

SARALAND

“We have extreme confidence. Really, the strength of our defense I feel is the linebacker corps, which I think is the best around.” — Shawn Byrd

Shawn Byrd ‘a great leader’

Kelly says his linebacker is smart, tough and has everyone’s respect

BY TOMMY HICKS
tommyhicks@thecallnews.com

This one, Shawn Byrd said, is for Doug. Talented Saraland linebacker Shawn Byrd, a player several schools have their eye on heading into this season, said the 2019 season isn’t just about the players on this year’s roster. At least that’s now how he sees it.

As far as Byrd is concerned, this season is about getting back to the Class 6A state championship and collecting the crown this time around. He wants it for himself and his teammates, but he also wants it for his friend, Doug Sullivan, a senior on last season’s Saraland team that reached the title game at Auburn University’s Jordan-Hare Stadium, only to fall a bit short against Pinson Valley.

“It would mean the world to me (to return to the state championship game),” Byrd said recently. “The way our season ended last year, I hated to see one of my best friends playing beside me, Doug Sullivan, I hated to see the season end that way and see us lose in the state championship game. We’re going to get back; that’s what I want. And we’re going to win it for him.”

Sullivan is the lone starting linebacker from last year’s team that didn’t return for the 2019 season. As such, the linebacker corps is considered the strength of the Spartans’ defense heading in the Aug. 23 season-opening game against Andalusia on the road. The experienced and talented group of returning linebackers and defensive line-men will be counted on to offset the loss of all four starters in the secondary from a year ago.

Byrd said they are ready for the challenge and the responsibility.

“We have extreme confidence,” he said. “Really, the strength of our defense I feel is the linebacker corps, which I think is the best around. And we all feel, we’re all confident, that we hold that position as a linebacking corps.

“I know I’m a returning senior and I play a big role in that and I have to take a leadership role in all that and help lead this team back to where we were last year, and hopefully we can finish the season out better (this time).

“I love the responsibility. I’ve always been a leader my whole life. I’ve always liked being a leader and being counted on. I’ve always like to show out, to stand out.”

In other words, bring it, Byrd said.

According to Saraland head coach Jeff Kelly, those aren’t just words for Byrd, who is one of the most respect-



Saraland linebacker Shawn Byrd

ed players on the Spartans’ roster. If he says something, his first action is to back up his words.

“He’s a great leader. I love him,” Kelly said. “He loves to practice, he’s a competitor, he’s tough, a physical football

player and a great athlete. He’s smart, he studies video and he’s a great leader in our school.

“He just does a great job of being a football player. He’s one of the main leaders on our team, especially on the defensive side with him being in the middle of everything that we’ve got going defensively. He’s an outstanding guy.

“He’s got the credibility too with the team because they know his character and his toughness and all of those things, which is unquestioned by his teammates. He has their respect. He’s the guy who makes them tick over there.”

Those sentiments and the respect of his teammates is crucial, Byrd said. Those are the things that drive him. Especially one of the descriptions Kelly used in evaluating Byrd’s importance to the team —toughness.

Asked what he would say is his best asset, toughness was Byrd’s quick and to the point answer.

“You will never see me take a play off,” he said. “You can look through every play we have and you will never see me take a play off, I promise you that.”

He doesn’t see the Saraland defense taking any plays off this season either.

“We’ve got a young line and a young secondary,” he said. “That line has already showed me that they can step up and in fact they already have. If the secondary steps up and grows up and matures a little bit, I think we’ll be hard to beat against anybody.”

He said part of his leadership duties requires him to say something when it needs to be said and to constructively provide guidance for younger, less experience players. That includes the secondary.

“I know the coverage a little bit, so I can help out the safeties and corners a little bit.”

His biggest suggestion would simply be for the younger players to just watch ... and follow, especially the manner in which Byrd finds his way to the ball.

“I’ve always been a ballhawk. I love to find the ball and go get the ball. I love it,” he said.

Kelly concurs with the idea.

“He has great ball skills,” he said of Byrd. “He has really good athleticism and he can make plays on balls. He gets interceptions and he can read and anticipate what’s coming and he has the ability to finish the play.

“He had a couple of big interceptions in the championship game. He has the instincts to be in the right place and then he has the ball skills to be able to make the play.”



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