

BLOUNT

Leopards launch youth movement

BY DARRON PATTERSON
Sports Correspondent

Since taking over the job at Blount three years ago, Lev Holly has entered each season with a proven commodity — basically a roster that included several college players in-waiting.

Whether it was the dazzling Kadarius Toney at quarterback, or sure-handed wide receivers Lebaron Jones and Collins Woods III snagging passes 50 yards down field, Holly always knew what he had before opening night.

Not this season.

Toney is now a highly-regarded sophomore at Florida, while Jones (Miles), Woods III (Naval Academy) and a cadre of other former Leopards are entering their freshman seasons in college.

In all, Blount lost 33 seniors from last year's 6-5 team that ended on a low note with a 41-7 loss at Wetumpka in the first round of the state Class 6A playoffs.

"This is as young as we've been since I've been there," said Holly, nattily dressed in suit and tie as he met with a room of reporters at high school media days in late July. He was honest and up front about this year's edition of the Leopards.

"I like what they bring every single day," he said. "They bring a lot of excitement. They bring a lot of juice and a lot of effort. As coaches, this (losing proven players) comes in cycles. But as coaches, that's when you go in and say, 'This is what we have, this is what we're dealing with, so how do you develop the talent?'"

"When it's all said and done, though, I think we'll be proud of this group in the long run."

And just which unsettled positions con-

cern Holly most?

"Center, quarterback, running back," he said with a sly, rather hesitant smile. "We lost two 1,000-yard receivers. Defensive line. We lost the secondary. It's everywhere, not just one position. As far as experience, we're young but that comes with the territory. I feel confident about what we'll do."

Despite not knowing how his young players will develop, Holly (26-10 in his three years) still has two reasons to be excited this season. Two big reasons.

"We have two proven guys on this team, and that's Cortlin and Kobe."

Cortlin is 6-foot-2, 240-pound all-state defensive lineman Cortlin Martin, who's started every game since his freshman year, while 6-3, 315-pound Kobe McCovery will anchor the offensive line. Holly is looking for both to go out with a bang in their final season at Blount.

Of Martin he says, "Just the excitement, the juice he brings. He's going to dominate the guy in front of him. He plays defensive end, outside, plays the Mike (middle linebacker)."

McCovery is being heavily recruited by several Division 1 schools, but said he's putting all that aside until the year is over.

"When the season ends I'll see where everything is at, then I'll talk with my coach

and my mom about it."

Right now, though, McCovery is focused on the season's beginning and one of the most important games of the year — facing arch rival Vigor in "The Battle of Prichard."

"Man, when you've got 15,000, that's a lot of people," he said, referring to the packed house expected at Prichard Stadium for both team's opener on Aug. 24. "My first year playing, I was hyped and excited. Like when you make that first play, it's like 'Man!'"

"But as the years go by, you're kind of cool. You already know the gameplan and you already know what to do. You know it's going to be loud. The young guys? We're going to have to coach them up about that."

Holly said he is happy his youthful team gets to walk right into the frying pan against the Wolves. But he was tight-lipped about who'll be the starter at quarterback that night.

"I'm glad it's early," he said. "I'd rather get it out of the way because it's so much excitement and it gives them something to look forward to going in. There's nothing solid (at quarterback). We're working about three guys. It's kind of day by day. We won't make that decision until the week before the game."

And what are Holly's expectations for

his young Leopards for the rest of the season?

"It depends on how fast we mature as a team," he said. "Coming out against a Vigor you really don't have a choice, then adding St. Paul's (last year's 5A state champs, who're moving up to 6A, Region 1), a Baldwin County team that I think is really trending (up), then you get a 7A Bryant."

"We play St. Paul's, Spanish Fort and Daphne back to back. So how well and how fast we mature I think is up in the air. You've got to beat four of them (including Baldwin County) to even have a shot to get in (the playoffs)."

Above all, though, Holly is encouraged about the more disciplined, tough mindset he and his staff have been able to instill in the players since coming to Blount.

"The culture defines itself," he said. "When you have a bunch of kids that do things the right way every single day, (and) you don't have to worry about them not being in class, not being where they're supposed to be and not having any discipline issues, that's a win."

"It starts with the administration. (Blount principal) Mr. (Jerome) Woods, the way he runs things and the standards he sets for the program, the faculty, the staff, and the understanding that the culture that we're in makes turning those (off-field) challenges into opportunities."

"The biggest thing that we have going is the network (of people). Every day that brick by brick culture pretty much defines itself. It's not about the bricks on the building, but the mortar that holds it together."

B.C. RAIN

Raiders successfully building up roster

BY LEEQUINTON BLACKMON
Sports Correspondent

Things are going to look a lot different for B.C. Rain's football program this year, but one thing that remains the same is the Red Raiders' struggle to fill the depth chart.

When new head coach Rick Cauley took over the Red Raiders' program, he knew he had his work cut out for him in building a competitive roster.

When Cauley took the podium for Mobile County's prep football media day on July 24, the Red Raiders had 56 players on the roster, which isn't quite 6A football numbers but it's a major improvement over a roster that had half that total — only 25 players — when he took over the program back in April.

Much to Cauley's surprise, building the roster up to 56 players hasn't been that difficult, mainly because of an unlikely lead recruiter in senior quarterback CJ Powell.

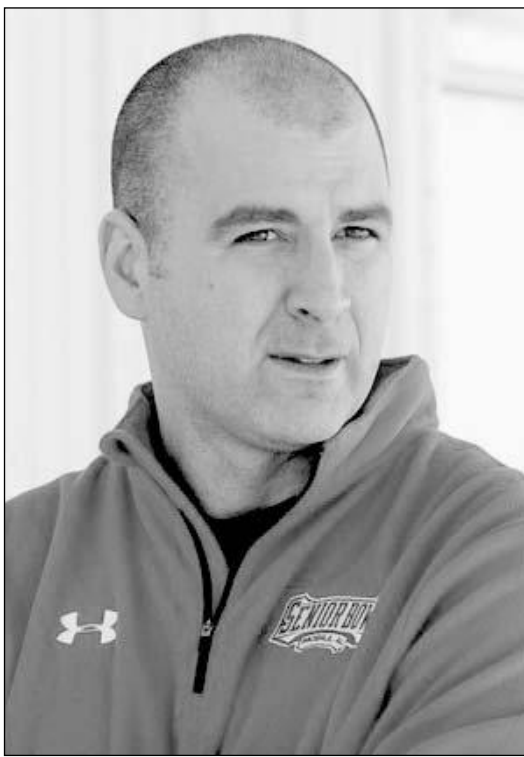
Powell, who is a rather soft-spoken player, has helped build the roster with a simple recruiting pitch to players.

"I just go up to them and ask them if they want to play football, and if they say yeah, then I tell them to come to practice," Powell said. "If you don't come to practice, you're not going to play. So, if I ask them if they want to play, and they actually come to practice, that tells me that they're serious about playing football. That's the difference with this team, because I think everybody on the team is serious about playing football."

Aside from Powell, there probably isn't a player on the roster more serious about B.C. Rain football than senior defensive lineman, William Blake. The Raiders lost seven players this past season — not to graduation, but to transfers. Blake could've been one of those players who chose to transfer to what many people would call a better football situation, but he returned to B.C. Rain because of his loyalty to the program.

"Everybody has their own journey in life," Blake said. "I guess leaving was a part of their journey. My journey is still here at B.C. Rain. Me personally, I'm one of those people that believes if you have my back, then I'll have your back."

"B.C. Rain has a lot more to offer than just sports. This is home for me. This is my family, and I want to be here



Rick Cauley

when we finally do have the type of success as a team that I know we're capable of having, and I think we can do that this year with the type of coaches and the type of brotherhood we have as a team."

The Red Raiders won only one game last season, and they once again have a brutal schedule ahead of them that begins on the road at LeFlore, followed by four straight region games in Saraland, Blount, Daphne and Spanish Fort.

That's a tough task for anybody, especially a team that's still trying to find its way under a new head coach. However, Cauley claims to have a secret weapon up his sleeves that he calls "organized chaos."

"We may not have the size and the numbers that a lot of these other teams have," he said. "But we're going to get innovative and use that to our advantage. It's not going to be easy. We're not going to get intimidated and lay down and make it easy for anybody who plays us. These teams are going to work for it when they play us."

As of now, exactly what Cauley means by "organized chaos" is a mystery, but it can be assumed it will be a high-paced offense, that "may or may not involve a spinning quarterback," Cauley said with a smile.

BAKER

'Great summer' has Hornets confident

BY TOMMY HICKS
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It's an even-number year, which if recent results hold true, could be a good omen for the Baker Hornets. The team has only made the playoffs three times since 1991, earning postseason play in 2012, 2014 and 2016. Did you note a pattern?

Maybe 2018 will be the year the Hornets return to the playoffs and perhaps even claim their first playoff victory since 1984.

Head coach Danny Smith said he likes the attitude this year's team is taking into the season and he hopes that, as well as the hard work the Hornets have put into preparations for the season, will pay off.

"We're really excited about this upcoming season," said Smith, who has a 15-16 record as head coach of the Hornets for the past three seasons. "We've had a great summer. We don't have any one or two guys that really stand out, that are really above anybody else. We are just expressing the ultimate team atmosphere."

"We are ready for fall camp after a great summer camp. This is a really a great bunch that has worked hard. We have a great bunch of seniors right now and we're right out of the gate Week 1 against Theodore, so we're going to have our hands full. We've really got to use this time (in the preseason) to really bear down and work hard and get ready to go."

Experience is on the side of the Hornets, at least as far as the number of upperclassmen is concerned.

"This year we're really working better as a team," Smith said. "They're all working together as a team and we've got better team chemistry than we had last year. I tell the guys all the time, we're going to go as far as the seniors take us. We've got a heavy senior load, with 37 seniors on the team, and they understand this is their last go-round and they are putting in some extra time after hours getting ready for the season. The team unity and work ethic

is probably the best I've seen at Baker in probably the last three years."

So what will the Hornets look like this season?

"We've got a new offensive coordinator in Jordan Patterson and I think the strength of our team is up front and with our running game, so we're going to try to establish that part of our game and run the ball downhill a little bit," said Smith. "That's where we are right now on offense. We have some guys who can stretch the field vertically and we'll use that too in some games. We're just going to keep plugging along see what happens."

"Defensively I like our box. I think that's going to be another strength of our team is the guys up front on that side of the ball."

As to what players to watch, Hornet fans may want to keep an eye on Terrell Crain on defense and Josh Pruitt on offense.

"Inside linebacker Terrell Crain, he's the leader on that side of the ball," Smith said. "He's a three-year starter and does a really good job there and with getting the defense in place. He's a leader on and off the field and the players

respect him a lot.

"On the offensive side of the ball we've got Josh Pruitt, one of our running backs. He has three offers so far — Army, Navy and The Citadel. He's a 4.0 kid, just a great kid, and works tremendously hard and has a great work ethic. He'll be one of our leaders on offense."

As always, Baker will be lined up against some stiff competition in Class 7A, Region 1, which includes McGill-Toolen, a team that has played in the 7A title game the past three seasons, winning the crown in 2015.

"When you line up against teams like Theodore and Murphy and McGill, it's a tough region," said Smith. "I've always said playing in 7A, Region 1 is like playing in the SEC West (Division), you don't have any pancakes on the schedule. You better be ready to play."



Danny Smith