

SARALAND

Spartan program has come a long, long way in a hurry

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Those traveling along I-65 near Exit 13 who glance over and see the Saraland High School campus, and for those who don't know much about the school's history, the initial thought is the school has probably been in existence for quite a while.

That, of course, is not the case.

While the facilities at Saraland — sometimes referred to as the University of Saraland by locals — are top notch and growing with the recent addition of the school's \$3.5 million Athlete Performance Center that includes an indoor practice facility, locker rooms and weight room facilities, the school has only been in existence for a short time.

As such, while the Saraland football program has already become a perennial power in Class 6A play, in truth the Spartans have played just nine seasons of football.

Each of those seasons but one have ended with a winning record; the first season under head coach John Holman saw the Spartans go 3-7. It was also the only season Saraland hasn't made the playoffs. And the only season Jeff Kelly has not been the Spartans' head coach.

Twice Saraland has made it to the Class 6A state championship game (2014, 2018) and once the Spartans reached the Class 5A semifinals (2013).

All of that speaks highly of the program and what has been accomplished at Saraland in a short period of time. This year's team will end the first decade of football at the school, and there's every reason to believe the Spartans will continue to post a winning season (eight straight heading into 2019), continue to make the playoffs (eight straight) and perhaps even contend for the Class 6A crown once again.

"I think we've been to the semifinals three of the last six years when you go back to 2013," Kelly said. "We've been around really just eight years of varsity football with seniors. That does get overlooked; people forget about that."

"Guys that were around back in 2011 when we were just getting going as a 4A program and now to see what and where we are now, and there are so many people responsible for that. We have great support from the community and the administration, just really everybody, and where we have come is really impressive."

In just nine seasons, Saraland has collected 76 victories against just 34 defeats. The Spartans have also produced a playoff record of 12-8 in that period and against regional opponents they are 48-20.

Kelly's record in eight seasons at Saraland is 73-27 overall, 12-8 in playoff games and 45-16 against regional opponents.

There are some other interesting facts associated with the Saraland football program in its nine previous seasons of play. For example:

- The Spartans have played 43 opponents in nine seasons and 21 of those teams have never defeated them. The list includes Andalusia (1-0), B.C. Rain (5-0), Baker (1-0), Bessemer City (1-0), Faith Academy (2-0), Greenville (2-0), Heard County, Ga. (1-0), Hillcrest-Evergreen (2-0), Homewood (1-0), Hueytown (1-0), LeFlore (5-0), Luverne (2-0), Monroe County (2-0), Robertsdale (5-0), Satsuma (2-0), Selma (2-0), St. Paul's (2-0), Stanhope Elmore (1-0), Sumter Central (1-0), W.S. Neal (2-0) and Wetumpka (1-0).
- Of course, there are a few teams the Spartans have yet to defeat. That list includes seven teams — Bibb County (0-1), Chilton County (0-1), Clay-Chalkville (0-1), Jackson (0-4), Park Crossing (0-1), Pinson Valley (0-1) and UMS-Wright (0-2).
- When it comes to scoring points, the Spartans know their stuff. In their nine previous seasons they have scored a total of 3,195 points, an average of 355 points per season. Their best year was 2014 when they scored 538 points. In their first season of 2010 they scored just 155 points and gave up 374 points, the most they have ever surrendered in a year. In fact, after the first two seasons (2010-11) in which they allowed 300-plus points, Saraland's defensive units have failed to allow more than 267 points in a season, including allowing just 171 points last year on the way to the Class 6A state title game. Opponents have scored 2,243 combined points in the previous nine seasons, an average of 249.2 points a year.
- While they have made the playoffs eight times, four of those seasons the Spartans were knocked out in the first round without winning a postseason game. However, they posted a 4-1 playoff mark in 2014 and 2018 and a 3-1 mark in 2013. They were 1-1 in the postseason in 2017.

SCHEDULE: Spartans know what they are up against, because slate's the same

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games last season, Saraland claimed an easy and convincing 50-0 victory. It would be the first of five shutouts by the Spartans' defense on the season and it gave Saraland a 91-3 point advantage over its opponents in the first two games.

On Sept. 6 the Spartans will play their first home game of the year, taking on Daphne, which was 5-6 last year, earning a spot in the playoffs but being ousted in the first round. Saraland defeated Daphne 27-19 last season.

The Spartans will play their third road game in a four-game stretch on Sept. 13 when they go to Bay Minette to face Baldwin County High. Last year, the Spartans defeated BCHS 38-10. The Tigers would go on to post a 6-4 record.

Saraland returns home on Sept. 20 to face off with Robertsdale, a team that was just 2-8 a year ago. The Spartans handed the Bears a 35-0 whipping last season.

A return to the road is next for the Spartans, who visit LeFlore on Sept. 27 and Gulf Shores on Oct. 4. Last year, Saraland beat LeFlore 42-0. The Rattlers would finish the 2018 season with a 3-7 record. The Spartans handed Gulf Shores a 46-14 defeat a year ago, a season in which the Dolphins finished with a 1-9 record.

The final three games of the this season will all be tough games for the Spartans who play at

home against St. Paul's on Oct. 11, take a week off then stay at home to face Blount on Oct. 25. The final regular season game for the Spartans is Nov. 1 when they travel to Spanish Fort.

St. Paul's moved up to Class 6A play last season, a result of the AHSAA's new competitive balance rule that pushed some teams up a classification. Last year, Saraland had little trouble with the Saints, claiming a 35-0 victory in a season in which St. Paul's finished with a 7-4 record and made the playoffs.

Blount was just 5-5 last season and lost to Saraland 20-17 in overtime. The

Leopards return several experienced players to this year's team and is a preseason Top 10 team in the Alabama Sports Writers Association Class 6A preseason poll. Saraland is ranked No. 2 in the poll, right behind defending champion Pinson Valley.

The final game of the regular season will be at Spanish Fort. The Toros were the only team to top the Spartans in the regular season a year ago, claiming a 28-16 victory. Spanish Fort would go on to post an 11-2 record, reaching the third round of the Class 6A state playoffs, losing to Wetumpka 21-17.



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