

SATSUMA

Zack Brown says Gators have high goals

BY **DARRON PATTERSON**
Sports Correspondent

Zack Brown has seen a lot since playing his first game for Satsuma three years ago. But he says he's not seen what he sees now.

"This is one of the better offensive lines I've been a part of in my years here, because we have guys who'll play hard and do what coach asks us to do," said the 5-foot-11, 260-pound Brown, who'll play on both the offensive and defensive fronts for the Gators.

He said he and the other guys up front know the team will only go as far they take it.

"First, we have to win out in our region, because, if I'm not mistaken, I don't think Satsuma has ever hosted a playoff game and never won in the first round of the playoffs," he said.

Actually, according to AHSAA records, the school won a "mythical" championship in 1964 when titles weren't decided on the field. But Brown is absolutely correct about playoff victories, as the Gators are 0-5, having lost in the first round in each appearance.



Zack Brown

"So, first we want to get there," he said. "Then we want to win in the first round. The ultimate goal is to play 15 weeks and win a state championship. We want to play up to

our expectations, play for the community."

He said he and his teammates have enjoyed the ride so far with new head coach Ray Nelson and added it doesn't feel a whole lot different.

"I don't really see it as that much of a change," said Brown. "It's just a change in the face that was the head coach. We play a little bit different brand of football, but we're still getting drilled the same message that we want to compete, we want to play better technique than everybody, that we want to play harder than everybody and nobody's going to outplay us."

Was he upset when the previous coach, Justin Thomas, abruptly resigned?

"Almost the only other coach that we wanted to play for was coach Nelson, because we knew that he knows the game of football and is probably one of the better football minds in the state," he said. "So we just knew what he could bring to the table. I knew he played a little bit of football back in the day," he sarcastically added.

"We'll run through a brick wall for coach."

Brown said he and the other linemen have been putting in extra work getting ready to spring the team's mercurial returning skill players to daylight, including dynamic Deion Pickens.

"He can change a game in an instant," he said of senior wide receiver Pickens. "Last year against Citronelle (a 20-19 win), we don't win that game if he doesn't block the two PATs. Deion goes out there and practices as hard as he plays. And it shows the young guys the expectations around Satsuma. It hasn't really been like that for a while, but our expectation is to do as Deion does."

"Coach (Jerald) Harris, that's our strength and conditioning coach, he does a really good job of putting stuff together to push us. It's going to prove who has grit whenever the going gets tough. The weight room and our conditioning shows who's going to be there in the fourth quarter on Friday nights. And if the game goes to overtime, who's going to be there."

GATORS: Satsuma has lots of reasons to feel hopeful

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region and I feel really confident about the offensive and defensive skills guys we have."

Nelson said his players have embraced playing in the two year-old, \$4.2 million stadium dubbed The Swamp, and now must turn the place into a nightmare for opponents.

"I think we have to build upon it," he said of the atmosphere. "We've played hard in front of our fans the last couple of years and the fans have been very supportive. We've got to build on that and make it more exciting for the fans to come out. And I think the system that we're trying to implement offensively, the way we want to play on defense — be a little bit more aggressive — and on special teams, we're going to try and make it an exciting football game."

"You've got to kind of tailor your program to your community. We know we want to create some excitement with me being a first-year head coach and I think the best way to do that is to have an exciting brand of football."

Nelson said offseason work has

focused on reversing last season's close calls. The Gators lost 14-13 at Cottage Hill Christian, dropped a 20-14 decision to Leroy at home the next week and went down 41-32 at W.S. Neal to open the season 0-3.

"I think its been a point of emphasis," he said. "You can't wait until August or September to say, 'Hey, I want to win a close game.' I think the commitment the kids showed in the month of March, June in the weight room and the conditioning in July, and the way they come out and work hard in July and August, that's when you win close games."

"So everything we talk about is start fast. We have a period at the beginning of practice that we call Fast Start, and on the first whistle we're getting after it. Then we end on a positive note where everybody is trying to finish the drill. So I think everybody is on one accord on how we want to finish games and on the personality we want to be as a football team."

Nelson said the team is relishing its move up to Class 5A.

"We played in a tough (4A) region last year," he said. "We played against the UMS-Wrights, the Andalusias, the Thomasvilles in that region. We also play Citronelle every year, which is a 5A team and a rivalry game for us. So we're familiar with 5A opponents. Me (previously) coaching in 5A and coaching in 7A, I don't think (numbers in) the 'A' makes a difference in the team. I think if these kids just come out and compete every day, and we as coaches give them a great chance to succeed, we'll be OK."

"I just want to kind of see how they respond. I think everybody will be fired up to play Game 1. We're at home in The Swamp; we're playing against Gulf Shores. But I want to see how we respond traveling to W.S. Neal, playing a tough region game against a new opponent in Jackson, and then having to travel to Prichard Stadium in week 4."

"I just want to see how our kids respond to that tough schedule in the early part of the year. I know how I expect them to perform and respond, but we'll see how the kids react to it."

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