

## MURPHY

## Panthers focus on cutting turnovers

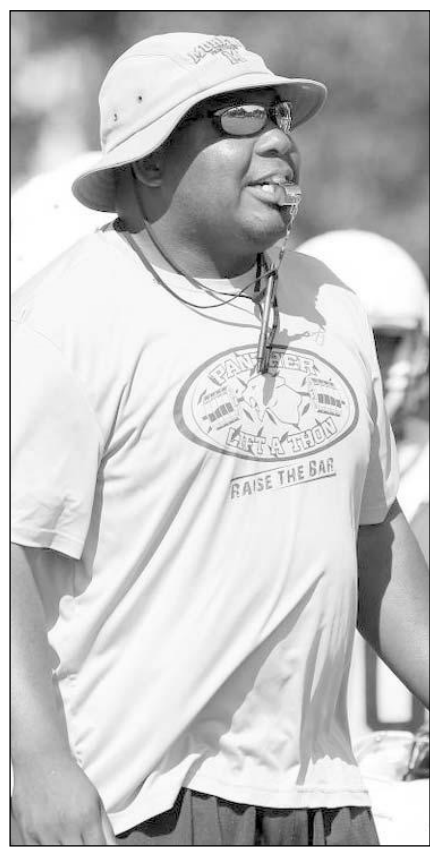


Photo by Mike Kittrell/Call News

Muskingum Barnes

BY MARK R. KENT  
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**MOBILE** — A year after the Murphy Panthers finished 3-7 and out of the playoffs despite having four very close games that could have all been victories, second-year head coach Muskingum Barnes has figured out the main area this year's team needs to improve in order to succeed.

"Turnovers," Barnes said. "Turnovers can kill you. Any time you turn the ball over to another team more than you have it, you're going to lose games. Last year was a good indication. Every game we lost, we turned the ball over more than the other team."

Barnes added, "We can control that, and as a head coach I take that on myself. The bad teams turn the ball over and have penalties, and the good teams don't."

A look at last year's game schedule shows close encounters that came up short may well have kept Murphy home from the playoffs. The Panthers played McGill-Toolen hit-for-hit and ended up just short, 21-14, and there was a game with Foley that ended 27-26.

Win both of those and the Panthers' region record would have ended up 5-3, probably good enough for postseason ball. All three games Murphy won in 2017 were region victories — Theodore, Alma Bryant

and Mary G. Montgomery.

There were also close losses to 6A power Saraland (25-21) and 5A Vigor (28-21), two teams that made their respective playoffs.

This Murphy team has some large challenges during the team's formative weeks. The entire starting defense of a year ago, except for one player, is gone, as are star quarterback Darius Robinson and ace wide receiver Michael Jefferson Jr.

"Chris Moffett and Alex Howell are two young kids battling for the quarterback spot," Barnes said. "At running back, Breland Manley and Anthony Miller are two kids who are coming back from last year. We have a whole new crop of receivers with which we have more depth this year."

Barnes noted receivers Christian Sellers, a returnee, and D'andre Bailey, Jyral Fletcher, Garrett Hamilton and Jeremy Washington are also notable players competing for field time.

Barnes said three returnees come back on the offensive line, making this a strongpoint the Panthers will have going into the season. "We've got to be able to control the ball,"

Barnes said. "The one thing you don't want to see as a defensive lineman is the offensive linemen whipping you. If we can run the ball and average four yards a carry, chances are more than likely that we're going to win the game."

"Football is not a hard game. You want to control the clock and keep the offense on the field as much as you can. If we get to the fourth quarter and the defense is still playing at a high level, the chances of winning are going to be high."

Jamarcus Wallace is a senior outside linebacker who will be called on to be a leader on the rebuilt defense.

"I got quite a bit of playing time last year, and I am hoping to get a lot more this year," Wallace said. "We'll be pretty good this year. I feel like I'm going to be a helping hand this year. Last year, I learned not to give up, to keep driving, don't hang your head, stay in the game and stay focused."

Offensive lineman Devonte Wheat said of Barnes, "He's a great coach. He's always on us if we're doing something wrong. If he's got something going on he'll let us know and if we've got something going on we can let him know."

Class 7A, Region 1 is a crowded field, and a region that has been dominated at the top by McGill-Toolen for the past three seasons. Still there are enough solid teams — Davidson, Fairhope, Theodore and Foley come to mind immediately — so that room for anyone else in those four top playoff spots is at a premium.

## ST. LUKE'S

## Expectations high for Wildcats now

BY DARRON PATTERSON  
Sports Correspondent

Oh, how quickly things change in the organized mayhem better known as Alabama high school football.

Three years ago, veteran coach Ronn Lee came out of retirement to take over a St. Luke's program that had only been in existence since 2010.

"I think there were nine guys that showed up for the first practice," said Lee, shaking his head wistfully. "It was a team that was senior heavy. They had 17 seniors the year prior to that and only about 30 kids were on the team. We knew it was going to be a struggle."

He wasn't lying. They finished 2-7 that year.

Fast forward to 2018, and Lee's Wildcats, dropping down a notch from Class 2A to Class 1A, Region 1 for the upcoming season, have gone from being hunters to the hunted.

Last year's sparkling 10-2 season ended bitterly with a 56-52 loss to Goshen in the state playoffs' quarterfinal round. A monumental

fourth quarter collapse erased a 49-35 lead they'd taken into the final 12 minutes.

Lee knows his players learned a lot from the stellar season.

"You would think it gives us a lot of confidence in which we're excited about the (coming) year, but it's also a place we've never been before," he said. "The expectations have been set. We have 16 starters returning, so at this point we are expected to be a good ball club and to be competitive every time we go on the field."

"For us that's new. We've never had that kind of expectation before. So we have to focus every day on trying to get a little bit better at what we're doing and focus on this day of practice instead of worrying about where we're going to be and who we're going to play."

"Last year we feel like a lot of it was maturity," he said of the leadership his veteran seniors provided. "We had to learn to play (from those early years). And these guys here, they've grown up by getting beat up."

"But they come back, they go to work, always have a smile on their face and know that eventually if they keep working hard that they wouldn't be 14 (years old) forever and that eventually they'd get to be 16- and 17-year olds."

This new group of seniors is led by two-way lineman Nick Etheredge, running back-outside linebacker John David Neutze and running back Jacorey Jacobs.

But make no mistake about it, the man driving the bus is last year's 2A Back of the Year, Jermaine Brown, who carried

the ball — and this is not a typo — 39 times for 481 yards and six touchdowns in the playoff loss to Goshen.

"He's special," said Lee of his mercurial, 5-foot-9, 175-pound senior quarterback who also threw for 1,572 yards and 19 touchdowns last season. "He's a very humble guy, but he's special."

The 23-year coaching vet with stops at Grand Bay (three years), Satsuma (seven years) and Murphy (10 years) is ecstatic about venturing into unknown 1A territory.

"It's a different group of teams to play," he said with a sly smile. "So the third game of the season, our first home game, we get to play Sweet Water; now isn't that a blessing, the reigning state champs in 1A. But we are excited about getting to play at some new places. We're excited about this season."

"We open up with Georgianna. A great football team that was ranked in 1A last year. They were the only team to beat us in regular season — in overtime. Coach Ezell (Powell) does a great

job up there and we look forward to playing them."

With Brown at the controls, the 'Cats scored a team-record 570 points last season, and they're looking for more this time out. "Last year was one of the most fun things we've experienced," Lee said. "Jermaine had a great year, obviously, as he was the 2A Back of the Year."

"We've got all of our skill people back and some of our linemen. We were fortunate last year that some of our younger linemen got to play. (But) we are still in the process of developing the kind of team unity we had last year. We want to lean on each other."

The Wildcats are hoping for something else they can lean on for support, too — a home field, something they've never had.

"We got the lights installed at the beginning of the year and were able to play some soccer games on our campus," said Lee. "Other than a baseball game, the soccer games were the first night games ever played in St. Luke's history. We want to make sure when we are playing games on campus that not only the home fans, but the visitors are in an area that's comfortable and will have an experience that they enjoy."

He said a decision on the facility's readiness was expected by early August.

"At this point it's a matter of bleachers. We'll know the first of August whether it'll be a reality for this year."

And the season, coach. Are you ready? "We are really excited. Our fans are excited, too."



Photo by Mike Kittrell/Call News

Jermaine Brown

## THEODORE



Eric Collier

Photo by Mike Kittrell/Call News

## Defense will drive Bobcats this fall

BY ROBERT LADNIER  
Sports Correspondent

The Theodore High Bobcats are hoping to pick up where they left off last football season and aim for higher goals in 2018.

"Those kids had good chemistry," Theodore head coach Eric Collier said of his 2017 squad. "They liked playing together and just being around each other. We had good players and a senior quarterback."

Collier believes the team chemistry will play a key role this season as well.

"We had a good summer," Collier said. "This is probably the closest team I've had. They don't play for themselves — selfishly — they play for their teammates and for Theodore High School and I really appreciate that. This is a fun team to coach."

The Bobcats return no less than eight starters on defense.

"We play pretty dadgum good defense," Collier admitted. "I feel like this defense is pretty solid."

The front wall is led by a pair of seniors in tackle Michael Washington and end Jeremy Castor and junior end Jayden McCants. Directly behind them are a pair of inside linebackers, including senior Michael Williams and junior Reggie Malone, while the outside linebackers are senior Colton Higgins and junior DeMouey Kennedy.

"Kennedy is a freak, a C.J. Mosley-type kid," Collier said.

The offense brings back six starters.

Up front are senior guards DeMarcus Johnson and William Owens, while the backfield includes senior running back Jimmy Haywood and junior fullback Billy Flanagan.

"Haywood has gotten stronger and faster," Collier said. "He had a good spring and we are looking for good things out of him."

The senior-laden receiving corps will be paced by split end Jordan O'Neal and slotman Hunter Tillman. Pulling the trigger in the passing game will be first-year starter and senior Tyler Underwood.

"As a backup, he didn't get a lot of reps last year," Collier said. "We did play in a 7-on-7 in Daphne and won it."

Earning a playoff berth hasn't been an issue for Theodore. The problem is the Bobcats haven't won a playoff game since 2008, under former coach Bill Meredith, and haven't advanced to the quarterfinals since 1999 under Joe Downey.

"The fourth-seed in a region always travels to play a No. 1 seed of another region, and that always is tough," Collier explained. "The big thing for us is we want to win the region, which is a big goal, have a home playoff game and ultimately win a state championship."