

FAITH ACADEMY



Seniors for the 2019 Faith Academy Rams

Faith Academy photos by John O'Dell/Call News

Rams want to ride the thrill

Reaching playoffs last year was special, and Faith has tools to make it happen again

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MOBILE — In his long and well-travelled coaching career, Jack French has had many memorable moments. He's led teams to state championships in Mississippi and he raised Baker's fortunes to a competitive level, where the Hornets have managed to remain. He also brought Baldwin County up to playoff level at one point as well.

But there was something special about leading Faith Academy last fall to its first-ever state playoff berth as an AHSAA team.

"I was extremely thrilled for all those kids and everybody at Faith Academy, and I'd been to playoffs before with teams that had never been there. It was still a thrill, and I have to admit that it meant more to me than I thought it would," French said.

"I could kind of see that extra effort that we had to have. Hopefully we're ready to build on it and try to do a little bit better."

The clincher came in the next-to-last week of regular season play, in a thrilling 14-13 win over Satsuma. It took two interceptions and a whole lot of white-knuckle defense in the game's final five minutes, but in the end, the Rams slipped into that No. 4 playoff position for Region 1.

Mind not that Faith two weeks later went up to Demopolis and got a quick postseason exit. After all, a lot of teams' seasons have ended in Demopolis in the early rounds in November's past.

French and his Rams are ready to make it happen again, and the coach says the team has the right mix of experience and depth in order to give themselves a fighting chance. Faith will field a team with 14 returning seniors and many in key positions on either side of the ball. A total of 60, give or take a Ram or two, will dress on any given Friday this year.

James Flynn will return to his starting quarterback position, one he kept through most of the 2018 season's first seven games before an injury sidelined him. He'll have in his backfield at running back a freshman of which French is quite confident — Colton Wood (5-foot-10, 160 pounds). Jackson Haney is top wingback candidate, while



Bryant Andrews, linebacker and tight end for Faith

Kendall Johnson will serve as blocking back.

A newcomer to Faith, transfer Shemar James, is expected to see plenty of snaps as wide receiver, and Caullin Lacy, who took over for Flynn after he was hurt, will fill multiple roles, including backup QB, running back and receiver.

Lacy will also be expected to play cornerback at times.

The offensive line will feature a good bit of size and experience, with 340-pound Jay Seymour and Lucas Hall (320) at tackles, Bryant Fisher (194) and Zane Hall (299) at guards and 250-pound Cole

Bourg at center.

The defense, French said, will be a 4-3 set, anchored by 270-pound Kennedy Coleman and 280-pound Earnest James at tackles, with Taylon Rice and James, the new wide receiver, at ends.

Evan Buckhalter, Bryant Andrews (who will also be featured on offense at tight end) and Connor Ratliff are top linebacking prospects. Trea Gordon, who'll also take snaps as a running back, and Dakota Saranthus will be the safeties, while

top prospects for cornerbacks will be Peyton Bell and Gabe Broadus.

But there will be more than these on the field at any Faith game, French said. Among the other players who have caught the coach's eye so far are guard Seth Bonner, Ethan Williams, who can play on either line, another two-way lineman in Travis Greene and yet another dual-role lineman in Alex Perrin.

Tight end Jaden Brown is another one who has caught French's attention. George Howard and sophomore Collin Ward are both running backs and Branson Williams has shown promise as a wide receiver.

Having a deep depth chart will likely be a big plus for the Rams again this year. In 2018, Faith secured a playoff spot despite losing a number of players to injuries as the season unfolded.

One place where long-time dependability will be important is the punter/kicker. Once again, Brunson Watt will take those roles. He'll be dependent on long snapper Bryant Fisher, while Flynn and Saranthus will serve as holders. Sam East is in the ready as either kicker or punter, should the need arise.

When the Rams beat Satsuma last fall to clinch a playoff berth, the team

resorted to an almost-exclusive running game with Lacy running the offense. But French's offensive style is much more diverse in other situations.

"We're really one of the most versatile, multifaceted teams left," French said. "We can go from one extreme to the other. We can be a full-house backfield with two tight ends, or we can go all the way to no backs. We actually run the whole gamut and there is some danger in all that. After a while, you take on a personality and figure out what our kids like and be-

lieve in, and you do that the most. You usually have to play a couple of ball games before you figure that out."

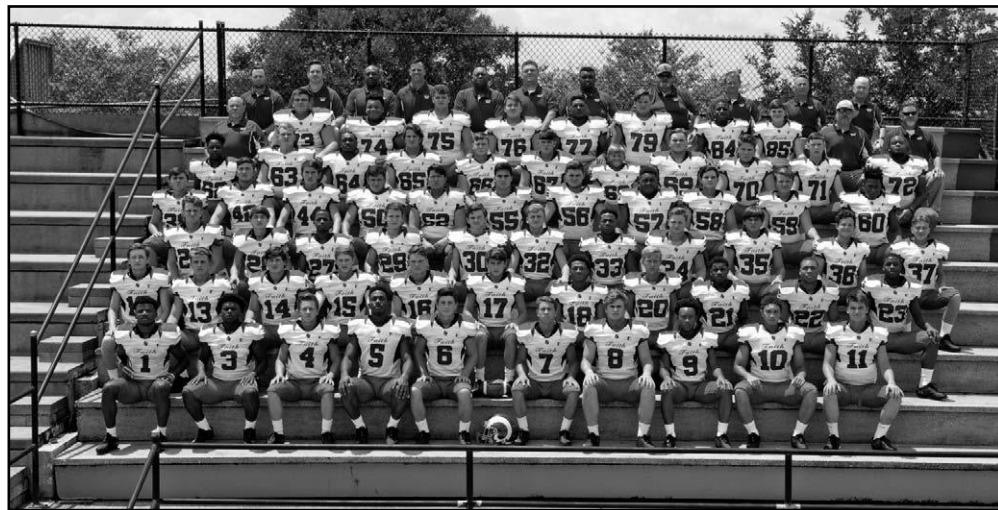
Besides the Rams' Class 5A, Region 1 opponents, there will be four out-of-region games on the schedule this year, plus a preseason jamboree event Aug. 23 with Alma Bryant.

Non-region games include a road trip to Bayside Academy Aug. 30, another road trip to Mobile Christian on Sept. 13, a home game against Robertsdale on Sept. 27, and a road trip to Lumberton (Miss.) on Nov. 1.

Home region games include LeFlore (Sept. 6), Citronelle (Sept. 20) and Satsuma (Oct. 25). Road region games are in three consecutive weeks, at Wilcox Central (Oct. 4), Vigor (Oct. 11) and Jackson (Oct. 18).

And what about Nov. 8, when the playoffs start? That will all be up to the Rams and their coaches. They've been on that plateau once and they know what it's like. And they know what it takes, even with a number of players left on the sidelines, to get there.

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