

SATSUMA

Coach Nelson brings wealth of playing experience

BY DARRON PATTERSON
Sports Correspondent

If you're a Satsuma fan wondering what kind of team new head coach Ray Nelson might put on the field this season, here's some hints:

His "Now you see him; oops, he's gone" style of quarterbacking in high school at Theodore probably still has a lot of Bobcats opponents in therapy. He still holds the Samford University record for most passing yards in a season (2,759 in 2003 and 2,807 in 2004). His twitter handle, @SUQB12, still reflects his love for those college days in Birmingham.

And if that's not enough to convince you what Nelson might be bringing to the table, just listen to his own words.

"Being a first-year coach you want the team to resemble your personality," he said. "I tell the guys all the time, when I break it down (after practice) at the end of the day that I can tell when we're growing as a team — when they start taking on more of my personality."

Translation: Satsuma fans better be sure their stadium seats have seat belts, because it's about to be game on in The Swamp.

"I don't think my playing days will help me out much as a coach," Nelson said humbly. "I try not to put these kids through anything I haven't been through myself. I think being a former player, a former quarterback, collegiate player, I think that helps out."

"But I think these guys can look at me and say 'Coach Nelson's not going to put me through any drill, any conditioning or any type of workout that he didn't go through himself.' I think it makes them want to push through and finish each drill."



Ray Nelson

Before his stint as a star at Samford and having a brief stint in the Arena Football League, Nelson was 6A Back of the Year as a senior at Theodore, leading the Bobcats to an 11-1 record and playing in the Alabama-Mississippi All-Star Game. He returned to Theodore as an assistant for four years, had two seasons at Davidson

and one at Vigor before joining Justin Thomas' staff in Satsuma.

Nelson, 35, became head coach in March following Thomas' unexpected resignation. A few players apparently said they'd only play for Thomas, but athletic director Steve Cochran moved quickly to quash tension by promoting the popular Nelson from his defensive coordinator's position.

"I don't think it was ever an issue on them selling out and playing for me," Nelson said. "I think once I got in front of them and started drilling my message, they realized this is the same coach Nelson in front of (them)."

"We (coaches) feel OK. We try to make it a family atmosphere. We try to be as transparent and as honest

with our particular kids as possible. We let them know what we're feeling, what we're thinking and what we expect. And they respond to it.

"We feel pretty good about our chances," said Nelson. "The turnout has been positive. The community of Satsuma, everybody has been very supportive. We know that there's expectations as a program. The support has been amazing. We've participated in a couple of OTAs and 7-on-7s this summer, and when we

travel the fan base is traveling with us.

"When we go out for conditioning and workouts we have fans that come out to the stadium and watch the team. People are inquiring about what's going on. People want to know how they can help out, whether its fundraising or just being a volunteer helping out around the facilities. The fans are rallying behind this team and myself as a coach. I think the kids see that and they're responding to it."

Some people might find it

odd that someone with such an offensive mind, has spent the past three seasons coaching defense. But as Nelson said during his new conference upon accepting the head job, "I had an offensive background, of course, but I think that has helped me tremendously on the defensive side of the ball."

"Being an offensive guy all my life, I know defenses. As the quarterback, you must know what everyone else is doing on the field on both sides. That has helped me coordinate defenses."

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WHITTAKER

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that's the goal," he said. "We've got a bunch of skill players and some good veterans on the line and I like the way coach (Ray) Nelson pushes us to our limits. Makes us do things we think we can't do."

He said he's seen the change in a lot of things since he's been there, including himself.

"I've seen it change a lot from the work ethic, attitude, players buying in, things like that," he said. "(I've improved) speed and strength. I want to get better in my technique on the O line."

Whittaker said his low point last year came when his position coach pointed some things out to him, particularly that a lineman lying on the ground does his team no good.

"I wasn't playing with good technique, just the same (old) technique and accomplishing nothing," he said. "I want to use my hands more on defense to keep linemen off me, and keep my feet moving on offense and stay in front of defensive linemen."

He said that last point is important because the Gators have skill-position players who can't do their jobs if he and his fellow linemen don't do theirs. He said whether it's blocking for Deion Pickens or the other backs, "I go all out on my blocking."

Whittaker said one of the best changes since he got there, though, is where they play.

"It's pretty good," he said of the school's stadium, dubbed The Swamp. "My freshman year, we started off just practicing on a field, separate from the stadium. Now it's a lot better. I love it," said Whittaker."

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