

ST. PAUL'S



The 2019 St. Paul's Saints

St. Paul's photos by John O'Dell/Call News

Saints get ‘coached up’ for 6A

BY DARRON PATTERSON
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Steve Mask is a quick learner. It took him just one season to figure out what his St. Paul's Saints need to compete week in and week out with the big boys in Class 6A, Region 1.

"No disrespect to my brethren in 5A, because there's still a lot of good teams there, too, but in this league there's just more players and more coaches," said Mask, entering his eighth year as the main man at St. Paul's, which moved up a notch in class from 5A last season, based on the AHSAA's competitive balance rule.

"The quality of coaching isn't any better (than in 5A), but there's just more coaches. Every week is a challenge and there are no off weeks. We've also got to improve as far as the speed of the game is concerned and we've got to build a little bit more depth."

St. Paul's finished third in the region with a respectable 6-2 record (7-4 overall). But Mask knew it was the way they lost to league heavyweights Spanish Fort (22-0) and Saraland (35-0 at home) that told the real story.

"I really thought the only game we were

not in was Spanish Fort," he said.

So Mask went to work this offseason to shore things up. He has added three volunteer assistant coaches with former South Alabama quarterback Dallas Davis joining the staff, as well as ex-Jags wide receiver Sam Harris and Matt Hall.

And it's no accident that two other new coaches played high school ball at region rivals Spanish Fort and Blount.

But the biggest addition to the staff might just be veteran defensive coordinator Ham Barnett, the former Cottage Hill Christian head coach and of late Theodore's defensive coordinator, who replaces David Stapleton, now on the staff at Bay-side Academy.

"He's going to free me up to be a better head coach," said Mask of Barnett. "All these moves are in addition to the great staff that we already had, so we just understand that we knew what we were getting into (with the move up in class and the rigors of the schedule)."

Coaching moves aside, the players still have to play the game and it'll all start with 6-foot-2, 200-pound senior quarterback J Greene. And yes, his first name is simply

the letter J.

"He's going to have a great year," said Mask of Greene. "People forget that (before last season) the last time J had played a down of football was in the ninth. He transferred here in the 10th grade from UMS and didn't play at all that year."

Greene was hobbled by leg injuries for most of 2018 after getting hurt in a hard-fought 17-7 win at Baldwin County in the third game.

He's back healthy now and more experienced and will get plenty of help in the backfield from all-world senior running back Jordon Ingram (6-1, 195).

"I think he's the best in the region," Mask said of Ingram.

Iowa commit Reginald Bracy (6-1, 200), the starting safety, will also share some carries, while the receiving corps is absolutely loaded with senior Kenny Brown (6-2, 185) and juniors Will Passeau and Javonte Graves-Billups (5-10, 170) all retuning.

The offensive line will be the strength of the team, with massive sophomore newcomer Lucas Taylor (6-4, 315) at one tackle, returning starter senior Brady Ward (6-7, 310) at the other, junior guard Peyton Ma-

ples (6-2, 270) and junior center Ivan Shultz (6-3, 290), who started at guard last season.

Seniors Lukas Hodges and Zack Rihner, who both saw a lot of playing time last year, are also in the mix as part of the team depth Mask so desperately sought to improve.

Defensively, Auburn commit Daniel Foster-Allen (6-4, 250) will be one defensive end, while Robert Johnson will man the other. Junior nose tackle Devin Manigault (6-4, 285) is also back, with juniors Trey Parker (5-11, 180) and William Coleman (6-0, 241) primed to also contribute on the D-line.

Senior linebackers Mills Hensley (5-10, 180), Trey Bellamy (6-0, 195) and Harris Sankey are all back, as is junior cornerback Zack Gray (5-8, 150) and running mate senior Julian Little (6-0, 180).

"The best teams in this region though are the ones that play really good defense," said Mask. "I think all the offenses are going to be OK, but it still boils down to who can play the best defense."

"In 5A we could get away with just having better athletes. But in 6A everybody's got good athletes."

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