

2023

High School and College

FOOTBALL PREVIEW

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**Swansea QB
Jacob Harper
grows into role**

And a comprehensive look at 14
Chronicle Country schools as they
get ready for the 2023 season



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2023 FOOTBALL PREVIEW

Every time I think of high school football, I think of the line in Jason Isbell's song "Speed Trap Town".

"It's a boy's last dream and a man's first loss."

It feels like the perfect encapsulation of how high school football, particularly in the South, feels every Friday night in the fall. Most of my favorite sports memories are from going to high school football games with my dad in the small town of Jamestown, Tennessee. The entire town takes the night off for home games and countless people travel to road games. It creates a communal sports experience more unique than any college or professional sports environment. It gives smaller towns, places that refer to themselves as towns and not "markets", a team to rally behind and pull for.

High school football season is a special thing. One game, you might see a future South Carolina Gamecock dazzle and amaze crowds with incredible athletic ability. The other, you can see a future accountant, church leader or school teacher play the game of their life in a night they'll always remember.

Which is why we at the Chronicle put our energy into pulling together an annual Lexington County High School Football Preview.

I talked to every head coach for every 11-man varsity team in the county and went by countless practices to help get you ready for this season. Whether it's about the returning starters for Northside Christian or county teams trying to dethrone mighty Dutch Fork, this has everything

you need to guide you through high school football in Lexington County.

We also took a close look at three high level college football players to watch this season that got their high school starts right here in Lexington County as well as a closer look into our 2023 cover athlete, Swansea quarterback Jacob Harper.

I've had a blast putting this together and hope you enjoy reading about your alma mater, a relative or even the rival school you've cheered against for decades. I'll see you all underneath the Friday night lights!

**Elijah
Campbell**
Sports
Editor



Jacob Harper's growth readies him for opportunity at Swansea

BY ELIJAH CAMPBELL

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This year's cover athlete was selected by an online reader poll that received more than 3,300 votes.

Jacob Harper was a freshman on the Swansea High School football team back in 2021. The plan was for him to play on the varsity team but learn from the upperclassmen and prepare himself for the challenge of being "the guy" at quarterback in the coming years.

But an injury to the starting quarterback in the middle of the season against Fox Creek thrust a young Harper into action and as a freshman with minimal football experience, he was tasked with running the offense of the varsity football team at its most important position.

Harper got instant support from his older teammates in the huddle despite the tough circumstances that were ahead of them.

"I've known them for a while, since I was a little kid," Harper recalled. "I guess they were excited for me to be out there. But at the same time, losing a senior quarterback is also damaging."

The Tigers finished that season at 2-7 and missed the playoffs.

Going into his sophomore year, Harper was slated to be the starter. He still took his lumps and had to face plenty of adversity in a tough region that is led by teams like Gilbert and Brookland-Cayce.

Tigers head coach Brent Wilder has noticed the toughness Harper has displayed during a very trying stretch of football that has experienced its fair share of growing pains.

"He got thrown into a pretty tough situation early, having to play as a freshman some because of injury," Wilder said. "And then last year, as a sophomore, he's a tough kid, he took some licks. We didn't really have a backup quarterback so every time he got hit, you were holding your breath a little bit. But he was a tough kid, never came out and he just battled through."

The Tigers won only three games last year, none in region play, and missed out on the playoffs once again.

As a freshman, Harper stood at 5'10". Going into his junior season, he grew and filled out and now stands at 6'4".

The growth along with the full season of starting



PHOTOS BY THOMAS HAMMOND

experience he gained as a sophomore gives Wilder confidence that Harper can take the next step as a player.

"Sometimes in our profession when you got kids this age, the turn of the calendar is the best thing that can happen to them," Wilder said. "Just getting older and their bodies are filling out and maturing and doing those types of things. He was a 5'10" freshman and now he's 6'4" so just seeing his body progress, his work ethic in the weight room and then his attention to detail and being here every day this summer and doing all those types of things that means to be a leader."

The attention to detail that Wilder alluded to is another element that can take Harper to the next level. Looking the part and being physically gifted is one thing, but at the quarterback position, you're in charge of the entire offense and the game instantly becomes more cerebral. Harper has adapted to that

element of the game by the way he watches film and prepares.

"I feel like I've been able to build more, been able to read the defense a whole lot," Harper said.

Wilder has worked with Harper this summer on some of the smaller details of his position to make him as fundamentally sound as possible, as well as adding an extra element to his game to make him tougher to defend against.

"He's really tried to work hard this off-season on quickening his release, doing some of those types of things, the finer points," Wilder said. "Sometimes last year, it was just making sure he knew the offense and could go out there in a game and manage the huddle and manage what we need him to do. He's got such a better grasp of what we're doing there, so now it's just trying to fix some of the mechanical things."

"We're also going to probably involve him a little more in the run game this year because he's older and a little more filled out," the coach added. "He's not a blazer by any stretch of the imagination but he can manage a game and do the types of things we need. He does a good job scrambling in practice when he feels he's not forcing the ball in like he did when he was younger and taking what the defense gives him."

With the strides he's taken, Harper will now look to lead his team to the playoffs.

The Tigers will also get the chance to play on television against the kings of the region, the Gilbert Indians Oct. 6, in Fox 57's Friday Night Rivals game. It's an opportunity for Swansea and Harper to display the growth and all the tough lessons learned over the last two years on a big stage.

"I'm just ready to compete and beat 'em," Harper said. "It'll be a fun game underneath the Friday night lights on TV."

It certainly isn't an easy task, but the goal now will be to try to contend for a higher finish in region play than they have the last few years. It's a goal that Harper feels confident that he and his team, filled with fellow juniors who make up a large portion of the roster, can accomplish.

"It's just the commitment of everybody," Harper said. "Everybody has put in hard work in the weight room and on the field. It's been a whole lot better than what I've seen in the past few years at Swansea."

Airport heads in a different direction with new head coach

BY ELIJAH CAMPBELL

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New head coach Shane Fidler is looking to implement a winning culture at Airport. Fidler takes over a squad that finished 2-8 last season and went winless in Region IV 4A.

The Eagles' only wins came against Butler (Augusta, Ga.) at home and Fox Creek from North Augusta on the road.

Offense

The offensive line will be the strength for Airport's attack this season. Led by right tackle Dylan Barbrey (Appalachian State commit), the unit returns a good amount of experience, size and speed. Senior John Homeier has experience at playing both tackle and guard and is expected to be a versatile piece on the line. Sophomore Parker Hudson saw a lot of action at center last season and returns with a full season of experience under his belt. Junior Cooper Langford will also bring some starting experience at the guard position. According to Fidler, the team is still trying to find that reliable fifth offensive lineman to round out the group.

When it comes to the skill positions, Fidler believes his team has some potential. Tight end Harry Patterson doesn't have a ton of experience but is described as having potential to contribute. The main wide receiver is expected to be junior Avery Jones. Fidler describes Jones as the offensive catalyst. With the departure of main offensive weapon Apollos Cook (Duke), Jones and Patterson will look to have breakout seasons in the pass catching department.

Running back Amari Lewis returns this season after running for 96 yards last season and will look to take a big step forward. Fidler said that Lewis won the team's off-season pound for



CHRIS RECORD | GOFLASHWIN

With an increased role out of the backfield and a solid offensive line ahead of him, expect a breakout year from running back Amari Lewis.

pound weightlifting competition. As a member of the track and field team, Lewis possesses solid speed and with the work he's put in the weight room and with some of the offensive line talent, could be a breakout candidate.

At quarterback, the Eagles will be led by senior Jesse Ray Hoover. Hoover is described by Fidler as a "lefty slinger who's fun to coach". It'll be Hoover's first full season starting and will be a big key to the Airport offense.

Defense

On the defensive line, Jason Bowman returns as a senior with quality experience. The rest of the defensive line isn't quite set and Fidler said there will be some mixing and matching, with players fighting for starting spots to play alongside Bowman.

Per Fidler, the linebacking group is the strength of the defense even if it isn't necessarily the deepest unit. Junior Bryant Cherry and senior Jacobi Cullum will start the season at inside linebacker. Brendan Powe, Trey Neil and Montrelle Keys will all three be battling for the two starting outside linebacker spots.

Kelby Stroman has impressed the coaching staff at the corner position as a transfer from Aiken. Fidler said that Stroman's toughness, athleticism and the swagger he brings to the table is an element this team needs in order to win. Detrick Keys, who has excelled on the school's track and field team, will play the other corner position opposite Stroman. At safety, Jeremiah Gilchrest and Joel Guess will play both spots as seniors with varsity experience.

Fidler likes his defensive pieces but just wants to see them put it all together physically to give them an advantage in a tough region.

"Defensively, we feel like we got pieces and it's just a matter if we can go out there and tackle," he said. "Looking at the region, we have Aiken, South Aiken, Midland Valley Valley and North Augusta and teams are going to try and go forward on the football and especially with some of the coaching changes in the region so we got to be prepared to stop the run."

Special Teams

Sophomore Eduardo Hernandez will kick field goals and kickoffs for the Eagles this year and looks to build off his first year of varsity experience. Airport is still trying out players for punter, kick returner and punt returner positions. Fidler said that a few players are competitively battling for those spots. Patterson, the tight end, will be the long snapper.

2023 EAGLES

1 Amari Lewis	50 Heath Bernhagen
2 Brendan Powe	55 Jason Bowman
4 Edward Joseph	56 Maliexkiy Illif
6 Kelby Stroman	62 Christopher Crosland
7 Jeremiah Gilchrist	63 Terrel Gamble
8 Jesse Ray Hoover	65 Gavin Shuler
9 Charlie Jackson	66 Maddox Roark
10 Avery Jones	70 Xzavier Melton-Lewis
11 Montrelle Keys	71 Matt Mattingly Jr
12 Joshua Roberts	73 Mathis Lee
14 Kendrick Pearson	74 John Homeier
15 Jacobi Cullum	75 Cooper Langford
18 Tyler Broomfield	76 Dylan Barbrey
21 Bryant Cherry	77 Parker Hudson
25 Joel Guess	81 Will Beamer
26 Detrick Keys	82 Harry Patterson
28 Hayden Chapman	83 Shiloh Perry
30 Chris Burgess	89 Christopher Roach
32 Ayden McCauley	
35 Trey Neil	
42 Jarvis Simons	
45 Caden Watts	



2023 SCHEDULE

Aug. 18	@ Swansea
Aug. 25	Brookland-Cayce
Sept. 1	Lamar
Sept. 8	@ Lugoff Elgin
Sept. 15	Fox Creek
Sept. 22	@ Irmo
Sept. 29	@ Aiken
Oct. 6	Midland Valley
Oct. 12	@ South Aiken
Oct. 20	North Augusta
Oct. 27	BYE

Talented defense highlights hopeful 2023 campaign for Batesburg-Leesville

BY ELIJAH CAMPBELL
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The Batesburg-Leesville Panthers went 4-7 with a close loss to Newberry in the first round of the 2A playoffs last year. The playoff ticket was punched thanks to two big road region wins against Pelion (55-7) and Fox Creek (21-13).

This year, the Panthers return a large chunk from last year's team and coach Greg Lawson believes they can build upon last year and be competitive in Region III-2A.

Offense

The conversation about the Batesburg-Leesville offense begins and ends with wide receiver/quarterback/running back/offensive weapon Tucker Bolen. With the amount of ways he'll be used on offense, he'll look similar to what former Colorado and Steelers quarterback Kordell Stewart did during his career. Primarily, Bolen will play wide receiver, but he will take hand-offs out of the backfield like running back and take some direct snaps and throw some passes like a quarterback. Bolen will be one of the most versatile offensive playmakers at the 2A level.

The primary starter at quarterback will be junior Tanner Watkins. Watkins started all 11 games last year for the Panthers and has good-looking throwing mechanics and threw some good looking passes in practice.

The running game will be the main point of attack for the Panthers this season. Lawson

said that last year they discovered that the offense operated its best out of the flex bone and with the talent they have at running back and with Bolen, they were able to move the ball well enough to stick with it.

Sophomores Amadre Wooden and KD Whitt along with senior Latrez Nicholson return to take additional carries from the backfield within that flex bone offense.

At receiver, Bolen will be joined by a well seasoned corps led by Cole Price and Jamerius Clark. Clark was an all-region player at the cornerback position but Lawson praised his ability to make plays as a wide receiver.

Lawson said the Panthers return almost everybody up front on the offensive line. Senior Tanner Fulmer will start at center, sophomore Jamarcus Williams returns at tackle and junior Ty Anderson played on the line last season and comes back as well. The one loss, however, was a big loss in Patrick Swygert. Swygert was a solid player on both the offensive and defensive lines and will be playing defensive tackle at Clemson next season.

Defense

Sophomore Travis Gates will be one of the main run stoppers up front on the defensive line. He started all 11 games as a freshman last season. Gates will be joined by Shaquezius Dennis who is a senior interior defensive lineman. On the defensive end, John Sawyer started all 11 games last year as a sophomore. On the other end



ELIJAH CAMPBELL | CHRONICLE

The Panthers run through some drills during their first day of official practice.

of the line will be junior Christian Burkett. Burkett will take the position previously inhabited by Swygert.

The Panther linebacking group is led by Tanner Rikard and Jayden Waters.

The defensive secondary will feature all-region corner Clark, who is one of Batesburg-Leesville's most talented two-way players. He'll be joined in the back end of the secondary by Hansel Discua at free safety. Discua started all 11 games at free safety last year. Price will also be in the mix at the safety position.

There's still a question mark at the other corner position. Lawson said that they have several players who have played the position but they have yet to decide who to put at that spot full time. Eldred Williams and Wooden are the two players

Lawson mentioned that can play at that spot and both are also listed as running backs on the offensive side of the ball.

Just like on offense, Bolen will be all over the place in the defensive secondary. He can play both corner and safety positions and will be an important player on that side of the ball.

The secondary has plenty of varsity experience but is also young with some room to grow.

Special Teams

Senior Felipe Diaz will be both the Panther's kicker and punter this season. Lawson expects big things from Diaz this season and feels confident in

the rest of his special teams units.



2023 SCHEDULE

Aug. 18	Clinton
Aug. 25	@ Gilbert
Sept. 1	Ridge Spring-Monetta
Sept. 15	@ Newberry
Sept. 22	Chester
Sept. 29	Strom Thurmond
Oct. 6	@ Silver Bluff
Oct. 13	Fox Creek
Oct. 20	@ Pelion
Oct. 27	@ Saluda

Big trio of linemen lead way for Brookland-Cayce



PHOTO | GOFLASHWIN.COM

Bearcats wide receiver Will Young is an explosive playmaker who will be seeing some snaps at quarterback this season.

BY ELIJAH CAMPBELL

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The Brookland-Cayce Bearcats were one game away from breaking Gilbert's Region V-3A championship streak last season. The 35-21 loss in October sealed the region for Gilbert and gave Brookland-Cayce a second place finish.

The Bearcats and head coach Rusty Charpia seem to be the favorite in the region to be Gilbert's biggest challenge to another title.

Offense

The strength of the offense will be the offensive line. Charpia said he has three players on the line who are all potential college football players and all have offers. The big three Charpia mentioned are Kamden Sox, Jared Holmes and Jacory Jones, and they're the key to the entire offensive operation.

At running back, the Bearcats return all-region runner Deshawn Washington as well as Tyrone Jackson. Charpia feels confident in those two to be able to shoulder the workload.

The one position group that Charpia isn't sure of yet is quarterback. Wide receiver Will Young will more than likely start the season taking snaps at quarterback. Brogan Sox, the only returning quarterback, will have to step up and help get Young the ball out in space and utilize his athleticism.

Young, of course, is the number one wide receiver on this team but two impact transfers can help in the passing game. Jordan Boston and Jayden Rollins come to Brookland-Cayce to help out at wide receiver and Charpia is excited about his abilities to play both wideout and corner positions. They'll arguably be the most important newcomers on the team and will be expect-

ed to contribute defensively as well.

Charpia said they have about five or six other players competing for wide receiver and tight end spots but still isn't sure who will emerge as an impact player in those units.

Defense

Defensively, the Bearcats will rely on a lot of their better offensive players to play both ways. The big three on the offensive line (Kamden Sox, Jared Holmes and Jacory Jones) will be the best three players on the defensive line and unlike on offense, they'll be tasked with clogging run lanes and making sure opposing lines don't get an advantageous push. Those three players will be one of the more important trios in all of Lexington County football this season.

The linebacking unit will be led by the team's main rushers like Washington and Jackson.

In the secondary, Young will be the main player to watch and will be joined by the two impact transfers in Boston and Rollins.

Charpia claims that, like the offense, the linemen are the strength of the entire defense. The Bearcats will try to control the line of scrimmage in each contest and will make it a vital part of the team's operation on either side of the ball.

Special Teams

Punting and kicking duties will be carried out by John Mower, who also earned All-County honors this past season for his role as a defenseman on the Brookland-Cayce soccer team.

He also plays some linebacker on defense and tight end on offense but Charpia was highly complimentary on his abilities as a kicker with a powerful leg.

2023 BEARCATS

0 Tyrone Jackson	26 Divyne
1 William Young	McLaughlin
2 De'Shaun Washington	27 D'Andre Dunbar
3 David Daniels	30 Nehemiah Daniels
4 Jamorion Brown	31 David McCoy
5 Sullivan Castles	40 Thomas Donadio
6 Jaylen Garrick-Glover	41 Deandre Jones
7 Jayden Rollins	42 Davion McGill-Boykin
8 Jvonn Edwards	50 Kamden Sox
9 Brogan Sox	51 O'Bryan Leaphart
10 Jonas McCoy	55 An'Tohn Ford
11 My'Son Jones	62 Zackery Wooten
12 Isaiah Oree	66 Jaxon Bowers
13 Chris Boston	71 Jacory Jones
14 Isaiah Daniels	73 Jared Holmes
15 Bennett Plane	77 Franklin Lykes
16 Amari Rice	90 Noah Jeffcoat
17 Lavarjae Jones	99 John Allen Mower
18 Mason Springs	
19 Nick Matthews	
20 Keenan Rose	
21 Marty Miles	
22 Jimmy Thompson	
24 Jordan Boston	
25 Rylan Bullis	



2023 SCHEDULE

Aug. 18	Harding University
Aug. 25	@ Airport
Sept. 1	BYE
Sept. 8	@ AC Flora
Sept. 15	Chapin
Sept. 22	Wade Hampton
Sept. 29	Oburg-Wilkinson
Oct. 6	@ Lower Richland
Oct. 12	@ Dreher
Oct. 20	Swansea
Oct. 27	Gilbert

Chapin Eagles gearing up to compete in tough region

BY ELIJAH CAMPBELL
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The Chapin Eagles gear up for a unique challenge of a season. Their home stadium has received new artificial turf and is undergoing renovations.

The team hopes to bounce back from last season's 3-8 record and first round playoff exit against Sumter.

Offense

The Eagles offense returns quarterback Brady Albro, who coach Justin Gentry said was one of the better passers in the Lexington County area last season. Gentry makes a good point. Albro threw for 14 touchdowns and only five interceptions last season and accumulated 2,055 yards on a 63% completion rate. Albro was averaging around 205 passing yards per game he played during his first year starting as a sophomore. Gentry feels good about the progression in his game.

Gentry said the wide receiver position is "as deep as we've had in awhile" and thinks they can realistically play six or seven guys at that position. Clayton Sondergoth (35 receptions, 250 yards, 2 touchdowns) and Weldon Gunter (33 catches, 264 yards) are both return.

At tight end, Gentry said Brice Jolley has looked really good this summer. After playing behind older players the last few years, Jolley could be the team's big breakout player.

There's still some shuffling on the offensive line, leaving it as one of the biggest question marks. Sophomore Caden Muskus is considered by Gentry to be one of the bright spots for the uncertain group at left tackle. Muskus will be joined as a starter by fellow sophomore Mason Hetlinger, but no other spots seem guaranteed at this point.

At running back, Gentry really likes



ELIJAH CAMPBELL | CHRONICLE

Eagles head coach Justin Gentry said he believes quarterback Brady Albro is one of the best passers in Lexington County.

the progress that John Rossi made over the off-season. The other running back who will receive most of the carries alongside Rossi is sophomore Cole Martin. According to Gentry, a third running back to watch is Bryan Rosales. Rosales missed some practice time in August but is described by Gentry as "tough as nails."

Defense

On the defensive front, Gentry likes the book-end rushers he has at defensive end with Hayden Burriss (50 tackles, nine tackles for loss, three sacks) and Xavier Williams (23 tackles, four tackles for loss and two sacks).

The middle of the defensive line saw a lot of competition in camp. Gentry hasn't named any starters and will need some unproven players to step up and

fill positions on the interior

The biggest change for Chapin on defense is the move towards a three-linebacker look. They moved safeties Russell Gentry and Griffin Burns to the "spur" linebacker position which is generally considered to be a more hybrid type linebacker that can still handle some safety responsibilities. Tanner Short (57 tackles, ten tackles for loss) and Brogdon Ambrose (18 tackles, three tackles for loss) will play the inside linebacker positions. Gavin Stam also joins that group and had a productive season last year with 21 tackles, two tackles for a loss and an interception.

The secondary is a concern for Gentry. He said they're still figuring out who to plug in at the back end of the defense. Camden Ranieri has impressed Gentry and the staff after playing both safety and corner over the years. The

positional versatility can be a big plus for the Eagles defense and he possesses a ton of speed. Gentry even referred to him as the fastest player on the team "by far."

"He's gonna be on the field somewhere, just not sure where," Gentry said.

Gentry said Anthony Turnbow will also be a starter and complimented his talented skillset but is still not quite sure where he fits in best in their secondary whether it be safety or cornerback.

Special Teams

Last season, Chase Cline attempted a few extra points and handled some of the kickoff and punting duties. With the departure of Vincent Santostefano, he'll be asked to carry more of the burden this season.



2023 SCHEDULE

Aug. 18	Irmo
Aug. 25	Mid-Carolina
Sept. 1	@ Spring Valley
Sept. 8	@ Newberry
Sept. 15	Brookland-Cayce
Sept. 22	@ A.C. Flora
Sept. 29	@ Lexington
Oct. 13	Dutch Fork
Oct. 20	@ White Knoll
Oct. 27	River Bluff

Dutch Fork aims to reload for another 5A state championship

BY ELIJAH CAMPBELL
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The reigning 5A state champ and perennial powerhouse Dutch Fork comes into the season with a nationally prominent schedule and high hopes for another buzzsaw run through the state.

This program doesn't rebuild, they reload.

Offense

Dutch Fork starts the season with a quarterback battle between sophomores Ethan Offing and Jon Hunt. In July, head coach Tom Knotts was leaning toward Hunt as the favorite to be the signal caller going into the season.

Knotts, who has enjoyed deploying offenses with two tight ends, feels very confident about the tight end group. Cayden McFadden is a converted guard but will be one of the main tight end options. Boone Miller also has good size and both Miller and McFadden will play big roles in the passing and run blocking games.

Knotts said three players are fighting for key roles in the running game. Trenton Lodge was a main backup to current Clemson freshman Jarvis Green last year and still ran for 384 yards and more than nine yards per touch while recording four touchdowns. Lodge seems to have an edge over some of the other backs, especially after improvements in the weight room but he's getting quality competition from

Trey Starks and Maurice Anderson (who Knotts said had a great JV season). Knotts feels comfortable with all three but says Anderson is the most gifted runner while Lodge's improvement, patience and knowledge of the offense gives him a unique edge. Starks will more than likely be the third down runner.

Two year starting wide receiver Jacob Hamilton returns after an 81-yard performance last season and looks to be the leading pass catcher. Leyton Shuler was sidelined for the beginning of camp by a hamstring injury, but when healthy, will be one of the Silver Foxes' speedier receivers.

Knotts said that the offensive line is the biggest question mark on offense. They'll be led by big center Connor McGee at. The rest of the line still won't be considered small by any means. Tackle Josh Benson will have a big opportunity as a junior to secure his position at tackle and catch the attention of college scouts. Cam Myers, who played JV last year, will see time at right guard or right tackle.

Defense

According to defensive coordinator Scott Braswell, the defense will be this team's strength, especially at the defensive line and edge positions. He described Terrence Wells and Josh Smith as dynamic edge



PHOTO | GOFLASHWIN.COM

Dutch Fork wide receiver Jacob Hamilton is expected to be a bigger part of the offense this season.

rushers who will be asked to pressure quarterbacks. Jadon Cook, Jaden Johnson and Dakota Jordan (37 tackles, six for loss, last year) will anchor the defensive line. Jordan has been described by Knotts as being the strongest guy on the team. The defensive line has great size and experience.

Deon Winsley and Bryce Nutall have taken over as the main outside linebackers as seniors and look to make big jumps this season. Daniel Williams has also impressed Braswell over the summer, having developed his body and improved his speed.

In the secondary, Dutch Fork will lean heavily on two senior safeties in Tyler Jones and Peyton Betts. Robert Holliday is also expected to make an impact at cornerback after initially starting his career as a wide receiver. Junior corner Elgin Sessions will see time

at the boundary corner position. According to Braswell, former junior varsity standout Derek Smith will be the "plug and play" guy in the secondary. The versatile Smith has played at both corner and safety positions.

Special Teams

Knotts will deploy both of his quarterbacks Offing and Hunt to punt. Knotts likes to use the rugby-style punt so in order to give his punters the most room to roll to the outside, he'll use. With both being mobile enough to take off and run for a first down, Knotts believes that this will keep opposing special teams units on their toes.

When it comes to field goals, last year's starter Justin Welch returns but Joe Buetow has been more consistent in summer practices, according to Knotts, which has resulted in a battle for the starting job.

2023 SILVER FOXES

1 Justin Welch	42 George Shamburger
2 KJ Smith	43 Jarvis Jackson
3 Joseph Buetow	45 Bryce Nutall
4 Ethan Offing	46 Darold Huffman
5 Tyler Jones	47 Preston Howe
7 Elgin Sessions	49 Jakeith Jacobs
8 Jayden Westbrook	50 Raleigh Salters
9 Ron Di Pietro	51 Connor McGee
10 Chase Betts	52 Candler Morden
11 Braydon Johnson	54 Jordan Roseborough
12 Rob Holliday	55 Dakota Jordan
14 Jacob Hamilton	57 Terrence Wells
15 Matt Taffoni	59 Joey Neubaum
16 Caden Grier	62 Trent Cobb
17 Boykin Bickley	64 Camden Myers
18 Blake Cook	67 Chase Meggett
19 Jon Hunt	73 Steven Hill
21 Trey Starks	74 Josh Benson
22 Deon Winsley	76 David Roberts
23 Leyton Shuler	81 Boone Miller
25 Peyton Betts	83 Daylaun Shepard
27 Derek Smith	85 Cayden McFadden
30 Maurice Anderson	88 Ky-mani Mcleish
33 John Weed	90 Jaden Johnson
35 Grant Dupree	91 Michael Steed
36 Derrick McBride	97 Daniel Williams
37 Alexander Pelham	98 Jadon Cook
38 Carlos Sexton	99 Carl Fulmer
39 Trent Lodge	
40 Josh Smith	
41 Julian Walker	

2023 SCHEDULE

Aug. 19	@ Colquitt County
Aug. 25	Spartanburg
Sept. 1	Hough
Sept. 8	Stratford
Sept. 15	North Augusta
Sept. 22	Weddington
Oct. 6	@ White Knoll
Oct. 13	@ Chapin
Oct. 27	Lexington



Gilbert in pursuit of fifth-straight region title

BY ELIJAH CAMPBELL
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The Gilbert Indians roll into the season with momentum after a successful 10-3 campaign and appearance in the state quarterfinals before losing to eventual state champion Beaufort.

Gilbert took home the Region V-3A title for the fourth-straight season.

Offense

Gilbert returns quarterback Drake Braddock, who had a great year last year and will be looked at as one of the better quarterbacks at the 3A level. Head coach Chad Leaphart was complimentary of not only his on-field credentials, but his improved leadership.

Braddock will have plenty of places to throw the ball, with most of his receiving corps and tight ends returning. Connor Gooding returns with good size and primarily plays tight end. Chance Guthrie, Krew Morris and Matt Edwards return as well, with Guthrie and Edwards being experienced seniors. Leaphart said all four are good route runners with reliable hands.

When it comes to the running game, they're not as experienced. Jaylen Jay and Kelvin Blackwell along with "three or four other guys" will expect to see some action from the running back position as they work to identify a clear one-two punch in the backfield.

The offensive line will have big shoes to fill as well as they lose Blake Cooke, whom Leaphart describes as a "north-south" offensive lineman who made a big impact on the run game. Leaphart feels confident they can replicate the departing production, with Adam Thomas and Kal Garriss bringing size and varsity experience on the interior.



ELIJAH CAMPBELL | CHRONICLE

Gilbert quarterback Drake Braddock looks to lead the Indians' offense to another Region V-3A title.

Defense

Gilbert returns nine starters on defense but will need to replace the production of last season's leading tackler, Jordan Smith.

On the defensive line, Blackwell will be one of the main centerpieces along with Xavian Davenport and Caleb Strese. All are seniors and have plenty of experience stopping the run and rushing the passer.

Kyler Seigler will line up at middle linebacker. Leaphart praised his smarts and resilience. At outside linebacker, Gilbert will rely on three-year starter Brenden Boatwright.

In the secondary, the Indians return one of their top corners in Javonte Adams. Leaphart said that Adams, a coach's son is a smart, "heady" player. Leaphart said Adams can also play on the offensive side of the ball to add another weapon.

Smith will be tough to replace, but Leaphart feels confident in the experience of the starting group and the amount of two- and three-year starters on that side of the ball.

Special Teams

The highlight of the special teams unit is at long snapper. Leaphart said Thomas Armstrong is one of the best in the entire state.

The Indians lose last year's starting kicker, Danny Augustin, and will have to replace him with Vikram Cheema, who was on the team last season but will step into the full-time kicking role. Leaphart said he has a strong leg and is working to improve on his accuracy. He expects to be able to use him from up to 40 yards on field goal tries.

Quarterback Braddock will be in charge of the punting this season.

2023 INDIANS

1 Krew Morris	45 Gray Gunter
2 Matt Edwards	48 Jackson Taylor
3 Jaylen Jay	50 Jacob Stroud
4 Landon Browning	51 Chase Hopkins
5 Eli Mayers	52 Kyler Seigler
6 CJ Browning	53 Carson Hallman
7 Drake Braddock	54 Knox McFarland
8 Connor Gooding	55 Gavin Hall
9 Javonte Adams	56 Thomas Armstrong
10 Cooper James	58 Kyle Turpin
11 Wynn Meetze	60 Colton Travis
14 Ethan Coleman	62 Drew Hill
15 Ethan Haus	65 Aren Price
20 Jordan Brown	66 David Erskine
21 Ty'trell Smith	68 Bryson Butler
22 Javon Preston	70 Harrison Elliott
25 Trevon Williamson	71 CJ Rice
27 Demarion Brown	72 Brayden Keisler
30 Bennett Reid	73 Isaac Bruce
32 Ayden Bracey	74 Kal Garriss
38 Cole Keisler	75 Kevin Stone
40 Brenden Boatwright	77 Kennedy Harmon
41 Xavian Davenport	78 Adam Thomas
42 Caleb Strese	79 Corban Rabon
43 Austin Hucks	80 RJ Kearse
44 Kelvin Blackwell	82 Zach Laster
	83 Chandler Guthrie
	85 Vikram Cheema
	88 Chance Guthrie
	89 Ben Stogner
	99 Inman Burkett



2023 SCHEDULE

Aug. 25	Batesburg-Leesville
Sept. 1	@ South Aiken
Sept. 8	@ Pelion
Sept. 15	Lexington
Sept. 22	Saluda
Sept. 29	Lower Richland
Oct. 6	@ Swansea
Oct. 13	@ Orangeburg-Wilkinson
Oct. 20	Dreher
Oct. 27	@ Brookland-Cayce

Gray Collegiate vows to regain 2A state superiority

BY ELIJAH CAMPBELL
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The Gray Collegiate War Eagles come into the season with a chip on their shoulder. After their 2A state title defense fell short last season with an 8-4 overall record and a second round playoff exit to Saluda, they'll need to rely on the experience they've accumulated and use the athleticism and lineup versatility they have.

Head coach Adam Holmes said that the team has gone as far as adopting the motto of "R.O.T." which stands for "Regain Our Title."

Offense

When asked about the offense, Holmes immediately cited the return of some key skill position players. The War Eagles return their top receivers from last season in Zai Offord (524 receiving yards and three touchdowns) and Jamarious Lockett (376 receiving yards and six touchdowns). Holmes said both players improved over the summer and have stood out with their efforts in the weight room and in seven-on-seven. Rising junior Zion Job (69 receiving yards and one touchdown) and Conner Holmes will line up as the number three and four wide receivers

respectively.

The offensive line is led by four-year starter and Appalachian State commit JT Sowell. Holmes said he could possibly move Sowell around on the offensive line but will mostly play at the center position. Holmes expects Steven Newman to play left guard and also for Shola Erinfolami to play a bigger role on the line this season.

At running back, Gray Collegiate will lean heavily on rising juniors Caleb Ford (701 rushing yards and nine touchdowns) and BJ Montgomery (912 rushing yards and 10 touchdowns). Both runners averaged over seven yards per carry and will be a

solid one-two punch in the backfield.

The one question mark on the offense right now involves the quarterback position and who will take the reigns at the position. Sophomores Dre' Dobson and Tyler Waller are currently competing for the starting job with Dobson being the only one of the two with any varsity experience. According to Holmes, it's been a pretty even competition so far this off-season.

"Both of them have done a really good job, they're just both kind of the same mold and just kind of learning and feeling," Holmes said. "They're getting equal reps in seven-on-sevens

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so it's not like one guy's going over the other. What's great about both those two guys is that they're dual threat guys so they can both run the football real well."

The running of both quarterbacks brings a versatile element to the offense and, according to Holmes, can allow them to play additional formations with two running backs and keep defenses guessing.

An X factor for this offense will be Blaine Redmond. Redmond will take direct snaps from the wildcat formation, play halfback and be used in a plethora of ways similar to how the New Orleans Saints use Taysom Hill.

Overall, Gray Collegiate returns eight offensive starters. Even with a new look at quarterback, Holmes likes the versatility both players bring with their running ability and feels good about all the versatility his offense has.

Defense

Holmes was highly complimentary of his defense and believes that his front seven can be as good as it's ever been. His defensive line was a strength last year but this year, they've added Trequan Singleton and



War Eagles center and Appalachian State commit JT Sowell will be the feature player on both offensive and defensive lines for Gray Collegiate this year.



PHOTO | GEORGE MATSUI

The Gray Collegiate War Eagles aim to bounce back after falling short of the 2A state title last season.

Ethan Raysor. According to Holmes, Singleton is bench pressing 350 pounds and squatting 515. Carter Stevens will also be in the mix up front and is expected to be a major contributor on the defensive line.

All-State defensive end Zeb Taylor (12 tackles for loss) returns and Holmes said that he's gotten even stronger over the summer. LaMoris Holley and Charlie Scarbrough will also have a chance to make an impact on the edge. Sowell will also see some time on the interior defensive line as well as handling the center duties. Holmes is excited about the depth he has in the trenches.

At linebacker, the group will be led by Kaine Williams (team high 114 tackles, nine for loss) in the middle. Converted safety Blake Croft (102 tackles, seven for loss) is a fourth year starter who has moved into the box as a linebacker with All-State results. Sophomore Michael Boulware will have opportunities to mix in with this group of linebackers along with Redmond, the offensive jack-of-all-trades type player who plays both sides of the ball.

Justin Pauling highlights the secondary at the cornerback position and has already gotten an offer from Flori-

da A&T per Holmes. Offord and JP Sweat will man the other corners and Rilan Cunningham will actually move from the corner position over to safety.

Special Teams

The War Eagles have some contributors returning on special teams starting with long snapper Trey Craig. Croft has taken over the punting duties in the past and will continue that special teams role this season as well. Holmes said that he likes to have his punters to have some speed since they do a rugby style rollout punt.

When it comes to the return game, Offord will return punts and kicks once again this season after returning three punts and two kick-offs for scores last season. Montgomery and Lockett are also available to return punts and kicks this season as well.

Junior Gonzalez will kick field goals for the War Eagles this season. The converted soccer player was mostly kicking inside the five and in short field goal situations but this season, Holmes said he's gained strength and can expand his range.

2023 WAR EAGLES

0 Junior Gonzales	28 Michael Boulware
1 BJ Montgomery	30 Blake Croft
2 Zai Offord	32 DaVon Toney
3 Justin Pauling	33 LaMoris Holley
4 Caleb Raysor	41 William Rowe
5 Caleb Ford	50 Zeb Taylor
6 Zion Job	51 Trey Craig
7 Brady Cottingham	52 Steven Newman
8 Dre' Dopson	53 Cam Davis
9 Charlie Scarborough	54 Ethan Raysor
10 John Tyler Waller	55 Trequan "Mo" Singleton
11 Rilan Cunningham	58 Carter Stephens
12 Jamarious Lockett	60 JT Sowell
14 Conner Holmes	62 Brice Lawrimore
16 Jai Chuniesingh	65 Trentez Curry
17 Blaine Redmond	68 Jack Armstrong
21 Adien Legger	72 Nate Carson
22 JP Sweatt	75 Shola Erinfolami
25 Kaine Williams	76 Hunter Gentry



2023 SCHEDULE

Aug. 18	Christ Church Episcopal
Aug. 25	Crestwood
Sept. 1	Hammond
Sept. 8	Camden
Sept. 15	@ Eau Claire
Sept. 22	@ Mid-Carolina
Sept. 29	Columbia
Oct. 6	Fairfield Central
Oct. 13	@ Newberry
Oct. 20	@ Keenan

Irmo tries to get back into 4A state contention with young, explosive offense

ELIJAH CAMPBELL

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The Irmo Yellow Jackets want to get back to 4A championship level football. Last season was a solid one for Aaron Brand's team, but it's not where he sees them.

They went 8-4 overall and got ousted in the second round of the playoffs in a 24-22 heartbreaker to James Island in Charleston. This year, however, brings back a lot of familiar faces including some important ones on the line of scrimmage and in the backfield. With all the young talent that Irmo has, Brand thinks this year can be where they make the jump back to where they've been in the past as legitimate 4A title contenders.

Offense

The Yellow Jacket offense will be led by junior quarterback, and son of the head coach, A.J. Brand. A.J. has the tools and potential to be one of the best in the state and has already attracted the attention from division one schools.

"A.J. is the best player in Columbia," Coach Brand said. "He is a winner, he is poised, he is prepared, he's sharp, he can run and he's got a rocket. He's sometimes hard-headed, sometimes stubborn, but he knows what he wants so I can accept that in a quarterback."

At running back, Jaden Allen-Hendrix returns after an All-State season. Brand said that Allen-Hendrix has

"about 20" college football scholarship offers so far. At 6'2" and 230 pounds, he's got great size at the position to go along with his speed. Anton Jones will be back for his junior season as well at running back and can spell Allen-Hendrix for stretches if need be. Coach Brand described him as a runner who can get loose on third down and break off big runs while also being a competent pass blocker.

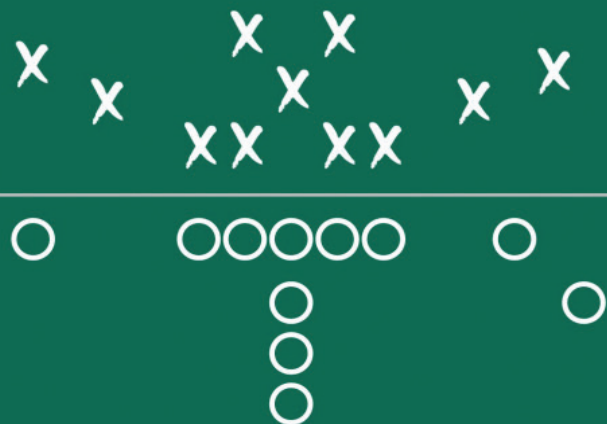
Coach Brand feels like they are solid in "three and a half or four" spots on their offensive line. One spot that he should feel very confident in, is the spot occupied by Elijah Williams. Williams is a senior who has already committed to Georgia State and is one of the best offensive line prospects in the

state of South Carolina at 6'5" and 270 pounds. However, coach Brand said that their best player on the line is Bryant Ham, who plays center and guard. Ham was All-State at center and can also play at defensive tackle. Brand said Ham doesn't have the measurables of Williams, but is a leader by example and plays above his size.

Sophomore guard Vernen Hairens returns to the offensive line after playing every down during the varsity season as a freshman. Ryan Love is a rising junior who is expected to play the whole season at center. Irmo is still trying to get the right tackle position situated and that full time spot is up in the air.

The receiver position is deep as well

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and is highlighted by one of the best sophomores in the state in Donovan Murph. Murph transferred from Our Lady of Good Counsel in Maryland and has already attracted the attention of some division one coaches in the Southeast. Coach Brand feels excited about the “formidable duo” he and A.J. can become over the next two years.

“Murph’s the real deal,” coach Brand said. “He’s got ideal size, great hand-eye coordination and is getting better every day with his route running.”

Murph is joined by Quinton Stroman and Terin Bowman who will also be playing on the outside and have developed good chemistry within the offense. One of the biggest returnees on the whole offense, however, is Telvin Smith. Smith, an All-County player, racked up 850 receiving yards last season despite missing a few games during the season due to injury.

At tight end, Caleb Alexander returns for his senior season after an All-Region campaign last year. He’s a Lenoir-Rhyne commit and along with his talent on the field, is considered by Brand to be one of the vocal leaders in the locker room and on the field.



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Yellow Jackets quarterback A.J. Brand’s dual threat ability makes him a must-watch quarterback in Lexington County this season.

Fork in a championship game and was the MVP of last year’s middle school, undefeated championship team and we really expect big things from him early.”

At linebacker, the Yellow Jackets return Jylil Favor, Demarkio Campbell and Marquell Lewis return as starters on the unit. Brand said Favor will be the leader of the unit, saying they go as he goes.

At corner, Irmo has two big pieces coming back in Isaiah McClary and Malichi Smith. The safeties will be highlighted by junior Matthew Blocker. Blocker will take one side of the field while the other safety position will be occupied by either Javeres Brown or Darius Smith. Coach Brand said he’s pleased with the depth of the secondary and feels confident in both Brown and Smith to keep up the high level of play when one comes in for the other.



ELIJAH CAMPBELL | CHRONICLE

Transfer sophomore wide receiver Donovan Murph has the potential to be one of the best receivers in the 2026 class and has two years to form an elite connection with Brand and the rest of the offense.

Special Teams

The punter position will feature a familiar face as quarterback A.J. Brand will handle those duties on fourth down this season.

Place kicker Jose Villanueva is back to kick the extra points and field goals. Coach Brand thinks Villaneuva, who has earned back-to-back All-Region kicking honors, is the best kicker in the region. Brand also feels good about back-up kicker Tucker Williams. He said Williams has worked hard to push Villaneuva and be the main guy at the position once Villaneuva leaves.

Kick-offs will be done by Will Kelly, who is also listed as a receiver and plays on the school’s soccer team as well.

2023 YELLOW JACKETS

1 Aaron Brand Jr.	25 Jaden
2 Malachi Smith	Allen-Hendrix
3 Javeres Brown	26 Amire White
4 Isiah McClary	27 Brandon
5 Marquel Lewis	Goldsboro
6 Donovan Murph	28 Jaiden Bryant
8 Caleb Alexander	29 Major Taylor
9 Telvin Smith	30 Phillip Williams Jr.
10 Demarkio Campbell	32 Makari
11 Malkiytsedeq Clay	Allen-Hendrix
12 Terin Bowman	33 Aspen Rivers
13 Bryson White	50 Ryan Love
14 Quentin Stroman Jr.	52 Bryan Ham
15 Cooper Seyfer	55 Ajon Fost
16 Xavier Montgomery	56 Ethan Gamble
17 Jylil Favor	58 Justin
18 Brandon Bell	Washington
19 Anton Jones Jr.	62 Brady Murphy
20 Maleek Miller	65 Marquis Daniels
22 Darius Goodson	71 Christopher Williams
23 Matthew Blocker	75 Vernon Hairnes
24 Johnathan Rhett	76 Bryson Moore
	80 Will Kelly
	85 Zion Oyewole
	88 Joey Albritton
	99 Jose Villaneuva

Defense

The Yellow Jackets feel great about the defensive line, starting with their two edge rushers: Xavier Montgomery and Mal Clay. Brand emphasized the importance of both of them because of their skillset of getting to the opposing quarterback and making them throw off their mark because of the pressure.

“It’s high school football, rush the quarterback!” Coach Brand said. “And that’s what we want to do. We want to make quarterbacks uncomfortable.”

At defensive tackle, Ethan Gamble and Ham are expected to be two of the better run-stoppers up front. A lot is also expected out of freshman Jaiden Bryant, who coach Brand said will get valuable reps this season and reminds him of a Calais Campbell-type player on the line.

“I’ve never seen him get blocked for a whole game in middle school,” Brand said. “Four sacks against Dutch



2023 SCHEDULE

Aug. 18	Chapin
Aug. 25	Lancaster
Sept. 1	River Bluff
Sept. 15	@ Hartsville
Sept. 22	Airport
Sept. 29	Richland Northeast
Oct. 6	@ Ridge View
Oct. 13	AC Flora
Oct. 20	@ Westwood
Oct. 27	@ Lugoff-Elgin



ELIJAH CAMPBELL | CHRONICLE

Lexington quarterback Taiden Mines and the Wildcats' offense hopes to compete with Dutch Fork and challenge them for a region title.

Dustin Curtis returns to alma mater in hopes of leading them to state title contention

BY ELIJAH CAMPBELL
elijah@lexingtonchronicle.com

New Lexington High School head coach Dustin Curtis returns to his alma mater after several successful head coaching stints at Westwood, AC Flora and Dorman. The return to his hometown has been an emotional one for Curtis who looks to bring his squad into serious Region IV-5A contention.

"It's going really well," Curtis said. "It's been a lot of fun getting kind of reintegrated into the place I grew up. A lot of it has changed but a lot of it's the same so I'm excited to be here."

Curtis takes over a squad that finished 9-3 and came in second place in Region IV-5A. After blowing out Wando 45-0, their season came to an end with a 35-13 loss to Summerville in the second round of the playoffs.

Offense

Curtis is excited about the group he has inherited, and it mostly starts with quarterback Taiden Mines who is going into his third year as the starter. Along with his abilities on the field, Mines has impressed Curtis with his leadership ability and his upbeat atti-

tude.

"He's always smiling and when you have a guy like that in your huddle, you feel pretty good about how he's going to react in various situations," Curtis said. "He's got the experience, he's got the demeanor, so anytime you can come into a season with a three-year seasoned vet at quarterback, you're going to feel pretty good."

Curtis is optimistic about his offensive line as a unit, saying they progressively got better from the spring through the summer and that they were able to make some strides. They return three starters and a little expe-

rience. Ryan McFarland looks like the leader so far in the Lexington offensive line unit according to Curtis, who applauded McFarland's strength and commitment to getting better in the weight room, saying that he's pound for pound one of the strongest players on the team.

The running game will be by committee this season. Curtis said the group had a great spring game.

Tyler Floyd and Cam Sutton have emerged as reliable tight ends for this team. Curtis described them as strong and gritty and that their baseball player mentality helps them win some of



ELIJAH CAMPBELL | CHRONICLE

The Wildcats have a solid core of pass catchers this season to support Mines and the rest of the offense.

their one-on-one match-ups.

The depth at the wide receiver position was one that Curtis expected to be a weak spot for the Wildcats but became pleasantly surprised by them over the spring and summer. Brandon Cromer is a player that Curtis thinks can be a really productive player at the next level.

“Brandon Cromer is committed to [South] Carolina for baseball, but Brandon Cromer is a really really talented wide receiver too,” Curtis said. “I’m sure baseball is his passion because he’s got a long history of his family being baseball players and I’ll pull for him every day of his life in that. But if he wanted to be a special college football player, I think he could be a special college football player. So I’m excited to see his grit, his toughness, his physicality. He brings a whole lot to the table at receiver and he’s gonna have to step in and fill the shoes of some kids that were pretty talented last year and I

think he’s ready for that challenge.”

Garrett Gallaher, Zareth Owens, transfer Jonathan Roland and Connor Holmes will be among those expected to make contributions at the receiver position as well. Curtis feels like his receiving corps can go about seven or eight deep.

Defense

Senior Dylan Bolin will anchor the defensive line and has impressed Curtis so far this off-season with his positive personality, leadership by example and commitment to getting better in the weightroom.

The strength of the Wildcat defense might be at linebacker. Christian Sexton and Montrell Byrd received high praise from their head coach. Curtis believes Sexton will be playing college football and that Byrd is the team’s best pass rusher and with his role as the “bandit” linebacker, he will have more freedom to get to the quarter-

back.

Matthew McAulay and Daniel Bryant will see play at inside linebacker. Curtis said they need to get better at being more disciplined when reading keys but bring the nastiness and an edge to the defense.

In the secondary, Jacob Gepfert and Lorenzo Katio are the main returning starters. If the linebackers and defensive line hold up to be the strength of the defense, Curtis feels like the secondary can take the defense to another level if they gel well.

Special Teams

Kicker Tyler Chavis returns for his senior year and Curtis is excited about his experience and his leg strength. He wasn’t able to participate much in the spring because of the Wildcat soccer team’s run in the playoffs but when he returned to the football team, Curtis said he looked like he had been practicing all spring and

still looked sharp.

Curtis went on to say that he’ll be using the fall practices and jamboree to determine who will get the kick and punt returner roles and that there are several players battling for that spot.



2023 SCHEDULE

Aug. 18	West Florence
Aug. 25	South Aiken
Sept. 1	@ Stratford
Sept. 8	@ Blythewood
Sept. 15	@ Gilbert
Sept. 29	Chapin
Oct. 6	@ River Bluff
Oct. 13	White Knoll
Oct. 20	Aiken
Oct. 27	@ Dutch Fork

Northside Christian looks to make leap in year three of Dean Howell era

BY ELIJAH CAMPBELL
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The Northside Christian Crusaders are going into year three of the Dean Howell era.

When Howell first took the position, he said the team played mostly a JV schedule, with mostly eighth and ninth grade players. Last season, Northside was still able to secure a winning record of 6-5 even with a team that mostly consisted of freshman and sophomores. That group also finished second in their region with a 2-1 record and earned a playoff appearance, falling in the first round to Colleton Prep Academy.

Now, the core players are all sophomores and juniors, priming the Crusaders for a jump after only losing two seniors last season and adding players from other programs.

Offense

The offensive line and tight end group is very experienced as they return all but two players.

Zach Gebhard returns at center for his junior season. On the left side of the offensive line, the Crusaders will start Hudson Shick and Landon Folks, also rising juniors. Tight end-fullback Gavin Ford will be back playing the tight end position primarily after being more of a “swing player” in past seasons.

Junior Jeff McCallum will be the starting quarterback for the third straight year, providing Northside with some stability. Howell said he’s gotten bigger and stronger within the program, allowing them to expand the offense.

The Crusaders’ biggest returner is reigning region offensive player of the year Sam Burks. Burks has lined up at running back but can also help in the passing game. Burks will be joined in



ELIJAH CAMPBELL | CHRONICLE

The Northside Christian Crusaders work on the offensive and defensive line during practice.

the backfield by Matt Diaz, the team’s second leading rusher last season.

Last year’s leading receiver, Jake Jeffrey, returns to be the main pass catching weapon. Trevor Hoffman, whom Howell refers to as “Mr. Steady,” will line up as the z-receiver. Hoffman broke out a few long touchdown receptions last season.

Do-it-all offensive player J.R. Kinard returns and has played wide receiver and running back for the Crusaders as well as filling in at quarterback.

Howell is excited about the depth of the offense and the diversity of his skill positions.

Defense

The defense sees all players from last season returning. They even added an additional corner (Dane Sundell) who played on the Northside basketball team last season.

Howell said the defensive line will be the strength of the team. The Cru-

saders return two All-Region defensive ends in Jeffrey and Shick. The rest of the defensive line will feature players from the offensive line as well, like Gebhard, Folks and Ford.

All of the safeties and corners will be players who also line up at receiver, like Kinard, Hoffman, Burks and newcomer Sundell.

Special Teams

With many players playing offense and defense, it can be hard fielding quality special teams, but Howell said the Crusaders are “getting there.”

Shick will also serve as punter and placekicker for longer field goal attempts. Howell said that he has a strong leg, and while the accuracy may not be there, he gives them a chance on long field goals.

Senior Ian McLellan will perform kickoffs and attempt all extra points and field goals from 27 yards out or fewer.

2023 CRUSADERS

0 Isaiah Beckwith	35 Tyler Shick
1 Jefferson McCallum	40 Logan Gouveia
2 JR Kinard	44 Gavin Ford
3 Sam Burks	50 Hudson Shick
4 Matt Diaz	54 Landon Folks
5 Trevor Hoffman	55 Zachary Gebhard
6 John Rogers	65 Dave Salas
7 Jake Jeffrey	68 EJ Yaroszewski
8 Jordan Martin	74 Jamison Bartlett
9 Joseph Trenbeath	77 Ian McLellan
10 John Lizewski	
11 Clayton Myers	
12 Dane Sundell	
20 James Jones	
21 Logan Taylor	
22 Preston Mills	



2023 SCHEDULE

Aug. 18	@ First Baptist School
Aug. 25	@ Greenwood Christian
Sept. 1	Orangeburg Prep
Sept. 8	Camden Military
Sept. 22	Williamsburg Academy
Oct. 6	Georgia School for Innovation and Classics
Oct. 13	Bethesda Academy
Oct. 20	Palmetto Christian Academy
Oct. 27	@ Spartanburg Christian Academy

Pelion Panthers want to get back to basics on defense to improve in 2023



ELIJAH CAMPBELL | CHRONICLE

Head coach Dann Holland hopes to get his team tackling better.

BY ELIJAH CAMPBELL
elijah@lexingtonchronicle.com

The Pelion Panthers look to improve from last season's 3-7 record.

Offense

The Panthers return nine players on offense and have added some wrinkles, including some triple offense plays to utilize their athleticism in the backfield.

The Panthers' offense has the most experience on the line. Kaleb James, Lane Brown and Blake Taylor are all going into their third year as starters.

The quarterback is Lucas New, entering his fourth year as the starter. Holland describes New as a fantastic athlete who could play at the college level.

Senior running backs Carlos Rivera and junior Michael Cottrell will be the main starters and have played meaningful snaps since they were freshman. Holland said he plans to use more two-back sets to keep defenses off balance.

At receiver, they bring back seniors Julian Tyler and Talan Gunter.

With the lack of experience returning at pass catching positions and the athleticism of New mixed with a solid offensive line and additional triple option looks, you can expect Pelion's dynamic running game to keep them competitive.

Defense

Holland said that defense is where he needs to see the most improvement. They haven't been where he wants them to be on that side of the ball for a few years, and with plenty of players com-

ing back, he needs them to make a leap to transform the defense.

"We don't have a lot of star power," Holland said. "But we've just got to be better. We've got to tackle people, we've got to create turnovers, you know, all the things that good defenses do."

Ty Brown is a middle linebacker and will play a crucial role in getting this defense set up as a senior.

The secondary will rely on some offensive players like Tyler and Gunter to play on both sides of the ball as well as some safety specialists like Ethan Osmanski, who has had brothers play in the program before him. Holland said he will have a chance to carve his own path in the Panther program as an impact safety. Hunter Rawl will play a big role in the secondary after seeing a ton of time there last year as a freshman.

Holland said the defensive line won't be huge, but they do have multi-year starters. One of the younger players on the defensive line that Holland is excited about is sophomore Jerronn Sanders. He'll bring good size, and what Holland really wants from him is to perform well enough to not have to use some of his offensive lineman on the defensive side of the ball, specifically in the hotter months of the season. Sanders will be an important X factor.

The Panthers will lean on three-year

starter Jordan Donovan at defensive end. Holland said he had a great off-season, putting on 32 pounds of muscle. His strength and intelligence make him a prime breakout candidate.

Tucker Johnson has good size for the defensive line.

Special Teams

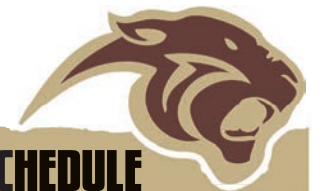
Holland prides all of his teams on special teams. He's hammered home the message that you don't always win games with special teams, but you can always lose games with special teams.

New, the Panther quarterback, is expected to do some extra point and field goal kicking. New is also one of the primary returners and has a special ability to change the game in that aspect. Holland praised the stability at the long snapper position with Todd Foster, who also is listed as a tight end.

Tyler, one of the few returning pass catchers, is expected to take over most of the punting. When it comes to kick and punt coverage, Holland plans to deploy many of the defensive players.

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2023 SCHEDULE

Aug. 18	Bethune-Bowman
Aug. 25	@ Columbia
Sept. 1	@ Eau Claire
Sept. 8	Gilbert
Sept. 22	@ Ninety Six
Sept. 29	Saluda
Oct. 6	@ Fox Creek
Oct. 13	Strom Thurmond
Oct. 20	Batesburg-Leesville
Oct. 27	@ Silver Bluff

Gators search for growth in young offense in 2023

BY ELIJAH CAMPBELL
elijah@lexingtonchronicle.com

The River Bluff Gators roll into the 2023 season after a 7-4 record and first round playoff exit last year against Carolina Forest. The Gators went 2-2 in region play which was good enough for a third-place finish in Region IV-5A.

This year, coach Blair Hardin looks to build toward moving up in the region and advancing further into the playoffs despite some youth at key positions.

Offense

The River Bluff offense is young

and will be one of the younger groups in the region. They only have one senior on the roster who plays meaningful snaps on the offensive side of the ball and will rely on a lot of the talent they have at the skill positions like quarterback, running back and pass catchers.

At quarterback, Parker Murray returns after throwing for 1,176 yards (106.9 per game) and 14 touchdowns to go along with only three interceptions. Murray is a junior this season but with a solid sophomore season starting in a competitive region, a jump in production can be expected.

Sophomore Hayden Myers will be

one of two starting running backs this year. Myers is another one of those young players (sophomore) that will be relied on for this offense to put up points. The other primary starter will be Trace Nettles. As a sophomore, Nettles carried the ball nine times for 67 yards. It appears he'll see way more action this season.

River Bluff brings back their leading receiver, Stephen Collier, after a solid sophomore campaign. He led the team in catches with 32 and in yards with 356. He was tied for the team lead in receiving touchdowns with five. Landon Shipley and Aaron Griffin (six catches for

80 yards last season) will be called upon for greater production this season at the wide receiver position to help out Collier. Landon Schultz will be the primary starter at the tight end position.

The youngest position group on offense is the offensive line. Hardin said they don't have a senior up front. Junior Pac Pitts returns on the offensive line and possesses great size, being listed at 6 '5". Joe Allende returns for his junior season and will play on the interior of the offensive line. LJ Berndt will start on the offensive line as a junior along with Cooper Simril and Alex Kirylo.

Thank you for allowing me to represent the great people of Lexington. Please contact me if I can ever be assistance.

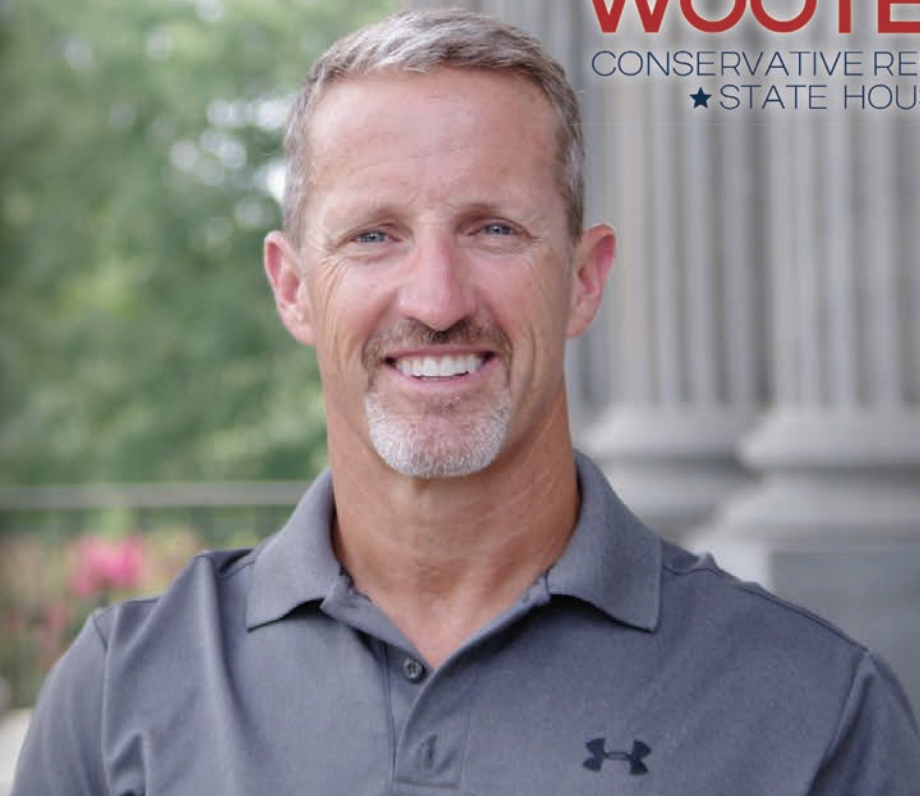
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ELIJAH CAMPBELL | CHRONICLE

Gators head coach Blair Hardin looks to rebuild an offense that only has one senior playing meaningful snaps in 2023.

Defense

In terms of experience and returning production, the defense is the polar opposite of the offense. The defense will have nine returning players that will be seniors this year, most of whom play in the box (defensive line and linebacker).

Reese Lawrence returns on the edge after a broken leg cost him the season last year. He's expected to be one of the better edge rushers in the county. Lawrence is joined on the defensive line by Alonzo Singleton (seven tackles, one for loss), Josh Szehner and Kaleb Long (seven tackles, one interception).

Hayden Cushman, Griffin Lindler (17 tackles, one for loss) and Kameron Woodruff (55 tackles, three for loss) make up the line-backing group.

At cornerback, the Gators will be led by Toriaun Leaphart (32 tackles, one for loss, three pass deflections) and Jordan Grant (21 tackles, two pass deflections, one interception). Elijah Hayes (five tackles and a fumble recovery) and Xavier Sullender.

Special Teams

The Gators return punter and kicker Tripp Bryant for his junior season. Last year, Bryant averaged 33 yards per punt and pinned nine of them inside the 20 yard line.

In the return game, Leaphart returned 11 kicks, Collier returned six and returned three. They're all expected to be involved with kick returns again this season.



CHUCK CRUMBO | GOFLASHWIN.COM

Quarterback Parker Murray posted an exceptional 14:3 touchdown-interception ratio last season.

2023 GATORS

1 Aaron Griffin	32 Griffin Lindler
2 Parker Murray	33 Reese Lawrence
3 Trace Nettles	34 Jacob Pinkney
4 Toriaun Leaphart	35 Jake Bryant
5 Stephen Collier	36 Terrell Tull
6 Caleb Hart	37 Ford Whetstone
7 Daniel Harper	38 Justin Shealey
8 Jordan Grant	41 Justin Smedley
9 Xavier Sullender	42 Kameron Woodruff
10 Brock Godfrey	43 Nathan Shuman
11 Lathan Smalls	44 Landon Anderson
12 Brayden Moore	50 Ellis Smith
13 Hayden Cushman	51 Cooper Simril
15 Elijah Hayes	52 Alex Kirylo
16 Landon Shipley	53 Landon Hudgins
17 Sam Minor	54 Jake Johnson
18 Jackson Shannon	55 Jesse Belloff
19 Alonzo Singleton	56 Pac Pitts
20 Darius Caine	57 LJ Berndt
21 Hayden Myers	58 Joe Allende
22 William Petty	59 Kaleb Long
23 Eric Johnson	60 Andrew Coe
25 Blaine Fender	61 Joshua Szehner
26 Ayden McIver	70 Bryce Noggle
27 Tripp Bryant	81 Landon Schultz
28 Luke Wheeler	82 Noah Sengupta
29 Adam McCown	83 Will Yancey
30 Walker Cartin	



2023 SCHEDULE

Aug. 18	Lugoff-Elgin
Aug. 25	@ Swansea
Sept. 1	@ Irmo
Sept. 8.	South Aiken
Sept. 22	Dorman
Sept. 29	White Knoll
Oct. 6	Lexington
Oct. 27.	@ Chapin

Youthful Tigers look to take step forward in 2023

BY ELIJAH CAMPBELL
elijah@lexingtonchronicle.com

Last season, the Tigers finished 3-7 overall and 0-5 in the region.

The winless region record kept them out of the playoffs, but with good players returning at key positions, making the playoffs and showing growth is very attainable.

Both sides of the ball will still be young. They return no more than five seniors, with one being the kicker.

Offense

The Tigers return arguably the most crucial player to the team: quarterback Jacob Harper. Harper, a junior, is going into his third year as the Tigers' starter, having seen valuable reps as a freshman and sophomore.

Sophomore Dante Caldwell will be the Tigers' starting running back, having spent last year as the top back for the JV squad. While Caldwell will get the majority of the touches, coach Brent Wilder said he's figuring out which linebackers and defensive backs might share some carries with him at the running back spot. D.J. Green might also see additional carries.

The Tigers return two young starters on the offensive line in sophomores Charlie Moody and Michael Mills. Both were thrown into the mix as freshmen and will hope to further their development and anchor the run game and pass protection.



ELIJAH CAMPBELL | CHRONICLE

Swansea head coach Brent Wilder tries to get his youthful squad to grow up fast as they face a tough 2023 schedule.

Landen Lee will start at right tackle and Juan Hernandez will get the nod at left tackle in his first year playing varsity, protecting Harper's blind-side.

The wide receiving core will be brand new. Basketball player Donnell Goodwin joined the football team and will be one of the featured receivers. Isaac Sandifer will join Goodwin in the pass game and look to be more of a contributor, as he will also play tight end. Green, one of the backup running backs, will see snaps as a receiver.

Defense

The defense will be anchored by lone senior Torna Bonnett at nose guard; he will play some four-technique. He'll be joined by Kasi-

ah Harkless-Adams at defensive end; the junior who started his freshman season didn't play as a sophomore. Wilder called Harkless-Adams one of the strongest kids he's ever coached. Jonathan Vest is another defensive lineman Wilder is excited about.

Teysean Charley and William Geddis played out of position at defensive end last season but will return to their more natural position of linebacker. Junior Jeremiah Williams is the only returning linebacker who actually played the position; he'll be relied on to start.

Wilder said Chase Alley and P.J. Larry are battling for the remaining starting linebacker spot going into the first game.

Last season, Malik Hamp-

ton primarily played special teams. This season, he'll be one of the main cornerbacks. The other starting corner will be Ahmad Johnson. Wilder considers Johnson to be one of the best JV players from last year. West Ashley transfer Jerel Wine will take over one of the safety spots.

Green will play free safety. Wilder referred to him as one of the most explosive players on the team.

Special Teams

Kicking duties will be handled by soccer player Ismael Martinez. He'll be kicking extra points, field goals as well as performing the kickoffs.

Harper, the Tiger quarterback, will be in charge of punting.

2023 TIGERS

2 Jeremiah Williams	44 P.J. Larry
3 Ahmad Johnson	50 Keiwan Jones
4 Teysean Charley	51 Torna Bonnett
5 Greyson Mack	54 Ceth Yarborough
7 Daniel Graddick	55 Bobby Matute
8 Jordan Edmond	56 Landon Lee
9 Dante Caldwell	61 Davis Livingston
10 Jacob Harper	62 Juan Hernandez
12 D.J. Green	64 Athan Vest
13 Quincy Morris	70 Logan Crider
14 Jerel Wine	71 Michael Mills
15 Logan O'Neal	72 Charlie Moody
16 Landon Cunningham	73 E.J. Perry
18 Jayvon Houser	74 Jordan Donahue
19 Malik Hampton	81 Logan Sightler
20 Chase Alley	84 James Smith
21 Donnell Goodwin	88 Isaac Sandifer
22 Colton Rish	90 Kasiah Harkless-Adams
23 Trace Selfridge	99 William Geddis
24 Ernesto Brazell	
25 Joshua Dennison	
34 Ismael Martinez	
42 Khaylil Aiken	

2023 SCHEDULE

Aug. 18	Airport
Aug. 25	River Bluff
Sept. 8	Wagener-Salley
Sept. 15	@ C.A. Johnson
Sept. 22	@ Midland Valley
Sept. 29	Dreher
Oct. 6	Gilbert
Oct. 13	@ Lower Richland
Oct. 20	@ Brookland-Cayce
Oct. 27	Orangeburg-Wilkinson



Third year starters lead White Knoll into potential darkhorse season



ELIJAH CAMPBELL | CHRONICLE

Quarterback Landon Sharpe has impressive arm talent and as a seasoned starter, leads a White Knoll offense that hopes to contend in a competitive region.

BY ELIJAH CAMPBELL
elijah@lexingtonchronicle.com

Timberwolves head coach Nicholas Pelham has been building the White Knoll program to have a breakout season this year. According to Pelham, the Timberwolves have 14 or 15 three-year starters and that the 2023 season has been three years in the making. White Knoll went 0-6 in 2020, 2-9 in 2021 and

broke out last season with a 7-4 record but finished fourth in Region IV-5A. Pelham is hoping that this experienced group can take the Timberwolves to another level and a higher region finish.

Offense

“Everything starts with our quarterback, Landon Sharpe,” Pelham said. Sharpe has been described by Pelham as also

being one of the team’s best runners and has great arm talent as a third year starter. Sharpe will go into the 2023 season as a real breakout candidate after throwing for over 2,000 yards, 25 touchdowns and rushing for five touchdowns.

Pelham is excited about the skill position players too. Tight end Hassan Lee Jr. (553 receiving yards and eight touchdowns) returns as one of Sharpe’s

best receiving targets and is a versatile offensive weapon who can be used in a variety of ways and formations. Austin Cunningham (665 receiving yards and 11 touchdowns) is another three year starter who is considered to be the team’s main deep threat and will stretch defenses. Slot receiver Evan Henderson will be the player the Timberwolves look to get the ball in space and be a reli-

2023 SCHEDULE



Aug. 18	@ Orangeburg-Wilkinson
Aug. 25	@ Spring Valley
Sept. 1	@ Colleton County
Sept. 8	Westwood
Sept. 15	South Aiken
Sept. 22	@ Lancaster
Sept. 29	@ River Bluff
Oct. 6	Dutch Fork
Oct. 13	@ Lexington
Oct. 20	Chapin

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able short yardage target.

The offensive unit Pelham said he's most excited about is the offensive line. Two years ago, Pelham said that offensive line was a "dirty word" in the program and the state of the unit was poor. Interest in even playing the position was at an all-time low but over the course of the last three years, they've built some unity and excitement at the position as they will be "10 deep" this season. This year, Pelham says the offensive line will be led by Ty Bennett, converted tight end and defensive lineman Daniel Mitchell, Mason Gravlin and Thomas Disbrow.

Defense

The Timberwolves defense will be led by outside linebacker Jaiden Kimble. Kimble is a high level athlete who has garnered division one interest with multiple offers. Pelham will rely on him to cover the whole field and stop the opposing run game as well as their screen passing game. The Timberwolves also return third year starter Demenico Banks and Connor Burgess at linebacker. Pelham considers Banks to be his best blitzer and applauded his ability to rush the passer. Outside linebacker Marcus Domenech will also return to the linebacking corps after an ACL injury last season.

The most improved player over

the course of the defensive rebuild is defensive lineman Leroy Simmons per Pelham. The White Knoll coach said Simmons has dropped from 340 pounds to 295 and expects him to have a great year. Lincoln Ilunga and Nick Pierce also return to the White Knoll defensive line along with Jaylen Gerald who can play multiple spots on the line as well as outside linebacker.

The secondary returns more three year starters like Charles Plange, who Pelham complimented his ability to keep the back end of the defense in check. At corner and strong safety, the Timberwolves will rely on brothers Caleb and Devin Geronomi. Pelham said the brothers are two of the best athletes in the whole program. The most versatile piece in the secondary looks to be Tyler Stoudemire. Stoudemire will play a little bit of nickel corner, outside linebacker and boundary corner this season.

Special Teams

White Knoll has four different players who will be long snapping this season, a position that Pelham has learned to take very seriously over the years and has made a point of emphasis. The kicking battle has still yet to be determined.

Outside linebacker Jaiden Kimble will not only be a game changer on defense, but will be the team's punter this season.



PHOTO | GOFLASHWIN.COM

Outside linebacker Jaiden Kimble gives White Knoll a high-level defensive presence.



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Former Dutch Fork WR builds off successful first year at Clemson



BY ELIJAH CAMPBELL
elijah@lexingtonchronicle.com

The Clemson Tigers have been known to produce NFL-level wide receivers. During the Dabo Swinney era, Clemson has always had explosive, play-making wide receivers. It's an all-star list, with the likes of Sammy Watkins, DeAndre Hopkins, Martavis Bryant, Amari Rodgers, Tee Higgins, Justyn Ross, Hunter Renfrow and Mike Williams highlighting the litany of receivers that became NFL draft picks and All-Pro-caliber players.

The latest leading receiver in the lineage of elite Clemson pass catchers is former Dutch Fork wide receiver Antonio Williams. At Dutch Fork, Williams won three straight championships and rarely ever lost. His senior season, he lit the world on fire, catching 80 passes for 1,569 yards (almost 20 yards per reception) and 14 touchdowns.

If you ask Williams, he'll tell you that experience helped prepare him for the challenge of playing major division one football.

"You know Coach Knotts, he's always hard on us. I think he has a similar coaching style to coach Swinney," Williams said. "It's a top tier program so in high school, I was expected to do a lot of the same stuff I'm expected to do here. So they set me up for success for sure."

Williams took his talents Upstate and in his first year, his 604 receiving yards led the team, making him the first freshman to pull that feat at Clemson since Ross did it in 2018. His 56 receptions were the most by a Tigers freshman since Artavis Scott in 2014.

But there were ups and downs for Williams and the Clemson offense. Against rival South Carolina, in a game that Clemson needed to have a shot at making the college football playoff, Williams muffed a punt and turned the ball over back to South Carolina.



MARK HOYLE | CLEMSON ATHLETICS

After leading the Clemson Tigers in receiving yards last season, former Dutch Fork wide receiver Antonio Williams will play an even bigger part in the offense with the addition of new offensive coordinator Garrett Riley.

It's a play that motivates him going into the 2023 season.

"There's definitely a chip on my shoulder," Williams said. "It was probably the lowest point I had in my freshman year. You know, in a big game like that, that's the last thing you want. You feel like you let down the older guys. So I'm coming back trying to make more plays for them and just do the most I can."

In that moment of weakness after the muffed punt, Williams said he got a

ton of support from not just friends and family, but coach Swinney as well.

The big challenge this season is to continue all the positive momentum into next year with a new quarterback in Cade Klubnik (who played in the ACC Championship and the Orange Bowl) and a new offensive coordinator in Garrett Riley, who came over from TCU after that team's improbable run to the national championship game.

Williams established a decent connection with Klubnik during the ACC Championship (three catches for 40 yards) and in the Orange Bowl (three catches for 41 yards). He's starting to develop a good relationship with Riley, whom the receiver said has helped re-energize the offense, with players on that side of the ball starting to play more freely.

"If you ask anybody on offense, he just brings a swagger around. I feel like everyone is just playing with a little more swag now," Williams said. "Cade's feeling himself, all the wide receivers are feeling themselves, the dudes in the backfield, the dudes up front, we're all feeling good and we all have something to do, playing with a chip on our shoulder for sure."

There are other challenges – adapting to a new offensive scheme, becoming a mentor to younger players like Tyler Brown and former Dutch Fork running back Jarvis Green – but the biggest is making the necessary jump in maturity and accountability. Williams said there were gaps in that part of his development last season. He's working on fixing them.

"I think as a freshman, I was just kind of immature," Williams said. "There was a lot on my plate, trying to focus on football and school at the same time. So I would show up late to class, miss class just because I was tired from trying to gain a starting position and then having to have school.

It was just a lot. But this year, I'm trying to take a step back and still focus on school for sure, because that's the main priority, but just doing both at a high level."

If Williams takes care of business on and off the field, he can elevate Clemson back into serious national title contention. Most national college football media sees the receiving group as the weakness of the offense, but if Williams can raise the floor of their production in the new offense, Clemson will contend for a spot in the College Football Playoff.

The aspirations and goals, as they are every season at Clemson under Swinney, are lofty. But one of the must-see games on the Tigers' schedule will be the rematch with South Carolina in Columbia. Not only is it a heated in-state rivalry, not only is there bad blood from South Carolina beating them in Death Valley last season, not only is there the potential for both teams to be nationally ranked and relevant going into the game, but the wide receiver-safety matchup when Clemson is on offense will pit Williams against former Irmo high school legend Nick Emmanwori, who has mentioned Williams by name when discussing players he's looking forward to facing the most.

"Me and Nick have known each other since high school," Williams said. "I didn't get to go against him in high school but we would go to the field together and work together. I've been on some trips and he's been in the same place as me. But obviously, he was one of the best freshman safeties in college last year. I'm practicing against some of the best safeties in college as well in R.J. Mickens and Andrew Mukuba. So, I feel if I can do what I need to do against them, I can do it against anybody in college."

Former White Knoll QB makes Miami (OH) QB room way more interesting in 2023

BY ELIJAH CAMPBELL
elijah@lexingtonchronicle.com

Former White Knoll dual-threat quarterback Aveon Smith spent his first two years at Miami of Ohio patiently waiting for a chance to take snaps as a starter.

He spent the first two years as the third string quarterback. It wasn't until the back-up quarterback transferred out that he finally got to move up the depth chart to become the official back-up. During that time, he had to always stay prepared because the little game experience he had wasn't enough to simulate the environment of a close college football game.

"Either we were getting blown out or the other team was getting blown out. So me getting in was cool just to get some reps in, but it didn't really prepare me," Smith said.

When starting quarterback Brett Gabbert went down with an injury late in the game against Kentucky last year, Smith came in and completed two passes for 13 yards to close out the blowout loss in Lexington. After the game, Smith got the news that he was going to be the starting quarterback for the foreseeable future as Gabbert's injury was going to keep him out longer than expected.

"It was kind of surreal because we were all on the bus and we heard he was probably going to be out for a while," Smith remembered. "I was talking to my parents and they said, 'C'mon, your time is now.' So basically, when that happened, I just tried to prepare mentally and physically in any way. I had to talk to my coaches and they told me they believed in me and they weren't going to do anything different with the offense and just wanted me to go out there and do what I've been doing in spring and fall camps."

Smith filled in nicely for most of the season. He led the team to a 6-6 record (5-4 in games he started). Against Buf-

falo, he ran for an impressive 142 yards and two rushing touchdowns in a close loss. Against Ball State, he threw for a career-high 217 yards and ran for 84 yards with a touchdown in a thrilling 18-17 win to make Miami bowl eligible.

After Gabbert came back late in the season, Smith got the start in the Bahamas Bowl, where the Redhawks lost a close game to UAB to end the season.

"No matter how low it is, there's always two different ways to face adversity. You can face it head-on or you can beat around the bush to try to shy away from it," Smith said of the season.

For example, Smith alluded to the Ball State game where he had a rough first half, completing only about 20% of his passes. He bounced back to erase a 17-6 fourth quarter deficit to win 18-17 after giving the Redhawks the lead with a 34-yard touchdown pass with less than two minutes remaining.

The ability to bounce back in adverse situations is something that's been a part of his game since high school. His former White Knoll coach Dean Howell, who now coaches at Northside Christian, noticed the same leader he coached take over at the collegiate level last season.

"He's a phenomenal human being. He's a great leader," Howell said. "He's one of those special kids because he was obviously the best player on the field and when you're the best player and the best leader and the hardest worker and all that kind of stuff, it makes everything around him better."

Smith made some history in his first season as a full-time collegiate starter. With 1,299 passing yards and 553 rushing yards, he became the first player in the history of the program to lead the team in both passing and rushing.

2023 will hold a new challenge for Smith. With Gabbert returning to the team, he'll be entrenched in the quarterback battle for the starting spot. While most quarterbacks in Smith's



PHOTO | MIAMI ATHLETICS

Former White Knoll standout Aveon Smith will battle for the starting QB spot at Miami (OH) after leading them to a Bahamas Bowl birth last season.

position transfer out to pursue guaranteed starting jobs, it was never even a thought for him. He thinks reuniting with Gabbert and embracing that quarterback competition will make both of them better in the long run.

"It's a lot better because you play better when you know you're competing and you make each other better by competing," Smith said. "We've been playing with each other for four years now so we know each other and are pretty close, pretty cool. It puts the fire in one another and that's really good because we're both getting better in doing that."

If you ask Howell who the starting quarterback for Miami of Ohio will be

next year, it's not even a tough decision.

"I think he'll win it. If it's fair, I think he'll win it and I think he'll play a bunch this year and we'll see what happens from there. ... I just really believe in him as a person which carries over to him as a football player," Howell said.

"I'm not gonna sound like a very intelligent person, but he's just got 'it'. Whatever 'it' is, you know, the really good ones have 'it' and he's got it. He's got all the natural athletic ability, he's got all that stuff but he's got the competitive nature and that desire and that drive and when he's around, good things just seem to happen."

Nick Emmanwori leads Gamecock defense into crucial 2023 season



BY ELIJAH CAMPBELL
elijah@lexingtonchronicle.com

The 2022 South Carolina football season was defined by the roll they went on to close the season. Most notably, their 63-point outburst against top-five Tennessee and a stunning upset of archrival Clemson on the road to end their chances at making the college football playoff.

The offense got a lot of publicity and attention during that stretch, and rightfully so, but the most consistent tackler on the defensive side of the ball was a true freshman fresh out of Irmo High School.

Nick Emmanwori established himself as one of the most physical and best tacklers in the entire SEC. For someone who wasn't even supposed to be a starter at the beginning of the season, he made an instant impression on South Carolina head coach Shane Beamer when he was forced to play Emmanwori during key plays on defense after an injury to starting safety RJ Roderick in the season opener against Georgia State.

"One of the impact plays from last year was when he got thrown into the battle against Georgia State before anybody thought," Beamer recalled. "And he made that tackle on fourth down, I think, and I remember standing on the sideline thinking, 'Oh crap, that's a heck of a play for a freshman.' And the next week, we go out to Arkansas, and he's making a bunch of one-on-one solo tackles against their quarterback and then you realize the moment's not too big for this kid."

In that Arkansas game, Emmanwori recorded 11 tackles.

"The Arkansas game was a little all over the place for me," Emmanwori said. "It was my first away SEC game and the stadium kind of had me like, looking around and was kind of star-struck a little bit. But when I got settled



PHOTO | SOUTH CAROLINA ATHLETICS

Former Irmo great Nick Emmanwori will be one of the undisputed leaders of the Gamecock defense after leading the team in tackles as a true freshman in 2022.

in and made my first tackle, I was just playing. I went back to my high school ways and started playing football. It's just natural instinct."

By the time the season ended, Emmanwori led the Gamecocks in tackles with 85 and was named to the first team Freshman All-American team by ESPN, Pro Football Focus and On3. He was the first South Carolina defensive freshman to earn those honors since Jadeveon Clowney did so in 2011. He was also to the conference's All-Freshman team by SEC coaches and was recognized by his team as the Co-MVP of the defense.

When it comes to Emmanwori's approach to his second season, it all comes down to locking in.

"I'm mainly more focused," Emmanwori said. "I feel like my freshman campaign was just all over the place, doing things for the first time and stuff. I'm not saying I'm a vet but I got things more under wraps now so my sopho-

more campaign should be a lot more focused, a lot better."

One big difference in the Gamecock secondary in 2023 will be the absence of star players Cam Smith and Darius Rush. Smith was drafted by the Miami Dolphins and Rush is currently competing for a roster spot with the Indianapolis Colts.

With those two gone, it will be up to safeties like Emmanwori and Spring Valley graduate DQ Smith to be the vocal leaders on the back end of the defense, especially with some of the team's cornerbacks, while talented, lack legitimate starting experience in the SEC. Emmanwori will have to use what he's learned and bestow it to some of his teammates and help elevate the defense.

"A lot of our seniors left so there's not a lot of vets on the team right now," Emmanwori explained. "So [the coaches] expect me, DQ and some other players on the team to step up even though

we're second year players. It doesn't matter how old you are, it's how you lead, how you use your voice and actions."

South Carolina is expected to take a step forward as a team this season too despite a tough schedule ahead. Emmanwori and the defense will face several elite passing offenses like Georgia and Tennessee and Emmanwori embraces those challenges. He said he's really looking forward to facing off against Texas A&M's Evan Stewart, who has NFL-level talent and is one of the best receivers in the SEC. He also mentioned being eager to face off against Georgia's Brock Bowers, who was arguably Georgia's best offensive player during their championship run last season. But the match-up that Emmanwori has a little extra juice for is the Clemson, where he'll face off against former Dutch Fork star Antonio Williams, who led the Tigers in receiving yards last year as a true freshman.

"He's a great receiver," Emmanwori said. "We have a little history and a little bit of a rivalry there."

Gamecock fans all across the state will enjoy watching Emmanwori continue to collect tackles and make his name known across the SEC but for his high school coach at Irmo, Aaron Brand, there might be some plans to honor his Irmo career and celebrate his early collegiate success.

"I've never seen anybody who just has no fear in anything in life, you know? No fear. No fear of anything," Brand said. "It's just rewarding to have a guy like that represent your program. We don't wear [Emmanwori's] No. 7 anymore because of it. We may someday. It's not retired, but we got to let it breathe a little bit and let it cool off a little bit because that 7 is still hot here. He just made so many plays and was a catalyst for the Irmo rebrand."

Go B-C Bearcats & Airport Eagles!

Thank you for the privilege of serving in the Statehouse. We've got work to do, but our best days are ahead of us. If I can ever help you, please let me know! Have a great football season!



The Town of Gaston would like to invite everyone to come join us for our **Gaston Collard and Barbeque Festivities**. The festival is every year on the first Saturday of October. The festival begins with our parade at 10am followed by live entertainment; Karaoke; free rides for the kids; vendors; crafters; exhibitors and much more.

Kitchen will be open at 11:30 with barbeque plates available containing barbeque, black eyed peas, collard greens, mac n cheese, cornbread, pound cake, lemonade or tea. Located at 131 North Carlisle Street in Gaston, SC 29053. *Come join the fun!*



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Wishing our student-athletes, their families, their coaches, and their teachers a safe and successful 2022-2023 school year and football season.

It remains my most humble honor to serve you in the State Senate. For this honor and your continued support, I offer my deepest thanks and most heartfelt appreciation.

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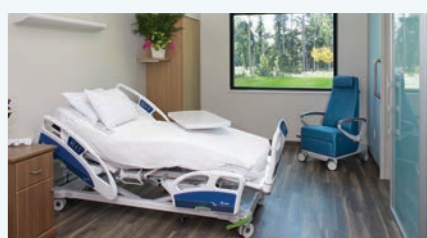
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