

BLOUNT

Leopards have 'grown up a lot'

BY DARRON PATTERSON
Sports Correspondent

PRICHARD — What's that line? Oh, yeah: the best thing about sophomores is they become juniors.

Blount head coach Lev Holly didn't coin the phrase, but he surely believes in it.

"We were a young team last season, but we've grown up a lot," said Holly in reference to the 5-5 season that came to a crashing halt with a 20-0 loss at Class 6A, Region 1 foe Daphne in what was essentially a play-in game for the postseason. "It's a testament to the way the team has handled the challenges and the demands we've put before them.

"It's a credit to them, but also to the assistant coaches that were in the weight room and did things on the field to make sure things were rolling smoothly as far as conditioning and character building, mentoring and making sure everything was put in perspective."

Junior quarterback LaMarcus Brown (6-foot-2, 190 pounds) and running back Jarris Williams (5-11, 192), both thrown into the fray as sophomores last season, are primed for a breakout year.

"He's developed a lot," Holly said of Brown, who matured as the year went on last season. "We wanted to work with him to not just be an athletic quarterback but be a true student of the game. His athletic ability is something that you just can't

teach. But being a game manager and knowing what you're looking at are qualities of a good quarterback.

"He's responded well to what we want him to do. There's been a lot of tough days, a lot of drilling, but he doesn't back down from the challenge."

And the hard-running Williams?

"Jarris was the guy and he's had a really good offseason," said Holly, going into his fifth season at Blount. "As a matter of fact, both of those guys, and the rest of the guys, too, have had really good offseasons. It's been one of the best, if not the best (offseason) we've had since I've been at the school. We're super excited.

"But let's talk about the total picture. Everybody has a role and we've defined that



Linebacker Sidney Collins, left

role, so now it's do your job. If everyone does their job, everything else will work itself out. On offense we talk about 11 parts is one whole."

Defensively, if the Leopards can't stop anybody, Holly won't have to go far to chew out the defensive coordinator. All he'll need to do is look in the mirror, because he's taking over the job from former coach Lee Smith, now in an administrative role at the school.

The Leopards are again solid up

front, with highly recruited junior defensive lineman Lee Hunter (6-5, 292) leading the way. Seniors Devin Graham (6-3, 315) and Johnny Bonner (6-3, 310) will join him to comprise a formidable front, while steady senior linebacker Sidney Collins (6-2, 210) and junior defensive back Armani

Diamond (5-11, 175) bring battle-tested experience to the group.

"Lee Hunter is one of the top defensive tackles in the nation — not just the state, but the nation. And Sidney is also a heavily recruited guy," said Holly. "Any time you're talking about making a deep run and being a championship-caliber team, you better have a defense that's going to stop some people.

"In the week-in, week-out grind (of 6A, Region 1), you cannot have a flat week. You've got to play every single week. This is a great region, very tough and very competitive, with a bunch of great coaches and players. Being consistent is what we need to do.

"After the season we did a total evaluation — I evaluated myself, the coaches, everything. We looked at the way we warm up, the way we film study, break opponents down, the way we work out, the way we walk around the school ... the total process.

"Culture wins football games. We're excited to get back after it. When I came in (in 2015) and evaluated where we were, I knew we'd have two really good years where we'd make some runs and be really, really explosive.

"But I knew that the last two years would be growing years. We're on a time schedule and I feel like we're on schedule to bring Blount back to where it's supposed to be. I'm very fortunate to coach this bunch."

DAVIDSON

New coach inherits 'resilient' Warriors

BY ARTHUR L. MACK
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New Davidson head coach Rick Cauley is entering a situation in which he's inheriting a team that came back strong after facing adversity in 2018.

Cauley, who coached at B.C. Rain that year, was named the Davidson head coach after interim head coach Shawn Smith led the Warriors to a 6-5 record, winning four of their final five regular season games to make it to the final round of the Class 7A playoffs before losing 46-0 to eventual state champion Central-Phenix City.

Former head coach Fred Riley retired in late September after a viral video of a Davidson player being beaten by several of his teammates took place last April. Riley had been placed on administrative leave prior to announcing his retirement.

"The kids were resilient. They did go through a whole lot last year and they responded during the season," Cauley said. "The offseason has been the same; they've been introduced to a bunch of changes and they never missed a beat. They come to work every day. They've obviously been taught through the years how to work and they're very disciplined kids."

Despite projected starting quarterback Jaden Jordan missing the spring session with an injury, he came back during the summer and improved tremendously. As such, the 5-foot-10, 155-pound senior seems poised to handle the offense.

"I thought that throughout the spring and summer our offensive coaches have done a good job," Cauley said. "With the start of summer to where he (Jordan) is at now, he has progressed a ton. We really stumbled into our identity a little bit and our coaches up front have really done a great job with those guys.

"Jaden does a great job not only leading the offense, but the whole team. He does a great job in getting the guys together and they throw on their own. He makes sure they don't miss practice and that they are also there when they have spare time. He makes sure they get all the extra work they can possibly get."

Cauley said the running game, long a staple of Davidson's offense, is in good hands despite the graduation of Kolbe Blunt, who rushed for more than 1,000 yards last season.

"Right now, I think our strength is up front in the run game," Cauley said.



Coach Rick Cauley

"We've got good backs and the passing game, like I said, has improved. We have three backs that we are confident in — junior Johnathan Whitfield, senior D Adrian Portlock and junior Jaylen Nash.

"Kolbe was the main ball carrier, but these guys are really fresh. They haven't been out there a lot, but they are hungry and eager to get out there and get some carries."

Defensively, Cauley said the whole unit had a good spring. Defensive lineman Cedric Johnson was one of the players who stood out during spring workouts.

"He's had a really good offseason," Cauley said of Johnson, who has committed to Ole Miss. "I'm really happy with our box

players — our front seven are good players. We have three linebackers who can get it done and we're an aggressive and attacking defense and you have to be good on the back end.

"We feel good with what we've got back there. We have a whole lot of good athletes and that's kind of the way we build it. We take what people would consider our longest and fastest guys and put them on defense."

Among the linebackers are seniors Kuasim Mayers (5-9, 165) and Alex Dials (5-11, 225) and junior Demetrius Johnson. Junior Rauchard Kyser is one of the returning starters in the secondary, as well as senior Daniel Thompson, but senior Charles Wilson and junior Korian Westry have come

on strong during the summer.

"Kuasim is probably one of our best leaders on the whole team," said Cauley. "He kind of keeps the bulk of the unit going."

Davidson opens up the season against state runner-up Thompson on Aug. 24, and then faces four straight Class 7A, Region 1 opponents — Alma Bryant, Baker, McGill-Toolen and Fairhope — before having an open date on Sept. 27.

"It's always a challenge," Cauley said. "We have Thompson and Robert E. Lee (as non-regional opponents). One of them played for the state championship. Then you have Region 1. Theodore is always a tough game. Fairhope is tough, and Murphy's going to be a tough challenge. Every team (in the region) can sneak up on you and beat you if you don't do what you're supposed to do. It's not how good you are, it's how good everybody else is. I think this is going to be a good year in high school football and we're looking forward in competing in it."

LEFLORE

Rattlers' skill crew young but talented

BY ARTHUR L. MACK
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A familiar face will be at the helm as head coach of the LeFlore High Rattlers this season. Christopher Raymond has taken the job and said he's ready to help get LeFlore back into the playoff picture.

This is Raymond's second go-round as the Rattlers' head coach, having served as head coach from 2008-11, leading the Rattlers to the playoffs his final three years there. This time, he's taking over from Anthony Shamburger, who served from 2012-18. Raymond has had some previous head coaching experience at Sumter Central in 2012 and served as head coach at Class 6A Selma in 2017 and 2018.

In addition, Raymond served as head coach at Southside Selma from 2000-07, making the playoffs in 2003 and 2005.

"It feels good to be back (at LeFlore)," he told the Call News. "It's home for me. I played here, I graduated from here and it's just great to be back at home."

Raymond said things went well during spring drills for the Rattlers, who finished 3-7 overall last season and 2-4 in Class 5A, Region 1 play.

"We got a real good evaluation of things that we needed to work on to get ready for the upcoming season," he said. "We had to replace last year's starting quarterback (Hezekiah Belfon), who moved back to Florida with his parents."

Raymond said there are a couple of players — Mark Green and Xiccan Cade — who are vying for the starting job at quarterback. In addition, there are some other players who may make a mark during the fall.

"We've got some pretty good talent," Raymond said. "We're trying to develop offensive and defensive linemen, so I'm excited about what the future brings."

Offensively, Raymond said there is a lot of up-and-coming talent, particularly in the receiving corps.

"We can go six deep in the receiving corps," he said. "I'm impressed with the talent that has come in and worked hard."

Among the leading candidates at receiver are sophomore Demir Smith and juniors Jahiya Robinson, Jeremiah Riley and Angelo James.

"The good thing about it is that you can get them for two years," Raymond said. "They're pretty good talented kids, they work hard and I'm excited about working with them."

The line may be the most experienced part of the offensive unit. Three returning starters — center Kidd Tyson, right tackle Kelson Mitchell (6-foot-4, 260 pounds) and left tackle Desmond Mitchell — are back to help the Rattlers' offense, particularly in the run game.

"It's just a matter of putting a couple more pieces together," said Raymond.

Defensively, Raymond said one of the positives during the spring was developing some young players, particularly in the backfield and linebacking positions.



Coach Christopher Raymond

"We were able to develop some young kids and I was excited about the growth of the defensive backfield and the entire group," he said.

One of the younger players who could make some noise in the defensive backfield is freshman Corey Kelly, who Raymond said really impressed the coaches during the spring and the summer.

"He's got the potential to be a starter as a true ninth-grader," Raymond said of Kelly.

In addition, junior cornerback Akelian Christian will be relied upon to bolster the secondary.

Linebacker appears to be the strongest spot on LeFlore's defense. Returning starter Derrick Dougans, a 6-foot-0, 225-pound senior, has been a starter since his freshman year. Another true freshman, Traveil Jackson, made a good impression during the spring and could challenge for a starting spot.

If there is one thin spot, it's the defensive line. Raymond said there's the possibility some of the offensive line starters could be playing both ways.

"We've got to hit the hallways and find some more depth," he said.

With the summer workouts now under way, Raymond said things have been going well, with workouts starting at 7:30 in the morning, averaging 35-50 kids a day, with emphasis on conditioning, teaching and drills during the month of July. Raymond said he hopes it will translate into success in Class 5A, Region 1, which has some strong teams including Vigor, Jackson, Faith Academy, and Citronelle.

"We have some pretty talented kids here and my philosophy is to play the best kids," Raymond said. "It doesn't matter if they're in the ninth grade, tenth grade or eleventh grade, it's who's the best kid out there. I don't believe in saving kids till they become juniors and seniors. If they can help you right now, we're going to put them out there. As coaches, our job is to coach them up."