

SARALAND

Super back McAlpine ready for 'big, big year'

Saraland's Rashawn McAlpine ran for 1,985 yards last season.

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Those who were unaware of Saraland running back Rashawn McAlpine last season do not suffer from that lapse of information any longer. Not after last season. Not after he posted game after game in which he piled up hundreds of rushing yards against Spartan opponents.

Along the way, he made the Spartans' rushing attack one of the best in Class 6A and the Mobile area overall, which allowed starting quarterback Brett Nezat to become more comfortable in his role with the team, added punch to a pretty good offense and helped Saraland post a 13-2 record and reach the 6A state championship game.

So, yes, Rashawn McAlpine's presence in the Spartans' backfield was a big deal a year ago. And it's expected to be an equally big deal, if not indeed bigger, this season as Saraland looks to make a return to the title game.

A year ago, McAlpine shared running back duties with a pair of seniors. This season, a youngster moves up to help provide a breather now and then for McAlpine, who will be the starter and main force once again. He carried the ball 199 times, collecting 1,985 yards and scoring 16 touchdowns.

So was McAlpine's emergence as Saraland's top rusher last season a surprise or a little by design?

"He's always sort of been out of the pack, we just kept the pack involved because we knew that we were going to need more than one back all year long," Saraland head coach Jeff Kelly said. "We kept some guys involved because we knew that's a tough position and you can't win at this level with

one running back, you've got to have a minimum of two. So you've got to play them.

"But Rashawn emerged as the season went along, but he didn't surprise anybody within the building at all. He was always that kind of player. But it's a long season."

This will be a long season as well; it will be a very long season for Saraland opponents if they can't find a way to slow down McAlpine and the running attack. His approach is simple — just call his number. Asked to identify his favorite running play, a slight smile came to McAlpine's face.

"All of them, he said, "just give me the ball."

That, of course, is written in all capital letters on the Spartans' playbook.

"He's just a football player," Kelly said in describing McAlpine. "He's really had an outstanding spring, an outstanding summer. He was early and ready to go — and I mean an hour and a half early and ready. He's ready for his senior year and I think he's going to have a big, big year.

"He has great vision and he can make plays. We want him to be a complete back and be able to get more involved in the pass game and be able to do some different things. We're looking for ways to get the ball in his hands all the time."

McAlpine said he supports that approach and looks forward to making contributions to the Spartans' offense again this season. And to think, he might have been making big plays on the other side of the ball if he had remained at his original position.

"I think the opportunities were there for me last year," he said. "We

had a couple of senior running backs and the coaches wanted to share the load. I came from linebacker my sophomore year to running back for my junior year. It was a pretty good year.

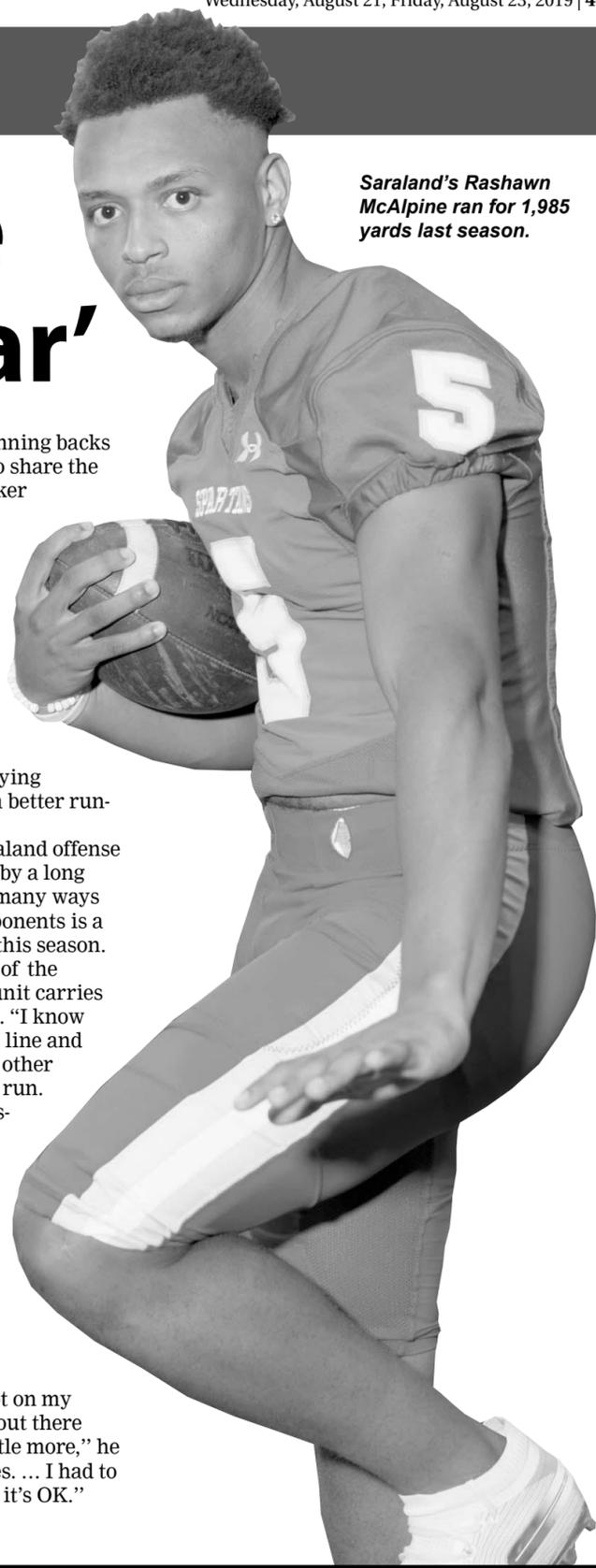
"I'm happy where I am. I like playing defense, but I like offense too and I like where I'm at. You can use what you know from having played both to help you with both. Playing defense helped make me a better running back."

McAlpine said the Saraland offense isn't a one-man show, not by a long shot, and he believes the many ways the offense can attack opponents is a big plus for the Spartans this season.

"It's up there," he said of the confidence the offensive unit carries into the upcoming season. "I know we've got a good offensive line and they're going to block the other guys and give me room to run. We'll be strong in the passing game and running the ball this year. Everyone has gotten better and stronger over the spring and summer."

And there may be something new added to the McAlpine arsenal — catching passes out of the backfield more frequently.

"I've been working a lot on my passing game, on getting out there and catching the ball a little more," he said. "We'll see how it goes. ... I had to adjust to it a little bit, but it's OK."



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