

SARALAND

Saraland's fall schedule: 'Not a lot of secrets'

BY TOMMY HICKS
tommyhicks@thecallnews.com

There will be something quite familiar about this year's Saraland football schedule. Namely, it is exactly the same — other than the dates the games are played — as the Spartans' 2018 football schedule. They even take the same week off this year, after their eighth game of the season against St. Paul's, that they took off a year ago.

Now, with the exception of a couple of games, if Saraland can duplicate the victories and success it experienced a year ago, there will be a lot of happy people in the community and at the school.

"We know them, they know us; there's not a lot of secrets," Saraland head coach Jeff Kelly said of the Spartans' 2019 opponents. "With the amount of video and information that's out there, there's not a lot of secrets out there."

"It comes down to who's better than the other one, who can block and tackle and do the fundamental things better than the other folks and be strong on special teams and not make the big turnover. That's what it's going to come down to."

The Spartans posted a 13-2 record with last season's schedule. They won their first nine games before falling 28-16 at Spanish Fort in the final regular season game. From there, Saraland ran off four more victories in the Class 6A state playoffs, defeating Stanhope Elmore (42-14), Hueytown (6-0), Opelika (24-19) and Wetumpka (22-21) before falling to Pinson Valley in the 6A state championship game 26-17 at Auburn's Jordan-Hare Stadium.

As a result, the Spartans have a nice state runner-up trophy displayed at the school, but they are hoping this season will follow the same path, the exception being wins in the 10th and 15th games of the year, so they can add an even better trophy to the case this season.

Certainly, the Spartans know what to expect from the teams on their schedule. Their 15 opponents produced a combined record of 49-60. Saraland outscored its opponents 461-171 last season, that's an average scoring margin of 30.7-11.4.

Saraland opens the season with a pair of road games, playing at Andalusia on Aug. 23 and at B.C. Rain on Aug. 30. Last season, Andalusia posted a 9-5 overall record and reached the Class 4A state semifinals where the Bulldogs lost to eventual 4A state champion (for the second consecutive year) UMS-Wright. Andalusia lost to UMS-Wright 24-3. Saraland topped Andalusia 41-3 a year ago.

Against B.C. Rain, a team that was winless in 10

See **SCHEDULE**, 49C

Spartans counting on Dunnam to be anchor

Center stepped up when team needed him last year

BY TOMMY HICKS
tommyhicks@thecallnews.com

He wasn't expecting to be the starting center for Saraland last season, but things changed really quickly for Josh Dunnam a year ago.

He was on the sidelines at Saraland's stadium for the season-opening game against Andalusia, hoping to get some back-up time on the field, when it happened. The starting center went down with an injury and the coaches were calling for Dunnam to "get out there."

He did a little more than that. For the rest of the season Dunnam was the Spartans' starting center, through all 14 remaining games that ended in the Class 6A state championship game at Auburn University's Jordan-Hare Stadium.

Next man up was Josh Dunnam, and he was ready when his name was called.

"It was an unexpected start for me last season when the starting center got hurt in the first game," Dunnam said. "It put a lot of pressure on me the first couple of games. I got over it pretty quickly after the first couple of games, but definitely playing in Jordan-Hare kind of upped things for me. But we're back this year and all I'm looking forward to is that first game."

"With the quick start I learned that opportunity is always there. It's all about how hard you prepare. If you're not the main guy you have to always been prepared for when opportunity knocks. You have to be ready for it at all times."

Dunnam said he was happy he prepared in the manner he did heading into last season so he was ready when he was needed.

Head coach Jeff Kelly said Dunnam made what could have been a dif-



Saraland center Josh Dunnam

icult situation for the Spartans easier to handle with his preparation and how he played once he got on the field.

"Josh has been a center for us, pretty much every snap last season," Kelly said. "He's been a great athlete, baseball player. He's tough and strong and athletic and can get up on the second level and go get those linebackers and go get up on those safeties and be involved in screens. We've tried to get those guys athletic and have them involved in the run game and they've done a good job."

The word Kelly used in describing Dunnam is "dependable," and he doesn't expect that to change this year. Heading into his second season as a starter, Dunnam has accepted the responsibilities that come with the po-

sition and tried to set a good example for his teammates while contributing to the offensive effort.

"The days of the big ole guy who's just going to take up a gap, they're gone," said Kelly, alluding to Dunnam's slight frame when compared to other offensive linemen on the roster and across the area. "But he gets the job done."

In truth, Dunnam said he loves playing center.

"I like that I know what goes on all the time and I like knowing that it starts with me," he said. "I like knowing that everybody is relying on the center to snap the ball and get it to the quarterback and if that doesn't happen it's all on me. If there's a bad snap then we can't make the play."

Asked how he can be better for his team this season, Dunnam had an answer at the ready.

"I feel like I'm never going to second-guess myself again," he said. "I was always the young guy and I prepared this year to not second-guess myself and just to go with it and do what I was taught to do. I spent the whole summer and the whole spring and the whole offseason preparing for all of this. It's a team goal and we only have team goals."

He said he's happy to be part of an offensive line with three returning starters, a group that recognizes its importance to the overall success of the offensive goals.

"It's definitely a good group," he said of his fellow linemen. "We're all definitely friends; I'd like to say we're all best friends. We all bond really good. The offensive line, we stand in the corner by ourselves and we're with each other the whole practice. That's just how it is. We've got to be close because it's all about us. If we're not close then the team won't be close."


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