

MC gathers talent,

By Mike Christensen

Mississippi College's football team returns 39 lettermen and 16 starters, plus the kicker/punter, from last season. The Choctaws have a senior quarterback who was all-conference in 2018. Coach John Bland says the 2019 recruiting class might be the best in his six years at the helm.

"It's the most talented team we've had," Bland said. "We've got more depth than we've ever had."

Choctaws fans are anxious to see if that talent and depth on the roster translates to wins on the field. MC went 3-7 in 2018 and 1-6 in the Gulf South Conference, one of the toughest leagues in NCAA Division II. The GSC produced the national champion in 2018 for the twelfth time. MC has won just three conference games since it returned to D-II in 2014 and last had a winning season in 2009 in Division III.

"We've gone toe-to-toe with the best in our league," Bland said. "We scored 42 points against Valdosta State last year [in a 63-42 loss], and they went on to win the national championship. They were the best team in the country, and we were right there with them most of the game. The kids know that."

"The goal is not just to be close in those games but to win those games. We feel like we're building that kind of confidence and creating that kind of culture."

The season opener is Saturday (September 7) against Division I Alcorn State in Lorman. The home opener is September 14 vs. Albany State.

The centerpiece for 2019 is quarterback Detric Hawthorn, who transferred in last year from Jones County Junior College, took the controls of MC's triple-option offense and produced over 1,500 total yards and 13 touchdowns.

"He's really having a great [fall] camp," Bland said two weeks before the opening game. "He has stepped up in a leadership role. His confidence in the offense is up. He's been everything we were hoping for."

Aaron Feazelle, a redshirt junior with playing experience, backs up Hawthorn.

This will be MC's second season running offensive coordinator Tommy Laurendine's triple-option system. Seven starters are back on that side of the ball, including second-team All-GSC tackle Cordell Birge (6 feet 2, 335 pounds) and two other linemen.

"We're way ahead of where we were last year at this time on offense," Bland said. "Still, you gotta go out and make plays."

Running backs Ja'Mori Mark (393 yards, five TDs) and Drew Croegart return, and Bland is high on several backfield recruits, including former Pearl High star Jordan Wright, a trans-

fer from D-I Louisiana-Lafayette. Cote Rotenberry, a 5-8, 170-pound burner who made 17 catches in 2018, is the top returning receiver.

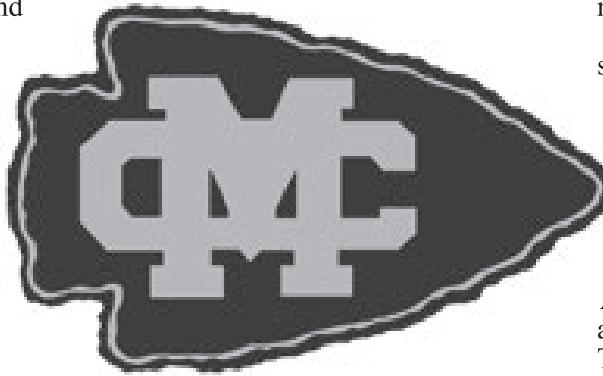
Tony Gilbert, a veteran coach who previously worked at Stephen F. Austin, came in as the new defensive coordinator in the spring.

"This state produces some of the best football players in the country, and I cannot wait to get to work on bringing them to this special place,"



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Mississippi College opens its season on the road on September 7 against Alcorn State, with its hope opener set for September 14 against Albany State.



Gilbert said in the school release announcing his hire.

"He's brought a lot of energy," Bland said. "He's done a super job with the kids on that side. I think we'll see some big things from the defensive side this fall."

MC yielded 28 or more points in seven games in 2018 and lost six of them.

Turner Rotenberry, a preseason All-GSC pick, is one of five secondary starters back from last season. The senior had 48 tackles and four