

UMS-WRIGHT

Bulldogs in good shape to repeat

by DARRON PATTERSON
Sports Correspondent

Describing the job legendary UMS-Wright football coach Terry Curtis has done in 19 years at the school doesn't take a lot of words. Nope. Just one — awesome.

And heading into year 20, there's no indication that he or his reigning 4A state champion Bulldogs are slowing down.

“We have a good nucleus back,” said Curtis, the son of a Baptist preacher. “We lost some good football players, but we’ve got six or seven back on offense, and six or seven back on defense. We lost a linebacker, Russ Myers, we’re a corner short and (shy) a couple of defensive linemen. But we’re probably a little further along than we were this time last year.”

Say what? Further along? What a bad omen for the other teams in re-designed Class 4A, Region 1, which now includes former 3A bad boys Hillcrest-Evergreen and Clarke County as part of the Alabama High School Athletic Association's stab at competitive balance.

“I think competitive balance can work,” said Curtis. “I think we need to give it a chance. I'm not sure if four or five years out they won't have competitive balance across the board in private and public schools. Our region only got tougher.”

The six-time state champ Bulldogs have lost five games or more in a season only three times during Curtis' tenure (2007, 2010 and 2011).

“We lose Thomasville (now a 3A), which has always been a perennial (power) team in 4A, but lo and behold they put in Hillcrest-Evergreen, who won the 3A state

championship last year, and Clarke County, who played in the semifinals (losing to Hillcrest).

“You put them both in and take Thomasville out, it didn't help anybody one bit. Our schedule will be tough like always.”

The Bulldogs kick off the season with a bang by traveling to St. Paul's for “The Battle of Old Shell Road,” a rivalry game that usually comes much later in the year. Two more road games follow, at Mobile Christian and heavyweight Andalusia, before three straight home games against Williamson, Clarke County and Hillcrest.

Senior Skipper Snypes will step in as the main man at quarterback for the departed Will Chapman.

“He waited his turn,” said Curtis. “He's an outstanding athlete, baseball player. He's a leader and we feel confident, just like we did last year with Will Chapman,” Curtis said.

Snypes won't have to do it all on his own, though. He'll hand the ball off to junior running back Symon Smith, who emerged as one of the more dynamic ball carriers in the state last season. The diminutive Smith ran for 200 yards and a pair of touchdowns in the 21-7 title game win over Fayette County and finished the season with 283



Terry Curtis

carries for 2,015 yards and 19 touchdowns.

“Last year, I wasn't sure who my running back was going to be,” said Curtis. “We had a running back that was 5-5 — maybe — and 140 pounds, and he turned out to be pretty good. He ended up being better than what we thought he was going to be. So on that side (of the ball) we feel OK.”

“The one we're going to miss over there is our fullback, Will Courtney. He didn't get a lot of notice, but was a perfect fullback. He didn't mind blocking every down and playing like a guard in the backfield. He helped us on the defensive line also.”

Curtis said there was one intangible that helped his team most during the championship run.

“Leadership,” he said. “We lost some guys that helped our whole team just to gel. We didn't have any drama, and we didn't have any hiccups during the season. The guys all got along. And that was a tribute to those seniors. That's the difference between being a good team and a championship team.”

“It's how the chemistry and how the team just kind of comes together. As the year went on last year these guys came

together. We were pretty good toward the end.”

And what about this team? “Our guys know our philosophy,” he said. “We're going to be a running football team. Play action, boots, waggles, and — not that we won't throw it, but it's not going to be from a spread situation, running a bunch of RPOs (run-pass options) and that sort of thing. Our guys know we're going to be a running football team and we're going to throw when we want to throw.”

“We're going to be good in the kicking game. That's just kind of our blueprint every year. I like our defense. If we can find one corner who's solid and a couple of defensive linemen, then we have a chance to be really good on defense.”

Curtis said one thing stands out most that he's learned during a coaching career that spans 30 years and includes stops at Shaw (four years) and Murphy (six years) before UMS. He is 289-85 overall.

“I probably care about my players now more than when I started. Their well-being,” he said, his voice slowing down and trailing off. “You know, back in the old days it was kind of rough and tough. Yeah, you made men out of them and all, but, Lord, we didn't treat them right.”

“If we had a bad day we wouldn't give them any water. ‘Go home and get your water, or whatever’,” was something Curtis might tell his players. “I'm not going to say (it was) abuse, but it was close. But as you get at it more and more, you get closer to your players, you know relationships are more important.”

VIGOR

Wolves ready for the next step up

by LEEQUINTON BLACKMON
Sports Correspondent

For the past two seasons, Vigor has claimed the Class 5A, Region 1 title, but the Wolves have very little to show for the accomplishment in terms of the playoffs.

Admittedly, Vigor may not have the postseason success it would like recently, but the two-time region champ still takes pride in its success over region opponents over the past couple of years.

“Our first goal when I took over was to win our backyard,” head coach Deric Scott said. “That means to be Region 1 champs, and you cannot win a state championship until you can win your region. We've consistently done that for two years, but we have not completed the task of winning a state championship.”

Step one of winning their backyard is already complete, as the Wolves have two region championships in their possession. The next step for the Wolves is to start the season stronger and hope that momentum follows them into the playoffs, which is something they haven't been able to do lately.

In the past two seasons, Vigor has admittedly made things harder on themselves by starting the season too slow. In 2016, the Wolves began the season 0-2 and followed that up this past season with an 0-3 start, both of which put them in an uncomfortable position of having to play from behind, which is not something Scott wanted to do.

“I'm proud of the way we finished in both of those seasons,” Scott said. “However, I would definitely prefer to not start the season 0-2 or 0-3 again. For us, it's all about knowing how to deal with adversity. I tell the guys all the time that it's not a matter of if adversity comes, it's a matter of when adversity comes. We've definitely had some adverse times to start the season, but hopefully this year we can deal with that adversity a little better than we've done the past two seasons.”

A big part of that early season adversity comes from the fact Vigor consistently opens the season by playing their biggest rival in Blount, which is a Class 6A, Region 1 powerhouse in its own right. This year, Scott said he feels the Wolves finally have an advantage going into the game against Blount that they haven't necessarily had previously under Scott — experience.

Vigor returns 26 seniors from a year ago, which gives them one of the largest senior classes in the area. To add to their loaded senior class, the Wolves have seven offensive starters and eight defensive starters returning.

“One thing we have is a bunch of guys



Deric Scott

Photo by Mike Kittrell/Call News

who have played a lot of football,” Scott said. “Experience is the biggest thing for us right now. Secondly, I would say the defensive line. When you look at our defensive line, that's probably the group of players that have played the most amount of football. So, we're really looking for those guys to go out there and show us how to win football games.”

Among that stout and experienced defensive line will be senior defensive tackle Fredrick Austin.

At 5-foot-10 and 275 pounds, Austin is definitely one of the largest defensive players in the area. However, Austin's size may not be his biggest advantage at the line of scrimmage. He also possesses rare and elite speed for someone his size.

“I think I move very quickly off the ball,” Austin said. “My reaction speed is very, very fast. One thing that's kinda been holding me back is that I'm a little too wild at times. That's something that I'm always trying to work on, because even though I have speed, I'm always working on ways to use that speed correctly.”

Experience will also be a big factor for the Wolves on the offensive side of the ball with senior running back Jayland Whitsett carrying the bulk of the load. Whitsett played a lot as a freshman and sophomore, but really came into his own last season when he became Vigor's featured ball carrier. Whitsett definitely has the experience to be a successful back, but what could set him apart from other backs in the state is his confidence as a player.

“I want to be the best running back in the state of Alabama and win the state championship,” Whitsett said of his goals for the upcoming season. “I feel great about both of those goals. I know what I can do as a player and I know what we can do together as a team. This is probably the most together we've ever been as a team.”

WILLIAMSON

Lions' new class is 'great equalizer'

by MARK R. KENT
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MOBILE — There are a few things you can always count on with the Williamson Lions.

For one, the team will be small in numbers, and this year's roster that totals about 28 is no exception. Also, they'll be a major tenant at Ladd-Peebles Stadium, and if it's late in the season and you're looking for a playoff spot, Williamson is never a team you want to have pop up on the schedule.

What's different for head coach Dedrick Sumpter and the few and the proud that make up this football team will be the teams on its schedule.

Williamson has just taken a step down to Class 4A, so the Lions are saying goodbye to former region opponents like St. Paul's, Faith Academy, Vigor, Jackson and Citronelle. Vigor, at least, stays on the schedule as a non-region game.

The new schedule includes UMS-Wright, Andalusia, Thomasville, W.S. Neal, Clarke County and Hillcrest-Evergreen. And this year, there will be a handful of long bus rides to games. Still, Sumpter and his payers are planning to do what they did two of the past three seasons in Class 5A, which is to make the playoffs.

And this year, Sumpter insists, they plan to win some playoff games before hanging up their helmets for the winter.

Last year the Lions went 7-3 in the regular season and earned a playoff game in Demopolis, a game that Demopolis won 21-0. A key late-season 20-9 win at home against Citronelle helped get the Lions in the playoffs and helped send the Wildcats home for the winter.

So, where do the 2018 Lions fit into the scheme of things?

Sumpter said the move to 4A will serve as a “great equalizer” for his team.

The coach said, “I have 25-30 players, but we're only playing 17 or 18. On that level, the best player is going to play. There are some talented teams in 4A, but they have to play the same way as we play.

“For years we have been playing against 70 or 80 kids. Class 4A has a lot

more running than 5A, but there are still some teams that can throw it well.” He said he plans to make Williamson a team that can use the pass to succeed.

Sumpter said Williamson will have an advantage in having a core group of receivers who are all 6-foot-2 or taller. Breland Franks will play on both sides of the ball, at quarterback on offense and defensive back.

Sumpter said the 17-18 players he is planning to use will be the same as the number that received significant time with last year's successful team.

On the defensive side, Jeremiah Hickbottom will be back after a season that got him some statewide attention a year ago, and many of the defensive jobs will be filled by players who are also seeing a lot of action on offense.

Sumpter said assistant coach Antonio Coleman has played a major role in getting the team conditioned properly for a season where many will have to play on both sides of the ball.

“When they get there at 6:30 in the morning, that's 21 or 22 110s, and that's before the workout. Once they do that much running then they work out and then they practice.”

Sumpter said there are six positions with

returning starters and six positions on defense as well, but he is quick to note that does not mean there are 12 starters returning, because most of those position fillings involve one player doing both. Sumpter said he is pleased with Franks' maturity as a quarterback. “Last year, he took it on his shoulders to get better as a runner and as a passer. This year he cleaned his footwork up and cleaned his throwing motion up and he'll be able to put the ball more vertically down the field than what we have done in the past.”

Franks, a senior, said, “There is a lot of leadership playing quarterback. A lot of people look up to you, and we've got a lot of youth now.”

He added, “I am way more comfortable at quarterback now and the coaches push me every day to give more.”



Dedrick Sumpter