

Veteran group seeks to end Eagles' skid

By Mike Lee
Eagle Contributor

They once were a group of 16 football players that won back-to-back district championships in middle school. But through high school, they've experienced the growing pains of three consecutive losing seasons while playing against older players. Attrition and injuries have reduced the group to a dozen.

Now, they're seniors and they have a big job ahead of them – trying to get the once-proud Goldthwaite football program out of its longest losing skid in 45 years and return the four-time state champion Eagles to their winning ways of decades past.

"Now that they're seniors and no one's in front of them, they feel like it's their team," Goldthwaite head coach Keith Virdell said. "The biggest deal heading into this season is having that group take the reins of leadership. You can see it in the way they run drills with no directions and how they help the younger players in practice."

Although Goldthwaite has made the playoffs twice in the last four seasons, the Eagles have posted a losing record in each of those seasons – 4-7 in 2017, 1-9 in 2018, 2-8 in 2019, and 3-8 in 2020. That's the longest streak of losing seasons for Goldthwaite football since 1972-1975. It has been a long fall for a program that won four state championships between 1985 and 2009 – and made the playoffs 14 consecutive years from 2004-2017.

Virdell is entering his third season as head coach, but he just completed his first full offseason with the players. Test results prove the players are bigger, faster and stronger. The challenge is taking those results to the playing field on Friday nights.

"What you can lift and how fast you can run look good hanging on the wall. But we've got to make it show up on the field," Virdell said. "The most valuable thing about the offseason work is the players see their improvement, and that gives them confidence."

The Eagles produced a glimmer of hope in the final two games of 2020. They beat De Leon 47-43 in a dramatic come-from-ahead, then come-from-behind win to earn a playoff berth. Then in bidistrict, No. 4 seed Goldthwaite led No. 1 seed Hawley 20-19 at the half before falling 34-20 in a respectable showing.

"The kids finally realized what they were capable of doing," Virdell said of the 2020 finish. "The week after we played Hawley, they beat Sundown by the same score they beat us. We played just as well as a team in the second round. It showed our kids they're capable of being in the second round and



winning one of those games."

Virdell hasn't put any playoff expectations on this year's team, focusing instead on the process for success.

"I'm more concerned with the day-to-day operations," the coach said. "Are we getting after it in the weight room the way we need to? Are we practicing the way we need to? Are we learning the material the way we need to?"

"If we do those things correctly, there's no reason we shouldn't be in the playoffs."

District 4-2A Division I will provide a tough challenge. Cisco, a state quarterfinalist last year, is ranked No. 5 in the state. San Saba, with 35 wins over the last three seasons, is ranked No. 17. Coleman and Winters both beat Goldthwaite by double-digit margins last year. The Eagles will have to beat at least one of those teams to make the playoffs again.

Goldthwaite, though, is the most experienced team in the district with 17 returning starters.

Offensively, quarterback Jackson Patrick rushed for 948 yards and 12 touchdowns as a junior last year in Goldthwaite's Slot-T offense. Returning running backs Seth Gardner and Aaron Anzua combined for 775 yards and five TDs rushing. Newcomers Lane Evans and Luke Sanderson add backfield depth.

The passing offense wasn't as productive last year as the 5-foot-8 Patrick completed 43 percent of his attempts for 499 yards, seven TDs and seven interceptions. Tight end Cason Guthrie, a 6-2, 190-pound senior, is the top returning receiver with 13 catches last year. The Eagles hope to get more production from other receivers, including seniors Bryson Owen (6-2, 175) and Adrean Martinez, junior Carsyn Campbell, sophomore Rylan Wiedebusch, and Sanderson.

"We were not as effective throwing last year as we need to be," Virdell said. "We need to be more consistent in getting first downs and avoiding three-and-out possessions. We need to pass when it's to our advantage, not when it's third-and-15."

The interior line returns four starters in seniors Kody Roberts (5-10, 210), Mitchel Hopper (5-11, 190) and Saul Vaquera (5-6, 212); along with junior A.J. McCoy (6-2, 295). Junior Hayden Fletcher (5-10, 220) or sophomore AJ Wetzig (6-2, 230) will fill the one vacant spot in the line.

The Eagles averaged a modest 19.5 points and 270 total yards per game last season.

Defensively, the Eagles must improve a unit that last year allowed 31.5 points and 348 yards per game.

"We have to get better at tackling and be

better on third down," Virdell said of his defense. "A lot of times last year, we had players in the right spots, but we didn't make the tackle. That has been a priority in practice."

"There were times last year when a team drove 70 yards against us to score, and 60 of those yards were on third down. Any defensive goals go out the window if you can't get off the field on third down."

Goldthwaite's defensive front returns McCoy at nose guard and Vaquera at tackle. The other tackle spot will be filled by Fletcher, Wetzig, 325-pound senior Jacob Valdez or 200-pound junior Garren Higginbotham.

Hopper, who made 95 tackles last year, and Roberts, who had 85 stops, return at inside linebacker spots. Guthrie returns at outside linebacker after logging 75 tackles last year, and he'll be joined by newcomers Wiedebusch and Evans.

Gardner and Campbell return at cornerback after combining for 64 tackles last year, and they'll be joined by Martinez and newcomer Mason Reven.

Patrick returns at safety, where he led the team in tackles last year with 111 and in interceptions with two. Anzua also returns at safety, and they will get help from Sanderson.

On special teams, Vaquera returns at kicker and Patrick at punter.

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