

MOBILE CHRISTIAN

Leopards 'must grow up quick'

MC looks strong again, but new faces will replace departed stars

BY MARK R. KENT
mkent@thecallnews.com

MOBILE — It would be easy to regard the 2018 season of the Mobile Christian Leopards as one worthy of praise and respect. Don't ask that, though, of either the Leopards or their coaching staff.

Mobile Christian rolled through its Class 3A, Region 1 schedule with relative ease, even though that region may well be one of the toughest 3A lineups assembled. The Leopards had an easy 34-6 win over Citronelle, itself a playoff participant at the 5A level, and they opened with an impressive win over Mississippi small-town power Pelahatchie.

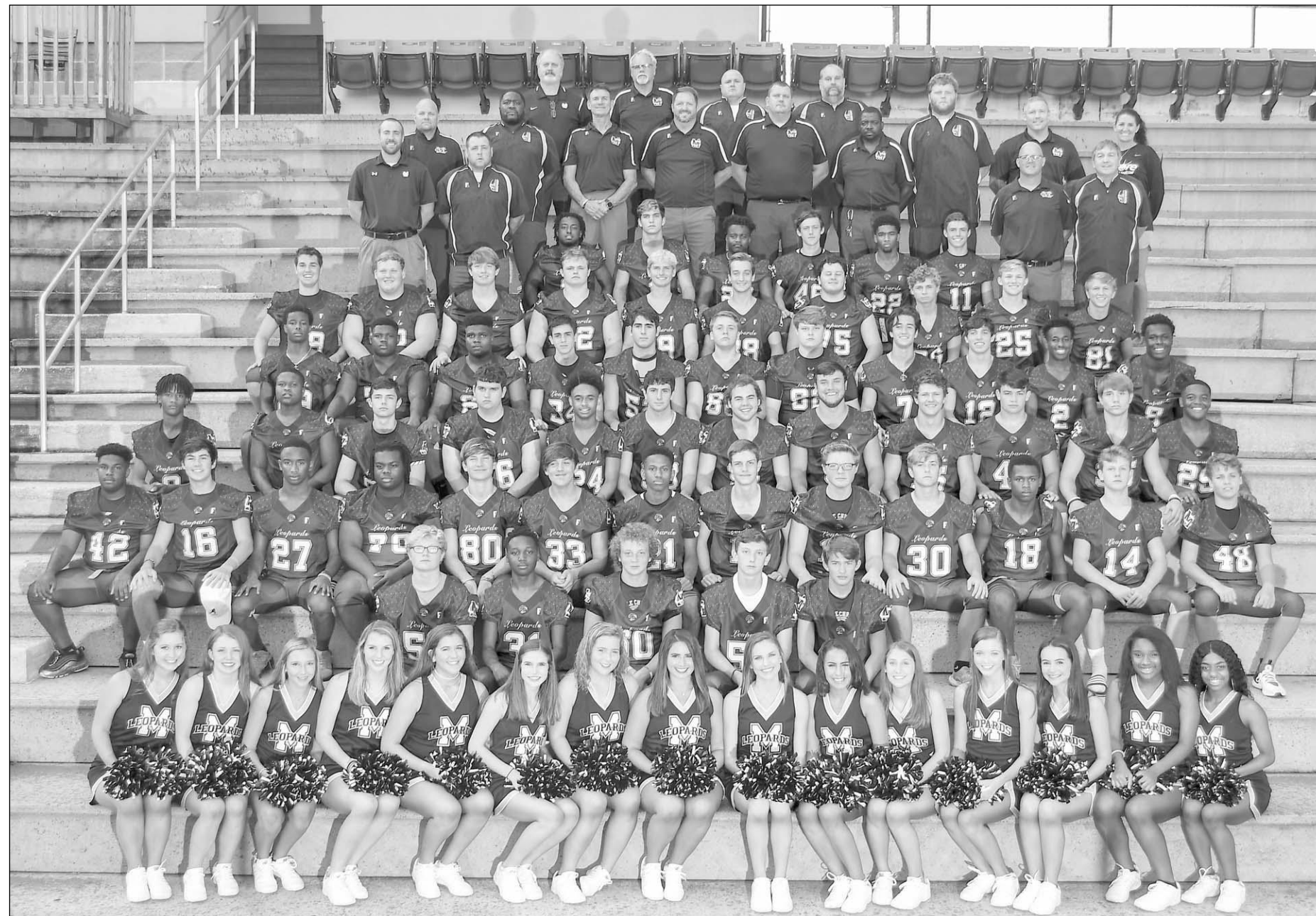
The regular season had one loss, to non-region UMS-Wright, the eventual 4A state champion, and a first-round playoff win over Pike Road, 42-14. It all appeared to be lining up for the Leopards. Then in came the Gordo Green Wave on Nov. 16.

Trailing 20-17 late, the Leopards drove deep into Gordo territory and after a dropped pass in the end zone, head coach Ronnie Cottrell opted for a 25-yard field goal to tie the game in the waning seconds. The snap, however, was mishandled, and Gordo escaped with the win.

Three weeks later, Flomaton, which lost during the midseason to Mobile Christian, carried the Class 3A state championship trophy out of Jordan-Hare Stadium. Needless to say, the end of the 2018 seasons has been on the Leopards' mind ever since.

"Defensively, we've got a solid club and we have maybe our best offensive line since I've been here. We're pretty upbeat about our offense and defense," Cottrell said.

"Our biggest concern is our kicking. We've got to figure out who our punter is going to be. We lost Catfish Gibbons; he was the all-region punter for the Call News in Class 5A and under. We have an outstanding snapper in Tate Moore who replaces Jake Brooks, who was our snapper for four years, and we've got a re-



The 2019 Mobile Christian Leopards

Mobile Christian photos by John O'Dell/Call News

ally fine kicker in Jackson Chandler."

Replacing Eric Poellnitz, now graduated and playing at Alabama, will be a challenge, the coach said. "One of the biggest things he gave us was a mindset and a confidence factor that he could always make a play," Cottrell said. "We don't have that (person) around here right now, and we have to have somebody emerge at this time.

"Nick Ellis is our tailback and he rushed for over 1,000 yards last year. I expect him to have a really big year this year," the coach said.

Cottrell said a lot of the team's past, and probably future success will hang on the work of defensive coordinator Gus Smith.

"If he's not the best coach in Alabama on



Coach Ronnie Cottrell

defense, I don't know who that would be," he said. "He plays a lot of people."

Cottrell said the team is going to have to "grow up quick." But one thing the team will do differently this

year, Cottrell said, is there will be more running plays this season. "We've got to be balanced, but I feel we'll be a lot more physical with the running game," the coach said.

There are three quarterbacks being looked at in camp. Cason Lincke is a senior, Landon Hirtreiter a junior and Johnny Moore a sophomore.

Cottrell said this year's Leopards will feature more players going both ways than he has used in the past. Two examples he pointed out were safety Jacoby Chestang, who will get reps at wide receiver, and Ellis, who'll double in the defensive backfield as a safety.

Overall, for varsity games, Cottrell said he is going to dress 55 players in grades 9-12 for Friday

nights this year. "We'll pick up a few eighth-graders, five or six will come over after their season is over," he said. "We have 15 seniors and 19 juniors this year, so I think this could be a really good football team."

He noted his linebacker corps, led by Tate Moore and Deontae Lawson, may be the strongest group by position on the team. "They're the kind of leaders that you need on your defensive squad. They're both students of the game and they really study film," Cottrell said.

The coach is well aware of Region 1 and its regular representation in state championship games. "In 2015, my first year, Bayside played for the championship. In 2016 we played for the championship against Pelham and lost, and in 2017

it was Clarke County. Then, last year, Flomaton, whom we beat in the regular season, won it. Flomaton won 12 games, Thomasville won 10, we won nine and Bayside won eight. That's a really strong region," the coach said.

The Leopards open Aug. 23 against Pensacola Catholic at home, followed by home games against Bayside Academy (Sept. 6) and Faith Academy (non-region, Sept. 13). Mobile Christian then travels Sept. 20 to Thomasville and Sept. 27 to UMS-Wright for a non-region game. T.R. Miller comes into Mobile Christian Oct. 4, and the Leopards then travel to Flomaton Oct. 11 before hosting Excel on Oct. 18. A road game to St. Michael Catholic in Fairhope ends the regular season.

Chestang says MC ready to grab that elusive state title

BY MARK R. KENT
mkent@thecallnews.com

MOBILE — The very first time Jacoby Chestang ever set foot on the field in a live Mobile Christian game, he came up with the defensive back's ultimate prize — he got a pick-six.

"They sent me on the field while the quarterback was already calling his cadence," Chestang said of the moment. "Next thing, the ball was there, I picked it and next thing I was in the end zone." The play came against Lighthouse Christian in the 2017 season.

He has not had another pick-six since. Still, he said he feels that does not diminish his worth to the team; rather, he has higher goals for this, his senior year.

"First and foremost, our goal this year is to win a state championship," Chestang said. "I feel like we've been leaving it on the table for the past three years, and especially last year. I feel we're ready to finish it out," he said.

This season, Chestang will be the only returning starter in the secondary. "I don't feel the pressure; I kind of like the role," he said. "It helps me get my leadership skills, so that everybody in the secondary will

look like they're already starting."

When asked about his own game and what he has improved on the most, Chestang said, "I've improved my speed a whole lot, coming out of the breaks and closing in on the ball."

The fact a team Mobile Christian beat last year — Flomaton — ended up winning the state championship, could have haunted some Leopards players, but Chestang said he looks at it from a different angle. "It was very encouraging. It gave me a sense to know that we can do it, and that we will do it."

Chestang said he is glad to have head coach Ronnie Cottrell in his life. "He's the best coach I ever had. He cares about you and he's more like a second dad almost. He's there to help with everything, besides football. And when you get on the football field with him, you're comfortable."

Chestang has plans for college, when that time comes. A piano player, he is hoping to learn more about music production as a career.

But for now, there's one more season of football for him to try to pursue the elusive state championship the Leopards have come so close to obtaining in recent years.



Mobile Christian defensive back Jacoby Chestang