

Eagles tired of losing, but face big obstacles

By Mike Lee
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The Goldthwaite Eagles are tired of losing.

For longtime, casual observers of Goldthwaite football, such a statement might seem out of place. Historically, the Eagles have won big -- with four state championships between 1985 and 2009, plus a school-record 14-year playoff streak from 2004-2017.

But as they open the 2020 season, the Eagles are trying to free themselves from the shackles of losing. Goldthwaite opens this season having lost 21 of 24 games dating to 2017. During those 24 games, the Eagles have been outscored by an average of 38-11.

"I've gotten my belly full of losing. A lot of the other guys feel the same way," senior lineman Slade Sutherland said. "The core of this team, they've worked harder than I've seen any high school guys work. They're ready to make a change."

Led by a dozen or so juniors, a group of Goldthwaite players worked out together on their own during the COVID-19 pandemic that shut down Texas high school sports from March-May. They continued to work out during the summer after UIL strength and conditioning programs resumed June 8.

Because of low numbers in the program, many of these juniors have played on the varsity since they were freshmen. They won back-to-back district championships in middle school, but they're 3-17 so far in high school. Forced to play under the Friday Night Lights while they were freshmen and sophomores was the equivalent of playing on the varsity when they should have been on the JV.

Now, though, they're juniors. They're finally upperclassmen. And they're ready to see more wins for all their hard work.

"It's definitely time to start winning," said junior quarterback Jackson Patrick, a varsity starter from Day 1 of his freshman year -- barring injury. "I feel like we've improved as far as our maturity and in the weight room. We had a good turnout at the offseason workouts. I feel good about the season."

The Eagles face some tough obstacles. Despite strong numbers in the junior class, they still have only four seniors in Sutherland, running back Angel Morales, lineman Scott McCoy and newcomer Deon Oosthuizen. Despite being older this season, the Eagles will still have to dip into their sophomore and freshman classes to fill out a varsity roster.

Another obstacle is the new District

4-2A Division I, of which Goldthwaite is a member. It's arguably as tough as any 2A district in the state, starting with No. 4-ranked Cisco and No. 10 San Saba, according to texasfootball.com preseason rankings. Cisco dropped from Class 3A, where it appeared in five state championship games from 2002-2013. San Saba is 27-2 over the last two seasons, including the two most-lopsided wins in its 102-game rivalry with Goldthwaite.

The other three teams in District 4-2A -- Coleman, De Leon and Winters -- beat Goldthwaite by a combined 89-13 last year.

Clearly, the Eagles have a lot of catching up to do.

"In a tough district like ours, you have to bring your 'A' game every week. You can't have any slip-ups," said Keith Virdell, Goldthwaite's second-year head coach. "We're fortunate to be in a tough district because, if we make the playoffs, we've already faced some of the best teams in the state."

Virdell's first rebuilding goal is to get the Eagles back in the playoffs after a two-year absence. He sees advantages of his team being in the second season with the same offense and defense.

"Even the players we've moved to new positions this year, they've picked up on it quickly because they have a better understanding of the offense and defense," Virdell said. "They went about their football skill workouts this summer with more confidence."

Virdell acknowledges his team's obvious weaknesses -- a lack of seniors, and therefore, a lack of depth.

"We graduated nine seniors last year, and we're following that up with a small senior class. That means we need some young kids to step up. We have to stay healthy, and we have to win the turnover ratio. Those things are always big keys," the coach said.

"Another big key is seeing what our young kids can do when we get on the field. That will allow us to move some of our veteran players around to where we'll need them most," Virdell said.

The Eagles have to be more productive in Virdell's Slot-T offense that relies on power and misdirection runs and play-action passes that catch the defense off guard. Goldthwaite last year averaged 15 points and 228 total yards per game, which in today's fast-paced world of football isn't enough to win many games.

"We have to be more consistent on offense," Virdell said. "We moved the ball in most of our games last year, but we'd follow up two good plays with a negative play



Jackson Patrick, Aaron Anzua

or a penalty. We have to keep the chains moving."

Patrick returns after starting the final seven games last year at quarterback. The 160-pound junior led the Eagles in rushing with 428 yards and in passing with 308 yards. Goldthwaite has two veteran tight ends in juniors Cason Guthrie, who caught three touchdown passes last year, and Mitchel Hopper. The 5-foot-11, 185-pound Hopper could move into the interior line.

The Eagles will have two new wide receivers in juniors Cole Hermesmeier, who was injured last season, and Kyler Shelton.

Junior Dusty Partin returns at slotback, where he averaged 7.3 yards per carry and scored three TDs last season. Morales and junior Seth Gardner are the projected fullbacks while junior Aaron Anzua (5-8, 165), a starting lineman last year, has moved to tailback.

The offensive line returns Sutherland (6-1, 180), two-year starter Kody Roberts (5-9, 175) and consistent junior Saul Vaquera (5-6, 202). Senior Scott McCoy (5-11 220) adds size to the line mix. Junior Calix Mensch (6-0, 250), sophomore A.J. McCoy (6-1, 255) and freshman Quentin Oosthuizen (6-3, 240) are the top line prospects.

"We're more familiar with what we're trying to accomplish on offense," Patrick said. "I think we'll be more versatile, more balanced with the run and the pass this year. We've got to make plays when the opportunities are there."

Defensively last year, the Eagles struggled against opponents with size and strength up front. A few months in Virdell's weightlifting program this past offseason should help.

"Mitchel Hopper and Cason Guthrie played every down up front last year," said Erik Edwards, the Eagles' second-year defensive coordinator. "We're bigger up front on defense, but we're not as experienced as last year. A lot depends on what the younger players can do."

"We have a chance to have a solid defense if some young kids step up, and we can get everybody in the right spots."

Hopper logged 58 tackles at linebacker last year while the 6-1, 170-pound Guthrie made 36 stops in the line.

Vaquera also returns in the defensive line, and help will come from Mensch, Scott McCoy, A.J. McCoy, Quentin Oosthuizen, and junior Jacob Valdez (5-9, 260).

Roberts, who made 72 tackles last year, and Hopper return at linebacker. Sutherland and Anzua have experience at defensive end, as does Partin, who likely will move to the secondary.

The secondary returns Patrick, who made 75 tackles last year, along with Morales, who had 44 stops in 2019. If Partin joins the secondary, he'll add speed and athleticism. Gardner and Hermesmeier are secondary prospects.

Despite the small senior class and the tough district, Virdell likes his team's chemistry. "A lot of these kids hang out together and work out together. There's a lot to be said for a cohesive group," the coach said.

Sutherland agreed.

"I wish we had more seniors, but we have a good enough connection," he said. "We feel more like a team instead of juniors and seniors. I'm excited. I'm glad to get to play football."