

VIGOR

Young Wolves facing challenges

BY DARRON PATTERSON
Sports Correspondent

The crowds on both sides of Auburn's Jordan-Hare Stadium were going nuts. Trailing 43-42, but with no timeouts, Vigor had the ball at the Central-Clay County 25 yard line with just 15 seconds left in the Class 5A state championship game.

Spiking it to set up for a field goal wasn't an option, so the Wolves scrambled to get set as the refs started the clock.

Tick. Tick. Tick. They never got a play off before time ran out on Vigor's magical 2018 season.

"We've had a lot of time to reflect," said Wolves' head coach Deric Scott, his voice trailing off as he obviously revisited that sour moment from a year ago in his mind. "We've had that time to think about what happened, but we've also had a lot of time to prepare for this season.

"We recognize that we came up a little short and we didn't accomplish our ultimate goal, but we're excited for the upcoming season, too. Unfortunately, in football you've got to have the ability to leave one season behind and move on to the next. So, that's kind of what we've done."

The Wolves won't have nearly the cast of experienced players that took them to the brink of a state title last season and thus they have holes to fill up and down the roster.

"We've got to find a new quarterback

and we're working on that," said Scott, entering his fifth season at the helm in Prichard.

"We've got one of our younger kids that's probably ahead of everybody else, but for the first time since I've been here we have some healthy competition at quarterback," he said, deciding against naming names. "Two of those guys actually have a chance to get playing time at that spot, which is more (quality depth) than we've had there since I've been here. We're excited for that."

Sophomore Benjamin Bennett (5-foot-11, 190 pounds) and junior Tyshawh Jones (5-10, 175) will get the majority of the carries from the running back spot.

Meanwhile, experienced senior Paul Jackson (6-0, 200) and junior Arthur Jackson (5-8, 165), whom Scott says "has good



Cornerback Sidney Williams

top end speed," are the wide receivers, and senior Jeremy Labyzon (5-11, 210) will handle tight end duties.

Junior guard Demontrey Pritchett (5-9, 315) and senior tackle Darrell Marshall (6-2, 275), only in his second year of varsity football, are the only returning starters along the offensive line, but versatile Junior Jai Scott (5-11, 230) will also be in the mix after playing only three games last year before going down with a leg injury.

As a matter of fact, Scott said because of a lack of depth, his linemen

will have to be just that — two-way performers both offensively and defensively.

"We tell our guys, you're a lineman," he said. "Just that."

Senior Jerkoby Marks (6-2, 290), a Davidson transfer who didn't play last

season, will be counted on to play on both lines.

Junior Jaquintis Summers (6-0, 245), whom Scott said "has had a really good spring and summer," will also contribute to a defense that returns senior cornerback Sidney Williams (6-2, 195) as the lone starter from a defense that allowed just nine points a game before the title game disaster.

"It's going to be a tremendous challenge," said Scott of the upcoming season. "We'll basically line up with a lot of kids who have little experience or haven't played at all. But I'm not going to accentuate that.

"A lot of people in this kind of position always say 'We're playing with an inexperienced team' as a way of making excuses. I hate that. We've got to go coach them up to achieve a good outcome and Vigor Nation wants the same outcome we (coaches) do.

"We're going to take these kids that we have and we're going to go play ball with them. We're going to get them ready to go. We're not going to accept anything from them except what the standard of Vigor is, and I don't want the issue to be that we're playing with a young team or that to be the message.

"We're going to go out there and do what we do, play the way we normally play and go win."

B.C. RAIN

Rain has new coach, eagerness to succeed

BY MARK R. KENT
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MOBILE — Despite ending the 2018 season with a winless 0-10 ledger, the B.C. Rain Red Raiders have a few things going their way in their hopes to return winning football to Mobile's South Brookley environs.

First, they have a new coach, Lawrence Yelding, who while he is a head coach for the first time in his career, has been a successful assistant at many positions at Daphne, a program that has been producing winners for well more than a generation now.

Second, they are returning a fair amount of talent that should make them a much more difficult assignment for opponents this season.

And third, schools in Mobile County have been here before. Faith Academy had a winless season in 2015 and ended up — for the first time ever — in the playoffs last year. Citronelle went 0-10 in 2014 and made the playoffs in 2016 and last year. Winless years can be and usually are overcome fairly quickly.

Yelding will have his work cut out for him. The Red Raiders have a bit more than 40-45 players out for football this year, a small contingency compared to most Class 6A schools. And Region 1 in Class 6A may be the most difficult region at any level in the state this year. Perennial winners Saraland, Spanish Fort and Daphne are always near the top, and St. Paul's will be a threat. The rest of the region is Rain, Blount, Baldwin County, Robertsdale and Gulf Shores, many tough even when out of playoff consideration.

Offense will have a senior as the probable quarterback starter and a robust offensive line in front of him.

Yelding said Jacoby Fowler is the lead choice for starting QB, and he'll get a lot of protection from left tackle James Hudson (6-foot-4, 300-plus pounds, or minus), James Jones (6-3, 275, either right tackle or center), Terry Prim (6-3, 275 at left guard) and Jeron Brown at center or guard, should be the O-line front-runners.

Hudson has offers already from Alabama A&M and Alcorn State, and Jones has colleges interested in him. Both present well to college from their class work; each has a 3.8 GPA and fine ACT scores already in pocket.

Hadrian Causey is another line prospect Yelding feels will get some good field time this season.

Running back will have a big-and-low Don Nottingham-type in running back Tyler Mixon, while Yelding is converting linebacker Kemar Thompson to running

back once his ACL is well enough to get him on the field.

Junior Victor Lopez is a possible multitasker, someone who can play quarterback, running back and wide receiver. Sophomore Cedric Orange is for now the No. 3 quarterback. Desmond Peters is another running back-receiver combination player, and he is a probable as a punt-kick-off return specialist as well. Look for Karl Norwood and Shane Lockett as wideouts as well.

Yelding said the team will run multiple offenses with a hurry-up approach meant to keep defenses from changing regularly.

Defense will welcome the return of Trayvon Gray, who missed last year but has prior playing experience. He's expected to be at defensive tackle, with Lebaron Alexander expected at the other DT position. Tyron Spratt and Lakeldrick Dees are assigned to defensive end spots. The 4-2-5 defense will feature inside linebackers Eric Tunstall and Cory Bonner, with Kyjuan Gulley expected to be the "wheel" defensive back in the middle between the linebackers.

Michael Jones will play the "star" DB position, while Tyrese Murphy and is going to be at strong safety. Sophomore Antonio Lockett, who Yelding said "works very hard" at practice and the weight room, is being looked at for free safety. Others who should see time in the secondary are Demargio Sowell, Javonte Dortch and Brandon Whitsett.

Special teams, Yelding said, are still a work in progress, and kicker Douglas Tupul-Escalante missed much of the early workouts due to work with his family. English and Jones are candidates for punt-team snapper and Hudson is expected to hold on PATs. Orange and Fowler are expected to vie for holder.

For those who find the surname Yelding familiar, he is related to the others of note in the area. His uncle, Bailey Yelding, coached at Fairhope and was for a time mayor of Daphne. Cousin Cedric Yelding starred as a point guard with NCAA pedigree at South Alabama and now coaches basketball at Daphne. And former big-league infielder Eric Yelding is also a cousin.

Coaching nearly every position over the years except quarterbacks and offensive line, Yelding took part in Daphne's biggest triumphs, their state championship years of 2001 and 2010. "I was fortunate that there were always offensive and defensive coordinators who knew a little bit more football than I," Yelding said.

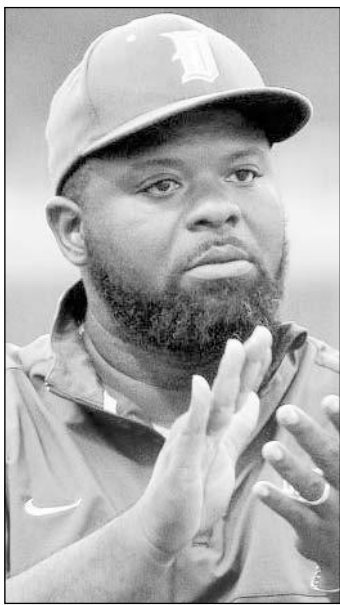


Photo by Mike Kittrell/Call News
Coach Lawrence Yelding

ST. LUKE'S

Cats lost some stars but still have veterans

BY MARK R. KENT
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MOBILE — The St. Luke's Wildcats, stepping down to Class 1A last year from Class 2A, fit right into the scheme of things and had a notable 11-2 season, lasting into the third round of the state playoffs before they were edged 44-43 by Linden in a tough road loss.

Head coach Ronn Lee has some work cut out for him this year, with the graduation of 13 seniors from that fine team of a year ago. But he's been challenged before and he knows as well how to challenge his players.

"I still have the same expectation here as when I was coaching at Murphy," Lee said. "We hold our players to the highest standards and we expect them to perform at their best level. The difference is the number of players. When you have a larger number you're going to have a larger array of talent. Expectations don't really change what you work with ... numbers have a tendency to affect how you practice."

When asked to compare players at Class 1A compared to larger classifications, Lee said, "You have offensive players and defensive players at that level, and at our level you have football players. They're expected to learn an offensive position and a defensive position and some of our skilled players, we ask them to learn more than one position on each side of the ball."

The experience is definitely there among the remaining and new Wildcats. There are seven returning regulars, plus another seven who saw some serious field time, up to 2-3 quarters a game. That's the gift of coaching and playing in a smaller classification; everyone plays and is expected to contribute and younger players mature into the game more quickly.

"The one big difference in coaching at 1A as opposed to, say, Murphy (where Lee coached a number of seasons), is that the skill players are often much smaller. We're talking 135 pounds, 125 sometimes," Lee said.

One thing Lee will have going for him in 2019 is that his line, both on offense and defense, is generally intact, with lots of returnees. Four big guys in the middle of the O-Line are all returnees. Bryant Lowe and Dylan Hale will be back as guards, and Jake Keesee and Stefon Ward are back as tackles. Center will be handled either by Will Wallace or Andrew Smith or both at one time or another.

Go over to the defensive side, and you'll have Ward, Austin English and Keesee there, with Bryant Lowe, Smith and Will

Wallace on the ends. Look for Grant Schoff as a possible defensive end and offensive tackle.

Quarterback for now will be Josh Neutze and Trey Bunch, if he decides to return to football, can also play quarterback. Bunch, Lee said, has been concentrating most of his recent efforts at trying to excel in baseball. Running backs will be new this year, although one is a familiar name to Wildcat fans. Quanya Gamble, who led the team in tackles a year ago as a linebacker, is taking a shot at toting the rock on offense and he'll be matched up with junior Bryce Eddington.

Lee normally doesn't like to use a tight end in his spread-oriented offense, although in situations where one is necessary, English is the one who'll get the call. English can also play blocking back if a need for that position arises.

Alex Devenney and freshman Jack Neutze are expected to lead the receiver corps. Hale is also expected to play linebacker this year. Lee likes to use as many as five defensive backs and the Neutze brothers, Devenney and Eddington should fill four of those spots.

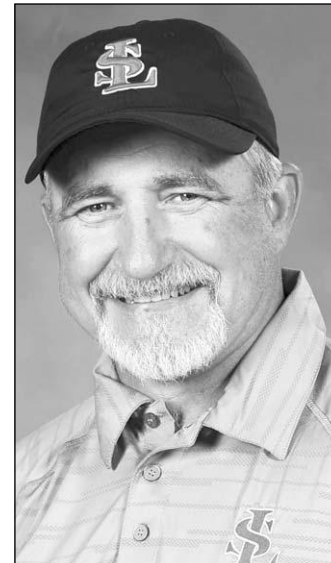
Even with running-back roles on his plate, expect Gamble, a senior, to be the man among linebackers.

"Class 1A offers players more chances on the field," Lee said. It also offers players who haven't played much of the game to develop quickly and take game-time lumps right away. Also, Lee said, there are opportunities for the younger players to compete and he has a few he's developing this summer.

Perry Laduna, he said, had a great workout summer and is already well conditioned from basketball. Rising freshman Cam Chambers and up-and-coming eighth-graders Larson Holt and Brodie Hale are three more Lee has on his immediate radar. Another young player who has already proven himself is rising eighth-grader Jackson Boone, who handled placekicking duties last year. Should Bunch decide to continue football, one of his roles will be as a punter.

A year ago, the Wildcats had a bookend season, opening with a road loss to Georgia and closing with their playoff loss. In between, St. Luke's racked up 11 straight wins, outscoring opponents 524-144 during those 11 games. The Cats had big home playoff wins against Francis Marion and Wadley before encountering Linden.

This year, Lee sees nearly everyone on his Class 1A, Region 1 lineup to be a challenge, and the coach notes Sweet Water, Millry and Marengo will be particularly challenging.



Coach Ronn Lee