

## LEFLORE

## Rattlers ready for new challenges

BY ARTHUR L. MACK  
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There will be several things different about the LeFlore Rattlers this season. For one, they will be in a new classification — Class 5A — along with additional Class 5A newcomer Satsuma, joining Citronelle, Faith Academy, Jackson, Vigor and Wilcox Central.

“Coming out of 6A, Region 1, we feel pretty good about it,” said Rattlers head coach Anthony Shamburger. “But we still have some tough opponents and we still understand we still have to play football. You’ve got Vigor, Citronelle, Faith Academy, Satsuma and all those guys there, and so there is a challenge each week.

“My first two years at LeFlore, we were able to make the playoffs and we were in 5A. The last four years, we’ve been in 6A, Region 1. We’ve been fighting and being close in battling for that fourth (playoff) spot for those years, but we just were not able to overcome the depth (advantage) of the other teams. Here in 5A, everybody dresses out about 45-50 kids and we’re right there, so we feel that it will be an even playing field for us.”

There’s also some tough out-of-region competition. LeFlore has a preseason game

against B.C. Rain and faces Williamson in the season opener on Aug. 31, Saraland on Sept. 28 and Selma in the regular season finale on Nov. 1.

“No matter what, we’re not running away from anybody,” said Shamburger.

“We’ll play anybody at any time and I feel that we’ve got a good team this year that’s going to make some things happen for us.”

Another change for the Rattlers is a virtually brand new offensive backfield, featuring a sophomore quarterback with a lot of potential, if not a lot of varsity experience. In addition, there will be a lot of young faces not only on offense, but defense as well.

“We feel good about it,” Shamburger said. “We’re doing some things offensively that are going to be a little bit different from what we’ve done in the past. We’ll throw the ball a little bit more this year. Defensively, we’ll still be the same, aggres-

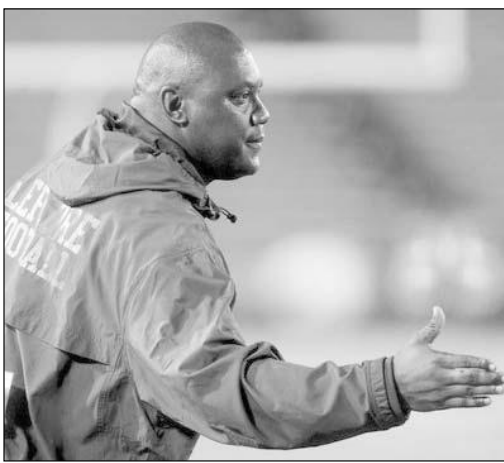


Photo by Mike Kittrell/Call News

Anthony Shamburger

sive, and I feel good about this upcoming season.”

New starters on LeFlore’s offense, especially at quarterback and wide receiver, could make an impression on opponents.

“We have some quarterbacks who can throw and some receivers who can go up and get it,” Shamburger said. “Also, we have an offensive line that’s returning and we feel good about what we have on that side of the ball.”

The player expected to make an impact at quarterback is sophomore Hezekiah Belfon. At 6-foot-2 and 220 pounds, Belfon is big and strong and has a cannon for an arm. “He has a really live arm and he’s getting better at reading coverages and he’s becoming more accurate as we go through the summer,” Shamburger said.

The running game will be done basically by committee, yet there is some talent that

made an impression in the spring game against Theodore. “We’ll go with Daniel Coleman and Devonte Majors,” said Shamburger. “Also, we’ll have Christopher Holifield, who is one of our starting corners. He’ll play some running back as well.”

On defense, Shamburger will rely on the leadership and experience of defensive lineman Marquez Tatum and linebacker Derrick Douggans.

“(Tatum) has 10 offers (from different colleges) at defensive end and we’re expecting big things out of him,” Shamburger said. “We expect him to go into games and pretty much dominate his opponents.”

The other positions will feature a lot of youth, including at least one new cornerback and two new safeties, as well as a new linebacker and two defensive linemen. Yet, Shamburger feels there’s talent in those slots as well.

“I feel like our defensive secondary is young, but they’re very athletic and I think they’ll make a lot of plays on the back end,” he said. “We feel like this will be the most talented team we had since I’ve been at LeFlore. We’ve always had some good talent, but we haven’t had it in pretty much every spot.”

## MCGILL-TOOLEN

## Jackets looking as strong as ever

BY MARK R. KENT  
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MOBILE — The McGill-Toolen Yellow Jackets football team has been on a high plateau for three years now, with no indication their time on or near the top is coming to an end soon.

In those three seasons, they’ve beaten Spain Park for a Class 7A state championship (2015) before getting to the finals in 2016 and 2017 and falling both times to Hoover.

But make no mistake about it, these Jackets don’t see themselves as vulnerable. With the 2018 season about to start, they see there is still work to be done.

This is the second year for head coach Earnest Hill, who took over the reins at the top of the program when former head coach Caleb Ross left for Opelika where he stayed one season before accepting the same job at his alma mater, Prattville.

Hill has a higher order for his Yellow Jackets for this fall. “First, we want to be successful in the classroom,” Hill said. “We want to have a great football team and do the right things on and off the field and be great human beings. Of course, we want not just to make it to the state championship game but to win it.”

Hill made note that a critical equipment issue hurt the team’s effort in the championship game, a 48-20 loss to Hoover.

“One thing we’re going to do when we get back is to have better footing. The shoes we wear every game, we’re going to get some different shoes for that particular state championship game,” Hill said.

“The last two years we made it, we had some footing problems, and we couldn’t stand up. Nothing to say about Auburn University or the University of Alabama; it was wet on that rye grass, and the shoes we had were not the right ones to properly play that game in.”

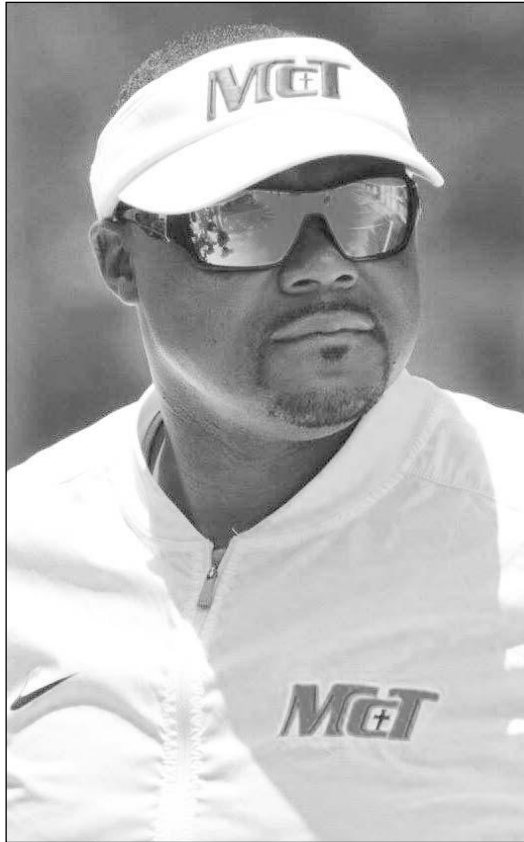
One important returnee for the Yellow Jackets will be quarterback Sheldon Layman. “He has a great arm, and he has been trained to play quarterback all his life,” Hill said. “Ever since he was 3 his daddy knew he was going to play quarterback. From this time last year, he’s 10 times better.”

One thing McGill-Toolen was blessed with last year in abundance was quality on special teams. Late in the semifinal game against Central Phenix City, when it looked as if the Red Devils would steal the game late, it was Central’s failure to execute on special teams and McGill’s successes that decided the game.

The Devils had a chance to win the game outright with a chip-shot field goal with mere seconds left, but for whatever reason, the kick went wide. Then, in overtime, Layman threw a touchdown pass and the extra point was good, leaving Central to answer.

The Red Devils answered with a touchdown pass, but on the extra point, McGill blocked the game-tying PAT attempt and stamped its ticket to Birmingham.

Hill said you can depend on the Jackets



Earnest Hill

once again excelling on special teams. “We work special teams year-round, and we put our best players on special teams,” Hill said.

A change in the McGill offensive scheme, getting away from the run-pass option and more into a quick-game scheme, will prove a challenge for the team, Hill said. “Blocking schemes are going to be a bit different. Our guys are excited about it,” Hill said.

The offense will have four starters returning and seven returning on defense. “I’m very excited for both sides of the ball,” Hill said.

Inside linebacker Christopher Hites said he knows what separated McGill from its competition over the past three seasons. “It’s our work ethic. Every morning at 7 before school we work out and we run, we do whatever the coaches ask us to do. Then we go to school all day and come back in the afternoon and work. That’s absolutely what separates us.”

Hites said that, for him, college choices will put his academic plans first. “I want to be a civil engineer,” Hites said.

Layman said, “As a quarterback, you’ve got to watch film and study the playbook, and I’m doing more of that this year than last year.”

Layman noted that among his new crop of receivers, seniors Bo Hightower and James Clinton, “did very well at the 7-on-7 last weekend.”

He also noted Dallas Daffin, Jordan Drake and Jordan Moseley as receivers in which he has a lot of confidence.

Layman has made a verbal commitment to sign with Memphis.

Ladarius Cox, a 303-pound Tennessee commit, said he wants to study business administration once he gets to college.

## MOBILE CHRISTIAN

## Leopards’ opponents are few but tough

BY ARTHUR L. MACK  
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Mobile Christian head coach Ronnie Cottrell has had a lot of success since taking over the Leopards’ football program as the full-time head coach in 2016, but that success has come at a price.

Success often leads possible opponents to resist adding a team to its schedule. This season, Mobile Christian is playing only nine games and the early part of that schedule is challenging. After the Leopards have their preseason game against Pelahatchie, Miss., in the Kenny Stabler Gridiron Challenge, they open the regular season against defending Class 4A state champion UMS-Wright on Aug. 31. Then, the Leopards face Bayside Academy the following week, and after a bye week, host Class 3A newcomer Thomasville. “We’ve had a hard time scheduling games, but we’re excited about this season,” Cottrell said.

Even though Hillcrest-Evergreen and Clarke County are no longer in Class 3A, Region 1, with both schools being reclassified as 4A, Cottrell, whose squad finished 2017 with a 9-4 record, said he feels the region will still be quite tough.

“Thomasville has an outstanding team,” he said. “They have been very successful and they really bring a lot to an already difficult region,” Cottrell said.

Last year, Clarke County brought an end to Mobile Christian’s season as it defeated the Leopards 21-16 in the third round of the 3A playoffs. Cottrell said his team struggled running the ball in that game, which led to an emphasis on working to improve the offensive line play this season.

“We struggled to run the ball in critical situations and we’ve got to improve that if we want to do better as a team,” he said. “We feel that right now, our offensive line will be one of the strongest positions on the team and that’s what you’ve got to have to be successful.”

Mobile Christian will have eight returning starters on offense. They include right tackle Stanley Newbill, center Justin Eubanks, left guard Jordan Sumerlin, quarterback Alex Moore, tailback Nick Ellis and wide receivers Eric Poellnitz, Cam Alexander and T.J. Hall. All except Ellis and Eubanks are seniors.

Defensively, it’s another matter. Mobile Christian has ranked among the top 10 teams in 3A on defense in the past year or two, but the Leopards lost some key players, including Andres Fox, who signed with Stanford, and safety Keith Gallmon,

who signed with South Alabama.

In addition, Ethan Hearn, who was a standout linebacker, won’t play this season, choosing to concentrate solely on baseball.

“We lost a lot of defensive players,” Cottrell said. “Since I’ve been here, we’ve been pretty strong on the defensive side of the ball. Gus Smith, our defensive coordinator, has done a great job.”

But Mobile Christian does have some talent coming back, including nose guard Marcellus Boykin, who started every game last season. In addition, there’s also defensive end Wyatt Bosarge and outside linebacker Deontae Lawson, who started as a freshman last season.

“He (Boykin) has played very well and has been a great leader for us this summer,” Cottrell said. “Deontae will be a returning starter as a 10th grader, and he, Moore and Poellnitz are being looked at by several schools.

“This is a year where we’ll see what the young guys can do and bring to the table. Some of the guys who were on JV and others are going to have to step up and take a role. We rotated a lot of guys on defense last year and we’re real excited about Tate Moore and Rowdy Turner at line-

backer, a pair of sophomore linebackers who are really playing good right now. We feel that some of those young guys are ready to go.”

In the secondary, junior Jacoby Chestang is a strong lock to replace Gallmon at safety.

Cottrell said he is also excited about his special teams, which include punter Chandler Gibbons and Poellnitz, who will be counted on to return kicks.

“We feel like we can have a very explosive offensive team, but this is the first time in my career that I can recall having a snapper, a kicker, a punter and kick returner with a lot of experience all return intact,” Cottrell said.

With all of those weapons, Cottrell said he feels expectations are high for another successful season.

“We’ve been 32-8 during the last three years at Mobile Christian and the bar is very high,” he said. “But we haven’t played a schedule like we have in these first five games, so we’re going to really find out where we are and where we’ve progressed as far as our program is concerned. We’re honored to be involved in the Kenny Stabler event in Foley and for certain it’s going to be a big challenge to participate and to play against UMS-Wright. But we’re excited to be playing that contest at home. Those first five games can be make-or-break for us.”



Ronnie Cottrell