

Top talent returns for Wildcats, but success this season rests on development of 1st-year players

*For GCHS
to reach goals,
young guns
will have to
mature
quickly and
on the fly*

By **STAN CALDWELL**
and **RUSSELL TURNER**

Two seasons without a playoff appearance is two seasons too many for Greene County football, and the Wildcats are set on getting back to where they believe they belong in 2022.

“We’ve talked about our team goals here, and I think anything less than top two in our division will be something of a letdown for us, because of the history here,” said Wildcat head coach Michael King, who enters his second season in his second stint as the Greene County coach.

King has settled in after a somewhat tumultuous beginning to the 2021 season. Offensive coordinator Rotch Dungan entered the preseason as the head coach after guiding the Wildcats through the 2020 season. But several weeks before the season opener, King took over as head coach to allow Dungan to focus on some family health issues. The move made sense on two fronts, as it brought King back to a job he'd done well for three seasons as head coach following the retirement of longtime coach Johnny Ainsworth, and it allowed Dungan to stay on with the Wildcats as co-offensive coordinator and offensive line coach.

King had gone 28-10 as head coach from 2017-19, with Class 4A playoff appearances all three seasons, so his return as the head man was well-received by the Wildcat faithful.

Still, 2021 saw the team

suffer some growing pains. Greene County finished 4-6 overall and 1-3 in Region 8-4A and was the odd team out in a three-way tie for the third and fourth playoff spots in the region.

"The transition was smooth, but we took some lumps," said King. "It was one of those situations at the end, where if you win you're in, but if you lose, you need help, and we didn't get that."

“We opened up with a forfeit (because of Covid 19) that hurt us. We were supposed to play Vancleave, but we didn’t get to play that game, and I think we were behind from that point on. And after having a lot of success, it wasn’t easy to take.”

But, that was a different year and a different team, and this group of Wildcats is looking to get back on track as a 4A contender in 2022. In order for that to happen, a lot of new faces and young players are going to have to step up as they gain much-needed experience on the fly.

The Wildcats boast only seven seniors on the roster and a couple of them are making their first appearances this season.

"We don't have many seniors, but we have some good leaders in that group," King said recently. "And, when you have a lot of freshmen and sophomores that are being called on to play a lot, you need that."

"Of course, some of those young guys have to step up and lead and I think we have kids that are going to do that. Several already have and that is great to see."

That leadership is already being tested as the Wildcats were outshined in the jamboree by the defending 4A state champs from Columbia and took a lopsided loss at the hands of Vancleave in Friday night's opener. There were plenty of bright spots in both of those games, but those things are hard to see for young players and King and his coaching staff will need all the help they can get from those leaders on the



Photo by BRAD CROWE / Special to the Herald

Greene County High School senior Kaden 'K.J.' Miller is shown getting outside defenders en route to a 53-yard touchdown run at Columbia in the Wildcats' season-opening jamboree. Miller, who has drawn the attention of collegiate coaches, is expected to be one of the top playmakers for GCHS this season.

team to keep the Cats moving forward in the face of a rugged non-region schedule over the next several weeks.

"We've scheduled some strong competition this season with some stout 5A and 6A school, as well as a solid-looking Perry Central team," King said. "We expect there will be some growing pains and we've felt some of that already. But at the end of the day, we know that is what will prepare us to reach our ultimate goals later in the year."

King said another benefit of the schedule that lies ahead is that his team will see a lot of different styles of play on both sides of the ball. That, he said, matches up well with a region slate that fea-

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Photo by BRAD CROWE / Special to the Herald

Senior defensive end Luke Barfield is shown bringing Columbia running back to the ground during jamboree action against the reigning 4A State Champions on Aug. 9 at Walter Payton Field. Barfield is one of just a handful of seniors on the Cats' 2022 roster, but is heralded by coaches as a team leader who gives 100 percent effort in games and every day in practice.

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