

Wildcats drop opener to Biloxi, but feel strong non-region schedule will help team improve



Photo by Shelley Eubanks - Herald Contributor

Greene County senior defenders Jaheim Cooper (22), Josh Bolton (45) and Keldrin Blackston (99) each had strong performances in the Wildcats' season opener at Biloxi. Despite the loss to the Indians, the Wildcats feel a lot was gained from playing the talented 6A team to kick off the non-region schedule.

George Co. up next as Cats look to prepare themselves for Region 7-4A run

By RUSSELL TURNER
Herald Staff

Wildcat fans learned the hard way a few years back that making the MHSAA Playoffs is not an easy task and certainly not a given. It doesn't matter if you enjoy a long streak of winning seasons as the Cats did for years under legendary coach Johnny Ainsworth. Each year is different and the ball doesn't always bounce your way.

Over the past two seasons, Wildcat fans have once again become accustomed to marking their schedules for Friday nights in November. But, 2019 brings new challenges and a revamped Region 7-4A, that now includes the Tomcats of Stone County, along with the familiar foes from Sumrall, Forest County AHS,

Poplarville and Purvis. And, with that, Coach Mike King says he isn't taking anything for granted. To get ready to run the Region 7-4A gauntlet, which begins with an Oct. 4 Homecoming matchup with Sumrall, King has a solid slate of non-region clashes on tap. "We play in a tough region that got even tougher with the addition of Stone County," King said. "You look around the state at the elite programs and they are playing up in competition and we are doing the same thing with the games we have on the non-region schedule."

"And, we are going into those games playing to win. We're not okay with getting beat, but even if we come up short on the scoreboard, playing on those big stages against that level of competition helps prepare our team for those big games down the road."

That process got underway on Friday as King and his Cats traveled to Biloxi to tangle with a Tribe team that has its sights set on a region championship of its own.

The result was a 34-14 loss to the Indians. It wasn't the start King or the Wildcat faithful had hoped for in the win-loss column, but King said he believes the competition and the lessons learned will pay dividends down the road.

"Look, we want to win every game and go into each week with that as the goal," King said. "But, we knew we would

have our hands full with Biloxi. They are a 6-A school with a lot of talent and big expectations and they out-gunned us on this one. But, I think we gained a lot that will help us as we get ready for the remainder of the season."

GCHS was able to go toe-to-toe with the Indians, but big plays by the Tribe's top prospects ended up being the difference in the game. The Wildcats held the lead in the game midway through the first quarter, but fell behind before halftime and saw the game slip away in the second half.

The first of several explosive plays by the Indians came on their first possession when junior Elijah Sabatini hauled in a short pass and broke it for a 51-yard scamper down the home sideline for a TD. Greene County's De'andre Grice blocked the extra point attempt, but the Indians led 6-0 with just over eight minutes left in the first quarter.

The Wildcats answered with a 9-play, 80 yard drive, that

started with a few solid run plays, but also included some sharp passes from quarterback Jacob Mitchell. Senior Peyton Roberts put the Cats on the scoreboard with a nifty 24-yard run off a jet sweep and Mitchell nailed the PAT to put GCHS on top at 5:44 in the first quarter.

The Wildcat defenders did

their part seconds later when they swarmed Biloxi quarterback Tristan Pearson after a low snap and forced a turnover. Jeremiah Cochran was the first to get to Pearson and then emerged from the pile with the fumble recovery to give Mitchell and company great field position at the Indian's 30-yard-line. Four plays later Mitchell connected with Cameron Dunnam on a throwback pass that the sophomore turned into a 19-yard TD. With the PAT by Mitchell, GCHS led 14-6 with 3:09 left in first quarter.

But, that was the highlight for the Cats for the evening. Biloxi responded with a touchdown and 2-point-con-

version on its next possession and took the lead into halftime after forcing GCHS to punt from its own endzone and converting the short-field opportunity into a touchdown. They added two second half scores to pull away and seal the win.

"Despite the loss, I thought we did do some things really well," King said. "We were really efficient passing the football, and I think we are a little ahead of schedule in that area. And, we didn't have a lot of turnovers and did a decent job protecting the football."

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Photo by Shelley Eubanks - Herald Contributor

Greene County senior receiver Drake Henderson is shown dragging a host of Biloxi Indians downfield for a big gain last Friday. Henderson is one of several senior standouts returning on each side of the ball this season and gives the Wildcat offense a big play threat in the passing game. The 6-3, 185-pounder also draws praise from coaches and teammates for his willingness and ability to block downfield when he doesn't have the ball.

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