

SARALAND



The Saraland High School football coaching staff takes a moment from a busy schedule to pose for a picture. Head coach Jeff Kelly is at top center.

SPARTANS: Squad has the experience and talent to dominate again this fall

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“We’ve got a bunch of guys coming back from that team and hopefully they can use that (experience from a year ago),” Kelly said. “They’ve been in the fire of the big games and they know what to expect. They also have been right there to the top and came up short, so hopefully that lit a fire. And they have carried that with them through spring and a great summer.”

“But when you get ready to open the season, none of that matters. Nobody cares how many games we won last year. We went to the finals, but nobody cares. Everybody we play is going to want to whip our tail and we’ve got a target on our back and we have to come out fighting every single Friday night.”

Saraland has the experience and talent to withstand what Kelly described, with lots of players in place on offense to score points and moves being made on defense, especially at linebacker where several returning starters will play, to make that unit stronger as well.

“Offensively we’ve got a lot of playmakers coming back, and I think any time you’ve got your quarterback returning,

that’s good — and I think Brett Nezat is as good a quarterback as there is in the state,” Kelly said. “He’s playing at a really high level. If we can protect him, I think we’ve got the players around him for him to have a big year.”

“Having an outstanding running back helps the quarterback and Rashawn (McAlpine) is an outstanding running back. Now when we put in guys like Omarion Crawford at running back, there’s not much difference, he’s a really good player, just a junior. He’s going to be a name to watch. We feel confident about having two really good running backs.”

It doesn’t stop there for the Spartans who can also boast a good group of receivers, as well as an experienced tight end and offensive line.

“D.J. Thomas (Ole Miss commit) is coming in there and playing the tight end role for us and we have two young receivers that we’re really excited about in Jarel Williams and Jerone York. The guys up front, we’ve got three starters that played in every game last year. Offensively I feel good, but there are some things that we’ve got to improve on.”

That shifts Kelly’s attention to the defen-

sive side of the ball, and there are pluses there for the Spartans as well, though Kelly admits there are also some holes that must be filled, most noticeably in the secondary.

“Defensively, we’re trying to find that right mix right now, that right combination of players in the positions, so we’re working on a lot of different things. Having Shawn Byrd, Treyce Byrd and Adam Chaney there in the linebacking corps is really, really good.”

“We’ve got some defensive linemen that we feel really good about. Chancellor Handy is real good in there and Rashawn’s little brother, Trevon McAlpine, is going to be a really good player. We have some other D linemen that we’re really excited about, they just haven’t done it yet.”

“Our secondary, we are working a bunch of different guys. We had four seniors working back there last year but we’ve got four or five guys that we feel can go play and do well. The spring and summer was good for them and we feel like they are going to be able to pick up where those other guys left off and be a good unit.”

Another plus for the Spartans this season — kicker Cole Robitzsch is also returning.

“We’ve got some guys coming back, but we’ve also got some holes that we’ve got to improve on and replace some guys that we lost,” Kelly said. “We lost a ton of leadership, that’s one of the things we lost last year and we are working with our guys daily trying to teach them about leadership. And they’ll pick up those things as we go.”

“Depth is a concern going in. Last year I think we had players and we had back-ups that were good players. This year we’ve got players, the elite kind of guys, but I don’t think we’re as deep as we need to be across the board. We’ve got to do a good job of practicing smart and you have to get lucky a little bit with injuries.”

With all that going for him, Kelly said there is an uncontrollable factor that always plays a key role in the type of season a team has.

“You look around our region and there’s some really good football teams,” he said, “but probably the one that’s the most healthy at the end of the season is going to have the best chance. That’s just the way it works.”

Saraland opens the season Friday, Aug. 23 against Andalusia on the road.

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