 7 with LeFlore, a 6A school that dropped a level when St. Paul's moved up. Another road region game follows on Sept. 21, when the Rams visit Citronelle. A non-region road game will take the Rams to 6A Robertsdale on Sept. 28.

From there, it will be home region games for the next three weeks, with Wilcox Central coming on Oct. 5, Vigor due in on Oct. 12 and Jackson coming on Oct. 19.

Satsuma, another 5A newcomer, this time promoted from 4A, is the final road region game for the Rams and one that could be a make-or-break for either the Rams or the Gators.

The Mount Olive Attendance Center from Mississippi closes the regular season on Nov. 2.

Will there be more after that? If so, it would be a first for the Rams' football program and a goal well worth striving for.

Battiste wants more sacks and Faith wins

BY MARK R. KENT
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MOBILE — Chris Battiste is a senior in his third season as a Faith Academy player, having cut his teeth in football for a number of younger years in the public school system, up to what was then called Chestang Middle School in Trinity Gardens.

But now that Battiste is in his last year of football with the Rams, he has some high goals in mind.

First, he said, is Faith's first-ever AHSAA state playoff spot. Ultimately, he'd love to win a state championship, but he says a season with at least seven wins would be a fine achievement.

He's already got a number of favorite memories in the game, particularly a quarterback sack he said he made last year against Escambia County in a game the Rams were able to win.

"He dropped back and he was running," Battiste said, giving chase, but recognizing he had overrun the play. Not one to give up on himself, Battiste then watched the Blue Devil quarterback reverse field, putting Battiste right back in the play. "I just grabbed him and spun him to the ground," he said.

Battiste said engineering is a college goal, but he'd be glad to keep suiting up as a college player somewhere.

"Birmingham-Southern, Millsaps, Cumberland, Savannah State, Southern, West Georgia, West Florida," Battiste said, mentioning schools

that have made contact with him. A final decision, he said, is a good way off, though.

He agrees with a lot of his teammates that Vigor is a team the Rams individually and collectively would like to do better against in 2018.

The Wolves came into Faith 0-3 last year but left with their first win of the year; Vigor wouldn't lose again until the second round of the Class 5A state playoffs, collecting nine straight victories.

Vigor would beat Jemison and Eufaula before falling to Demopolis in the 5A quarter-finals.

Like many athletes at Faith, Battiste wears other uniforms as well. As a sophomore, he played basketball, and when track and field season comes along, he's a discus thrower and a shot-putter.

Battiste describes new head coach Jack French as "old school and country," but he also adds, "he's all about business."

He said of his new coach, "He laughs with us, he jokes around us and tells us stories, but in the end we all know it's about his business. When it's time to work, we're going to work. We're going to run and do everything as a team and get it done."

Battiste added, "He a business man, but he's just about the most entertaining person you'll ever meet."

French's first two days with the team featured a sequence of events that char-

acterized both the coach and players, Battiste said.

"The first day he was with us, we had a team meeting and he handed out sheets for us to write down our goals. Then on the second day, we ran the cross country course, and I said to myself, 'I weigh about 280; how am I going to do this?'"

But he said that run was the first day the entire team started coming together.

One thing Battiste said French has changed among

the Rams is the sense of 24/7 family in this team. "The past year, we didn't talk to each other a lot out of school. Now, it's nothing to make a phone call to a teammate and say, 'Hey, would you like to hang out?'"

In the immediate future, the place Battiste and every other Ram is hoping to hang out is on that practice field the Monday after team's final regular season game on Nov. 2, preparing for Faith's first-ever playoff appearance.



Faith defensive lineman Chris Battiste

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