



Eagles seek to prove forecasters wrong

**By Mike Lee
Eagle Contributor**

Keith Virdell hasn't had much time to worry about preseason predictions. He wasn't hired as Goldthwaite's head football coach until the final week of school in May. Since the start of preseason practices in August, Virdell and his new coaching staff were in a race against time to implement a new offense and defense with their new players.

He knows his new team finished 1-9 last year, including district losses of 78-0 to San Saba and 77-7 to De Leon. Virdell also knows his Eagles are predicted to finish last in every District 7-2A Division I preseason poll. He doesn't care.

"When you're picked last, it's not necessarily a bad thing. We'll be under the radar. We don't have to improve by leaps and bounds, but if we can get a little better week to week, by the time district gets here, we might surprise a few people," said Virdell, who finished 9-2 last year at Sudan after being picked fourth in district.

Goldthwaite was picked to finish last in district for the first time in 16 years after finishing 2018 on an eight-game losing skid. The Eagles were outscored by an average of 47-10 per game, and allowed a school-record 466 points last season.

But they showed signs of competitiveness during the preseason, and the Eagles have six weeks before their District 7-2A opener against state-ranked San Saba -- the defending champion and consensus preseason favorite. Still, the Eagles will be relying on eight sophomores this season.

"Our kids grasp the concept of what we're trying to teach them ahead of schedule," Virdell said. "We have some components of a good team. We have a little speed. We have and a little strength. And we have some linemen. We should be able to move the ball down the field.

"We need to keep improving on the details. But we're quick enough to do what we want to do."

Virdell's run-oriented Slot-T offense will be much closer to the wishbone that Goldthwaite won four state championships with between 1980 and 2014 than the pass-heavy shotgun spread the Eagles went 22-23 with over the last four years. The Slot-T is more about misdirection than the wishbone, but the Eagles under Virdell will be a running team again.

Senior Grayson Moore, who last year caught 34 passes at receiver, is returning to quarterback, where he previously played at Hamilton. While Moore will be the starter, senior Jaxon Wootton and

sophomore Jackson Patrick also have taken snaps at quarterback.

Patrick -- who led the Eagles in rushing, receiving and scoring last year until a season-ending injury -- will open at half-back. Angel Morales, who ultimately led Goldthwaite in rushing last year but with only 216 yards, is projected to start at full-back. Sophomore Dusty Partin figures to open at Z-back, which lines up like a flanker or wingback and often goes in motion. Playing Z-back should allow Partin to get the ball on the perimeter and use his quickness.

Sophomore Mitchell Hopper is set to start at tight end, with help from sophomore Cason Guthrie. The 6-foot-4 Wootton, who last year led the Eagles with 42 receptions, is the wide receiver. Blocking will be a big responsibility for Slot-T running backs and receivers.

Seven offensive linemen who figure to see considerable action are senior Dalton Goodman; juniors Aries Vanderlaan, Slade Sutherland and Scott McCoy; along with sophomores Kody Roberts, Aaron Anzua and Saul Vaquera.

Goldthwaite will seek to improve an offense that last year averaged only 1.3 yards per rush, 199 total yards per game, and converted just 20 percent of its third

downs.

Defensively, Roberts and Hopper are set as inside linebackers, with Anzua and Sutherland also figuring into the mix. Moore, Partin and senior Jordan Simon will rotate as defensive ends. The Eagles have multiple candidates in the interior line -- nose guard and tackle -- including Goodman, Vanderlaan, Guthrie, Vaquera, McCoy, and seniors Jaden Biehl and Noe Sanchez.

The secondary will consist of safeties Wootton and Patrick, along with cornerbacks Morales, senior Weldon Krause and sophomore Seth Gardner.

If senior Nick Jones returns at midseason from a 2018 injury, he could provide help at running back or defensive back.

"When we've rotated guys in, there hasn't been a big distinction or drop-off," said Erik Edwards, Goldthwaite's defensive coordinator. "We've got several guys that can play defense. We got to find the ones that work best together.

"The attitude and effort are there, and you can't coach that. There are things we need to improve on, but we're flying to the ball. They understand what the defense could look like," Edwards said.

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