



Friday Night Lights

**Previewing
the 2022
high school
football
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Football on Friday nights tantalizes all your senses

They call it Friday night lights, but the lights are only a part of the lure of high school football. Still, it's a vitally important aspect.

The lights are like a homing beacon, bringing generations of fans together to cheer for their team, their alma mater, their family and their legacy. It's how opposing fans and out-of-towners find their way to the field, and if the home team has its way, to their team's demise.

No one asks for directions on a Friday night. You just follow the lights.

Against the backdrop of a dark sky, a football field's lights are a call to attention. Be here or miss out on the fun. In many cases, it's be here or be alone.

What high school football does is bring communities together.

Pull into a parking lot outside a school or a stadium on a Friday night and you're treated to a symphony of senses. You see the smoke billowing from the grills, the flags whipping in the breeze and people everywhere adorned in their school colors.

You smell the pork chop or ribeye sandwiches being cooked. You hear the band warming up. You listen to the patter of cleats as players walk from the locker room to the field. You get caught up in the cadences and clapping. You feel the electricity building.

And you're not even to kickoff yet.

While all of that is happening, moms wearing their sons jerseys gather to chat. Dads stand in the end zone and discuss who won the quarterback job

or whether the change in offensive philosophy will work. Former players relive their glory days and express a willingness to do anything to put on the shoulder pads one more time.

Beyond the end zone or on a nearby practice field, kids toss a football round, playing their own game of two-hand touch. They dream of being next player to make headlines and hoping one day they get to wear the same jersey their brother or their dad did.

In a small locker room somewhere inside the school, the game officials go through their pregame routine, checking their whistles and flags and reminding each other what type of verbal interactions they need to expect from the coaching staffs.

You wait for the band to take the field, play the school fight song and offer a stirring rendition of the national anthem.

Finally, kickoff.

The stands are filled. Fans lean on the fence surrounding the field or line up in the end zones. Coaches sitting either in the press box or on top of it share their bird's-eye view with the coaches on the sideline. The players getting ready to take the field pace on the sideline.

Nervous energy overtakes everyone.

That's high school football. That's what Friday night lights mean. That's why we wait and anticipate its return for nine months.

This is everyone's game. And it's here.

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Hannibal junior running back Aneyas Williams, right, is piling up scholarship offers from major NCAA Division I programs and bring college recruiters to the area. | Max Bennett photo

The Aneyas effect

With college coaches heavily recruiting Hannibal's standout running back, other prospects could benefit from attention paid to this area

By Matt Schuckman

MuddyRiverSports.com Editor

QUINCY — Who is the next Melvin Booker?

You might ask, "How does a University of Missouri basketball standout from the 1990s work his way into a prep football conversation?"

Here's how: Booker was a high-scor-

ing guard from Moss Point, Miss., who was named the state Player of the Year in his class as a senior. However, he had been underappreciated and under-recruited because he played behind former Moss Point star Litterial Green.

While recruiting Green, one of the Mizzou assistants noticed Booker, took interest in him and eventually signed

him when no other program in the south paid him much attention. Booker became a first-team All-American, the Big Eight Conference Player of the Year in 1994 and enjoyed a 14-year professional career mostly overseas.

Again, how does this relate to prep football in Northeast Missouri and West-Central Conference?

Here's how: Hannibal all-purpose

back Aneayas Williams is drawing interest from major college programs from coast to coast, with scholarship offers from No. 1-ranked Alabama, Ohio State, Notre Dame and a litany of others.

For players in this area, he is Litterial Green.

Who might be Melvin Booker?

The opportunity is there. That's not to say another player from this region is going to wind up being courted by AP Top 25 programs, but those coaches could spot a talented player, pass his name along to a colleague and help someone go from obscure to essential.

Or, something that seems more likely, coaches from an FCS program visit to see Williams on the slim chance he doesn't wind up at a Power 5 conference school and notice a player who fills one of their needs.

Recruiting can be as much about being in the right place at the right time as it is selling yourself through social media or highlight videos.

So here are eight area players, listed in alphabetical order, who could benefit from being seen by college coaches visiting the area and have their stock rise significantly:

Bryan Dieker

Linebacker, Unity-Payson

Some say he is the best defensive player in the Western Illinois Valley Conference North Division, and Dieker will need to make plays all over the field for the Mustangs. He's more than a thumper in the middle. He's quick, aggressive and mean. Opposing offenses will do their best to run away from him, and the Mustangs will try to funnel everything toward him.

Ty Douglas

Linebacker, Quincy High School

Here is a sideline-to-sideline tackler who hadn't played football until the eighth grade and had at least one NCAA Division I program contacting the QHS coaching staff last spring to



Unity-Payson linebacker Bryan Dieker, who also plays running back, had 134 tackles last season. | *Matt Schuckman photo*

see where Douglas projects at the next level. His natural instincts and athleticism give them the chance to play at a variety of levels and make a significant impact.

Isaac Genenbacher
Running back, Central

A solid basketball player whose

size could make him a coveted small-school recruit on the hardwood, Genenbacher emerged from a speedy backfield last season to become a bull-dozing, 1,000-yard rusher capable of running through defenders. Much like in basketball, his size will make him a coveted football prospect, be it in the backfield or as a linebacker.



Central running back Isaac Genenbacher is coming off a 1,000-yard season as a junior. | *Photo courtesy Mike Pritchard*



Quincy Notre Dame's Jackson Stratton is projected as a safety or a linebacker in college. | *Matt Schuckman photo*

JT Jeter

Wide receiver, Macomb

He enjoys the luxury of having an FCS program in his own backyard, but the son of WIU men's basketball coach Rob Jeter owns the physical skills and pure athleticism to pave his own path in Macomb or elsewhere. Bombers quarterback Jack Duncan has already

committed to WIU to play baseball, and he knows he has a game-breaking target on the edge who can go get passes no matter where they're thrown.

Ceaton Pennewell

Linebacker, Monroe City

There might not be a better tackler in Missouri, regardless of classification.



Hannibal senior linebacker Ashton Watts (44) is a three-year starter and a menacing presence. | *Photo courtesy Mathew Kirby*

Pennewell is receiving NCAA Division II offers, including one from Quincy University, but if NCAA Division I coaches take a look at a Class 1 program, they will find a gem who is as tough as anyone, as quick as anyone and has a penchant for simply blowing plays up.

LaKoda Preston

Return specialist, Mark Twain

Speed is something that can't be taught and can only be enhanced through weight-lifting and workouts. Either you're fast or you're not, and Preston is fast. Really fast. A dynamite weapon for the Tigers out of the backfield and a ball-hawking defensive back, Preston most marketable ability is that of being able to run away from defenders on special teams. He has a knack for returning kicks for touchdowns and flipping the field.

Jackson Stratton

Linebacker, Quincy Notre Dame

Although he will be the Raiders' starting quarterback this season, Stratton's future lies on the defensive side of the ball. He's received a handful of Division II offers, including Quincy University, and is drawing interest from a few FCS programs, such as Drake, and it's his quickness, ability to run through a ballcarrier and be a special teams tyrant that makes him attractive.

Ashton Watts

Linebacker, Hannibal

The senior is entering his third season as a starter and is the heart of the Pirates' defense. The ability to make plays sideline-to-sideline is critical and Watts can chase down ballcarriers and blanket tight ends in coverage. Better yet, he disrupts everything and is a nightmare for opposing quarterbacks. He's had to chase Williams in practice, which means he's seeing Division I speed daily.



Quincy High School senior running back Brian Douglas is expected to give the Blue Devils a mix of power and speed. | *Photo courtesy Max Bennett*

Depth, experience to help Blue Devils chase return to playoffs

By Matt Schuckman

MuddyRiverSports.com Editor

QUINCY — The depth the Quincy High School football team has accumulated made Rick Little smile when he realized six minutes into an interview he was still bringing up two-way players with experience.

“That’s what makes these conversations fun,” said Little, entering his 13th season as the QHS head coach. “I’m talking about guys who are really good football players and I’m just now mentioning them. That’s what our guys have done.

“They’ve put in the effort and the

work to give us depth on both sides of the ball that will help us win games.”

The hope is it parlays itself into a playoff berth.

The Blue Devils went 4-5 last season, but showed flashes of what was to come. Adon Byquist led the Western Big 6 Conference in total offense, averaging 190.4 per game. Gregory Quince earned all-conference honors on offense, defense and special teams. And Quincy led league champion Moline at halftime and scored 35 points against the Maroons despite a 13-point loss.

Moline allowed just 20 points total in its other six WB6 games.

The vast majority of Blue Devils who

spearheaded such an effort return.

“I like the fact we have a year under our belt,” Little said. “We were young last year, and we’ll be young again. It’s a team that missed the postseason by a game last year, and we bring a lot of those guys back. So for us, it’s about continuing to get better and work hard, and they’ve done that.

“Not only are they talented, but I really enjoy their perspective and maturity towards the game. We talk a lot about how you respect the game. So I like their physical ability, but I like their mental ability, too.”

An unselfish nature comes with that.

“I like all sorts and sizes, all makes

“Not only are they talented, but I really enjoy their perspective and maturity towards the game. We talk a lot about how you respect the game. So I like their physical ability, but I like their mental ability, too.”

— QHS coach Rick Little

and models,” Little said. “But the low-maintenance guy who just goes about his business is a joy to coach. That’s what we have. You’re not going to know if one of our guys has 12 catches or if he has three. They’re going about their business the same way no matter the circumstance.”

Quince is the epitome of that. The 6-foot wideout caught 22 passes for 451 yards and three touchdowns in Western Big 6 Conference play, earning second-team all-league status. He enjoyed the highest receiving yardage game in conference play last season, catching eight passes for 194 yards against Moline.

He also was a second-team all-league selection as a defensive back and a



Sophomore quarterback Bradyn Little will engineer the Quincy High School offense this fall. | *Max Bennett photo*

first-team pick as a return specialist.

He isn’t the only one who can and will do multiple things for the Blue Devils. Byquist is moving from quarterback to wingback and could find himself lining up in a variety of spots.

Brian Douglas returns as a workhorse running back, but he’s adept at catching the ball out of the backfield.

And Little says there are plenty of others who fit the do-anything mold.

“When you look at your team, you usually have one kid who can be a Swiss army knife,” Little said. “We have multiple guys like that. These are guys who can make plays at all sorts of spots, and for us, that’s going to be a huge benefit offensively.”

Sophomore quarterback Bradyn Little will be the one orchestrating the offense.

On the airwaves

WTAD 930 AM and WGEM 1440 AM will carry Quincy High School football as part of their Game of the Week packages. Broadcast schedules can be found at wtad.com and wgem.com.

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Quincy High School football coach Rick Little, right, has led the Blue Devils to the playoffs eight times in his 15 seasons at the helm. | *Photo courtesy Max Bennett*

“He had the opportunity to practice a lot and play a little, so he feels very comfortable with what we’re trying to do,” Rick Little said. “Then you move pieces around and everyone feels comfortable and good with the role they have.”

“It gives us the best chance to be really explosive offensively for nine weeks.”

That’s only possible if the offensive line opens holes and protects. Anchored by junior Chris Flachs and senior Brady Wells, the line could become a strength because no one is penciled in as a starter as of yet, even if they started last year.

“Looking at our depth chart, there are 14 linemen when we sit down and talk about it that we really like,” Little said.

“Only five can play, and we want those five to play well at the same time. But we have some depth with guys that we like.”

Better yet, it means no one takes a day off.

“Now you have guys saying, ‘Man, I have to practice hard or I’m not going to see as much time,’” Little said. “There is no better way of driving that home than having someone go in there and take those reps. It’s a really healthy relationship among those guys, but they know they have to work hard or someone is taking those reps.”

It’s taking place on defense, too.

Linebackers Ty Douglas and Sawyer Mulherin both earned honorable mention All-WB6 last season, and Max Wires will step into a starting role and provide quickness to the ball and power. They’ll play behind a line that has bulked up in the offseason and added 6-foot-6, 290-pound freshman Todd Smith.

“He’s a big body who is athletic,” Little said of Smith.

When you throw Quince, Byquist and Jack Mettemeyer, a junior who played wide receiver last season and will go both ways this year, in the defensive backfield, the Blue Devils are confident they can compete at every level.

“I’m really excited about this defense and what we can do,” Little said. “We have guys who can really run. We’re going to be better in every area.”

That has him encouraged.

“I like to use the term cautiously optimistic,” Little said.





The play of left tackle Garrett Flesner and the rest of the offensive line will dictate how well the Quincy Notre Dame football team will be able to mix the run and the pass. | *Matt Schuckman photo*

Raiders ready to add to legacy with another playoff pursuit

By Matt Schuckman

MuddyRiverSports.com Editor

QUINCY — Nothing the seniors on the Quincy Notre Dame football team have accomplished has gone by the book.

As freshmen, they were on the sidelines — a few were on the field — as the Raiders reached the Class 3A state semifinals. As sophomores, they were forced to play a six-game spring season due to the COVID-19 pandemic, yet they were considered the one of the best Class 2A teams statewide.

Despite a limited offseason leading into last fall, they pushed the Raiders

into the Class 4A playoffs.

Three uniquely successful seasons, all in different enrollment classifications.

“When you consider their football careers to this point, it’s out of the ordinary,” QND coach Jack Cornell said. “But it’s also extraordinary.”

There’s one more opportunity to make it remarkable.

Thanks to tenacity on defense, a mix of weapons offensively and the right combination of size, quickness and meanness up front, the Raiders believe they can exceed how last year ended. They were 6-4 and bowed out of the playoffs following a first-round loss to

Bethalto Civic Memorial.

“We have a great group of young people who love to compete, generally care for each other and want to see each other succeed,” Cornell said. “These guys hate to lose more than they love to win. That’s a good characteristic for any team.”

It’s universal. The Raiders, especially the seniors, are inseparable on and off the field, which led to them pushing the underclassmen to take part in every offseason workout possible. And the numbers QND saw in the weight room and doing individual drills was through the roof.

“They’re preparation, lifting weights



Charlie Lavery, left, will be a two-way starter for the Quincy Notre Dame football team. | *Matt Schuckman photo*

four days a week, took place across the board,” said Cornell, now in his fifth season at the helm. “Going through difficult days together and coming out better for it on the other end was great to see. It was good for us to get back in our normal offseason routine.

“Our whole program is built on a

weight-room aspect. The guys were able to get back to that and get in that routine and know after school every day from November through the end of school they were in there. They had a real offseason.”

It shows in the physicality the Raiders have played with throughout the

On the airwaves

WTAD 930 AM and WGEM 1440 AM will carry Quincy Notre Dame football as part of their Game of the Week packages. Broadcast schedules can be found at wtad.com and wgem.com.

preseason.

That’s a hallmark of a defense that has a long tradition of slobberknocking linebackers.

This group is no different with seniors Dalton Miller and Jackson Stratton anchoring that unit. On the edges and up front, the Raiders expect to be just as physical as they are over the middle, which is the byproduct of their weight room commitment.

“I don’t know if I have ever coached a more competitive player than a Dalton Miller or a Jackson Stratton,” Cornell said. “I think those guys embody the idea that they hate to lose more than they love to win. They get so excited about playing defense and playing football. They love to hit people and they love to play hard. They leave it on the field.

“That’s not to take anything away from the great linebackers we’ve had here in recent years, but those guys are just a little bit different. I’m excited to watch them play on Friday night.”

Add Charlie Lavery in at cornerback, Connor McDowell at defensive end and a host of hole-pluggers in the

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Quincy Notre Dame football coach Jack Cornell, a 2008 QND graduate, is entering his fifth season at the helm. | *Matt Schuckman photo*

middle of the defensive line and the playmakers come from every angle defensively.

The same holds true on offense.

Stratton takes over at quarterback and gives the Raiders versatility in the backfield. As someone asked to run and catch the ball from different spots last season, he has the run-you-over mentality who has worked extensively in the offseason to become a better passer.

He has targets like Lavery and tight end Jake Wallingford to make plays downfield, but Stratton also has the luxury of several running backs willing and able to carry the ball. Brock Wiley, Jordan Stickler and Denver Bryan could emerge from a crowded backfield as go-getters.

No matter who starts in the backfield, multiple players will see action.

That's the beauty of having depth.

"We have a really deep stable of running backs, and that's going to give us the ability to play a bunch of different guys to keep them fresh on both sides of the ball," Cornell said. "We're going to be a little more diplomatic in our approach."

No one is worried about their number of touches.

"These guys are very selfless when it comes to who gets

the glory," Cornell said. "We have a bunch of guys who are very motivated to get on the field and motivated to contribute to the team's success that they generally don't care where it is."

An offensive line with three returnees and others who played meaningful snaps last season should provide ample space to roam. The size and strength Garrett Flesner, Wilson Henning, Ben Schwartz and Jackson Meyer provide is going to be a luxury the Raiders need to exploit



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Hannibal coach Jeff Gschwender, left, and his staff see the Pirates taking ownership of their actions as they chase another shot at a state championship. | *Photo courtesy Mathew Kirby*

Restocked and ready, Pirates will pursue state-level success

By Matt Schuckman

MuddyRiverSports.com Editor

HANNIBAL, Mo. — The first public unveiling of the revamped Hannibal football team didn't go as smoothly as the Pirates had hoped.

"We had some adversity," Pirates coach Jeff Gschwender said of the jamboree Hannibal held at Porter Stadium one week prior to the season opener. "We didn't play as well as we thought we were going to play."

On the airwaves

KICK 97.9 FM will carry Hannibal football throughout the season. Broadcast schedules can be found at 979kickfm.com.

So they held a fully padded practice the next morning.

"And it was probably the best practice we've had all year," Gschwender said.

That's a tribute to the players holding each other accountable.

"A lot of our upperclassmen got there early and had a little team meeting before the coaches arrived," Gschwender said. "We always press the idea, 'Bad teams no one leads. Good teams coaches lead. Great teams players lead.' They are holding that in and pushing that idea."

That might have been Gschwender's biggest worry prior to the start of the preseason workouts.

The Pirates went 13-1 a year ago and reached the Class 4 state championship game for the second time in program history. It was the culmination of four years of diligent work for a senior class that produced five all-state selections and several players who received college scholarships.

Their leadership and drive graduated with them.

“I was a little concerned after losing a great senior class last year how we were going to step up as leaders,” Gschwender said. “That senior class was full of leaders. They held each other accountable, and they did it the right way.

“I was anxious to see how our returners were going to handle that, and they have been awesome. They’ve come to practice every day in good spirits, ready to work, having fun. If kids aren’t there or working as hard as they should, they are holding them accountable. They aren’t jumping on each other. They are reminding them, ‘Hey, you need to step it up.’

“They have big stuff in mind. They have big goals in mind.”

And the Pirates should with all they return and everything they add.

Most conversations begin with first-team all-state wide receiver Aneyas Williams, a junior who will get the ball in a variety of spots offensively and is arguably the most coveted prep football recruit in area history. The 5-foot-11, 185-pound athlete holds scholarship offers from Alabama, Ohio State, Oregon and nearly 20 Power 5 schools total.

Yet, the true success of Hannibal will depend on those around Williams more so than the all-stater himself.

“If I’m a defensive coordinator going against Hannibal, I’m going to stop Aneyas. That’s my No. 1 priority,” Gschwender said. “But when you have four running backs and some new receivers who have serious, serious speed, you have options. We have a little grit on the field, too.

“We have other guys who can get the stuff done that needs to happen. Those are the guys we know we can lean on. Aneyas will do special things, but the rest of these guys have to make big plays, too, and we are extremely confident they will.”

Markahl Humphrey, a starting cornerback since his sophomore season, will be part of the backfield and joined Williams on the Pirates’ 4x100-meter relay team that finished in the top eight at the Class 4 state tournament last spring.

The other two members of the relay team — Sheldon

Bergheger and Haden Robertson — will line up at wide receiver. And the depth at those positions gives Gschwender multiple options.

The same holds true at quarterback, where Waylon Anders is expected to be the starter.

“We have three kids I am perfectly comfortable putting in at quarterback at the varsity level,” Gschwender said.

A stout, experienced offensive line makes that easier. Ryan Ross, who spent last year at center, has moved to left tackle and is joined up front by a pair of seniors with more than 20 games each under their belts in Austin Wilhoit and Briley Cunningham.

Kane Wilson at tight end provides a big target in the passing game and another dominant blocker who understands how to move people.

“They have a ton of varsity experience, big-game varsity experience,” Gschwender said. “They know what it takes. They know what needs to happen.”

It carries over to the defensive side where junior Trenton Cowden anchors the line, all-stater Ashton Watts is in his third year as a starter at middle linebacker and a bevy of dynamic defensive backs provide blanket coverage.

Because the large number of players within the Hannibal program, none of the Pirates can afford to take a day off.

“Every single day is an audition,” Gschwender said. “I told them at the end of practice you have to come out with the mentality I’m going to make plays today if I’m going to get on the field. It’s going to be that way every day. With the depth we have, I’m comfortable with guys in a variety of places. If they do it in practice, you can bet they’re going to be on the field.”

“A lot of our upper-classmen got there early and had a little team meeting before the coaches arrived. We always press the idea, ‘Bad teams no one leads. Good teams coaches lead. Great teams players lead.’ They are holding that in and pushing that idea.”

— Hannibal coach Jeff Gschwender

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Senior wingback Cole Behymer, left, and senior fullback Colby Wort give the Brown County football team two experienced building blocks. | *Photo courtesy Scott Bemis*

Lack of experience something Hornets seek to overcome

By Matt Schuckman

MuddyRiverSports.com Editor

MOUNT STERLING, Ill. — Forgive Tom Little if he forgets which day of the week it is.

The same goes for the Brown County football players.

The shortage of game officials — a serious problem throughout the state — forced the Hornets to move their season opener at home against Hardin Calhoun to a Thursday kickoff. That meant shuffling the game week routine as well.

“We had to treat our Saturday like a

On the airwaves

BC Hornets Sports will livestream every Brown County football game on its YouTube channel.

Monday,” said Little, now in his 21st season as Brown County’s head coach. “That kind of throws you off.”

Beginning the week with a fully padded workout like the Hornets did Monday is odd as well.

“It’s a mental struggle as much as anything,” Little said. “One of the teachers said, ‘I’m going to be confused

all week.’ And I said, ‘It’s only Monday and I’m going to be a mess all week trying to remember which day it is.’”

It hasn’t changed the edge the Hornets have been practicing with, although there are definite signs the daily grind of three weeks of preparation is wearing on them.

“You could tell they are ready to do something besides practice,” Little said. “They’re antsy.”

They have something to prove.

The Hornets’ strong start to last season — five victories the first six weeks — tapered off when injuries depleted the starting units. Brown County re-

grouped to beat Toledo Cumberland in the opening round of the Class 1A playoffs before falling to Arcola to finish 6-5.

Gone is a deep, talented senior class, leaving the Hornets rebuilding and reloading at the same time.

“Of all the teams I’ve coached, I’ve never had a team on paper that is this inexperienced but in reality is experienced,” Little said. “With last year’s team having so many injuries and having these guys jump into spots, they got some playing time.

“With losing so many seniors from last year’s team, most people would be like, ‘Oh, you’re starting over.’ But a lot of these guys got meaningful playoff-caliber reps the last half of the season. Those were meaningful games. So I think they’re mentally experienced even though they don’t have as many games under their belts.”

The mental hurdles are as significant as the physical ones.

“They still have to gain that confidence that they are the No. 1 guy,” Little said. “We have that confidence in them, but they’re trying to figure it out. It’s been an interesting challenge for us.”

It can be a rewarding one, too.

“We’re seeing daily improvement,” Little said. “You see guys who have played some meaningful snaps and you have expectations for that make significant strides and you’re excited about. Every day is growth.”

That’s taking place in the trenches as much as it is anywhere.

Dalton Rice jumped in at center last season when Carter Maas went down with an injury, and he’s the anchor of the offensive line, having moved to tackle this season.

“The rest are inexperienced,” Little said. “Each day we see improvement with them.”

There are some head-knockers and speedsters looking for that line to give them space to work. Colby Wort and Cole Behymer return for their third varsity season and will play feature roles at fullback and wingback, respectively, in the Wing-T offense.

Wort, who was the starting shortstop last spring on Brown County’s historic baseball team, is an aggressive

“They are explosive athletes and such great leaders who have been in big games in football, baseball and basketball that it really helps those guys not to feel so much pressure and know they can handle those kind of big games.”

— Brown County coach Tom Little

runner who likes to play physical. Behymer provides speed off the edge.

“They are explosive athletes and such great leaders who have been in big games in football, baseball and basketball that it really helps those guys not to feel so much pressure and know they can handle those kind of big games,” Little said.

Angel Duarte, a junior who moved into the school district as a sophomore, inherits the quarterback position after serving as Tate Fullerton’s backup last season. Like so many of the players around him, he has to adapt and adjust to being a focal point.

“He has a lot of special attributes as an athlete that we’re going to need throughout the season,” Little said.

Defensively, the Hornets will rely on several players to go both ways, and sophomore Tyce Fullerton should settle in as a run-stopping linebacker.

“He’s making his reads better and he’s made some unbelievable hits,” Little said. “He’s starting to learn and starting to believe he belongs in that role.”

He and the Hornets have better days ahead, too.

“With experience, they get better. We’re seeing that,” Little said. “Their attention to detail is improving. They are working hard and they keep improving each and every week.”

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The Central football team will rely on the experience of quarterback Nick Moore and a bevy of backfield weapons to be efficient and explosive this season. | *Photo courtesy Mike Pritchard*

By staying connected, Panthers hope to be on track for playoffs

By Matt Schuckman

MuddyRiverSports.com Editor

CAMP POINT, Ill. — Illinois prep football teams lost more than summer workouts and a fall season when the COVID-19 pandemic overwhelmed everyone in 2020.

The players lost the opportunity to practice together and connect.

Central coach Brad Dixon saw it within his own program.

“Our freshmen and sophomores that season really didn’t get the chance to know the seniors the way we saw our other teams do,” Dixon said. “That’s the

On the airwaves

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chemistry every team needs.”

This group seems to have it.

“They are a lot more connected with each other and getting in line with each other,” Dixon said. “The first week of practice when we were starting at 6:30 a.m., there were guys showing up

at 5:50 a.m. Guys were beating me to the parking lot. Guys were walking in going, ‘Hey, text so-in-so, this guy’s phone might have died and see if he can go by and see if he’s awake.’

“I really think they are connected on a deep level and want to see this happen for each other.”

It’s going to take an abundance of committed players to push the Panthers back to the playoffs.

Central finished 9-2 a year ago, reaching the second round of the Class 1A playoffs. It was the 10th time in Dixon’s 11 seasons the Panthers have played beyond Week 9 — the COVID

shortened six-game season in 2021 is the only non-playoff team he's had — and the expectation is Central will be in the postseason mix again.

Returning the starting quarterback, a 1,000-yard rusher and a variety of weapons only heightens expectations.

Nick Moore, a junior, orchestrated the Panthers' run-heavy offense with precision and efficiency. He completed 62.5 percent of his passes for 493 yards with eight touchdowns against three interceptions, while helping the Panthers average 381.7 yards per game

"We didn't know what to expect from Nick except that we was a great kid, a great leader and a phenomenal athlete," Dixon said. "He had never played a snap at quarterback until Carrollton last year. To have him back there now, in his second full season after playing 11 games, is a blessing for us.

"It's nice to have someone who is very committed. And you know you're going to get everything he's got every time when he's back there."

The same can be said for Isaac Genenbacher, who rushed for 1,061 yards and 12 touchdowns last season and averaged 10.2 yards per carry. He averaged just nine carries per game, a number Dixon would like to see replicated this season.

"A guy like Isaac is a guy we're going to need down the stretch," Dixon said. "But if we can keep him in that 7-10 carry range per game for quite some time and unleash him when we need to, that helps him stay healthy. He's also a really good linebacker. Being able to rest him on offense some at times hopefully will help him play better at linebacker."

Since the backfield is loaded with fast cats, spreading the wealth shouldn't be an issue.

Junior fullback Connor Griffin, who started the second-round playoff game against Moweaqua Central A&M, is expected to reprise that role, while Dixon expects seniors Gavin Graves, Hunter Louderback and Ross Riley, juniors Wyatt Schemerhorn and Drew Paben, and sophomore Elijah Genenbacher to figure into the backfield mix.

Elijah Genenbacher started at linebacker in the playoffs last year and will be an important piece defensively as well.

"We had to start those young pups," Dixon said. "It helps us this year."

Who blocks for them is the biggest question.

"We graduated tackle to tackle and the next guy on the offensive line," Dixon said.

However, the Panthers return solid players along the defensive line who likely will see some time on the offensive front as well. Senior nose guard Cole Pracht will play more both ways this season, while seniors Owen Roth and Bo Gottman and juniors Reese Wilkey and Wes Crooks are workhorses.

"We have to get creative on when to get guys in and out and where we're going to rest guys," Dixon said. "We have to keep building depth."

Kadin Niekamp, a 5-foot-10, 183-pound freshman, will see playing time somewhere defensively, too.

"He's about as ready as any freshman I've had in 20 years," Dixon said. "He has a get-off, an explosiveness and really no fear. We're going to bring him along slowly. It was obvious when we started camp in July he needed to be with the varsity and not the JV guys."

The position Dixon has to worry about the least is tight end with the return of 6-foot-4 Carter Eyler and 6-foot-5 Josh Alford. Darren Rigg and Mason Miller play a role there, too, and the four will rotate at tight end and outside linebacker.



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Coming off a playoff appearance in 2021 and returning a handful of talented starters, the Macomb football team is hungry to chase glory. | Photo courtesy KHQA Sports Director Chris Duerr

Confident and hungry, Bombers to let experience guide them

By Matt Schuckman

MuddyRiverSports.com Editor

MACOMB, Ill. — What a difference a year makes.

Although he's been immersed in the Macomb football program a majority of his life, Tanner Horrell's first season as the Bombers' head coach came with some of the expected growing pains. That included a struggle to get up to

speed in a timely manner.

That isn't the case the second go-around.

On the airwaves

The Bomber Sports Network will stream play-by-play of Macomb football games. Follow the Bomber Sports Network on Twitter at @BomberSportsNet for updates.

"It's completely different," Horrell said. "Last year, if it was Friday of the first week, we were still trying to figure out three plays. Essentially, we have the entire offense in right now."

That left the Bombers nearly two weeks to fine tune things.

Thanks to a bevy of experience, there isn't as much needing changed or adapted this year.

That's especially true along the of-

fensive front, where four of the five starting linemen return. Ethan Ladd is the centerpiece of the line, and he is flanked by the likes of Lindsey May, who doubles with Ladd to make a dominant linebacking corps.

Their ability to protect quarterback Jack Duncan and open holes for a run game the Bombers expect to be more dynamic is vital.

“Last year, we came into Week 1 and thought we had our line set,” Horrell said. “We did like a hockey line change the second possession. So being more comfortable and then having a couple of guys we can rotate in there is huge.”

Between a stout offensive line and talented wide receivers such as JT Jeter and Langdon Allen, Duncan has the comfort of knowing he can orchestrate the offense from the pocket. Last season, he threw for 1,712 yards and 27 touchdowns.

“I don’t have to make the perfect throw,” Duncan said. “I have receivers who are going to make plays. Up front is what I’m really excited about. We only lose one lineman. We bring back a wealth of talent for sure.”

A Western Illinois University baseball commit as a pitcher, Duncan is well-versed on what the Bombers want to accomplish.

“We have the same offense I have been running since freshman year,” he said.

A healthy Max Ryner makes a world of difference, too. The flatbacking fullback, who was a state wrestling qualifier last winter, had offseason surgery to repair a torn meniscus he’d been playing with for two years and be ready for the season opener.

“Once he goes, he’s a total different animal,” Horrell said.

With all of the pieces in place, the Bombers are confident they can replicate a playoff appearance.

“I’m definitely very confident, but I don’t let it get to my head,” Jeter said. “I know we have tough games coming up. We can’t really dwell on those things.”

While avoiding overconfidence, the Bombers are staying hungry.

“We came back a lot hungrier this year,” Jeter said. “We can feel that in practice.”

The coaches can see a distinct difference, too.

“It’s a different intensity than what we’ve seen in the past,” Horrell said. “Our guys are communicating non-stop. We’ll be in between plays and they will all be talking about what they saw. It’s something we’ve tried to preach in the past, and our kids never understood it.

“Part of it is these guys have been together now for three years. Even in water breaks, you can hear them talking about what happened on a certain play or adjusting routes because the spacing wasn’t right. They are taking some ownership.”



“Our guys are communicating non-stop. We’ll be in between plays and they will all be talking about what they saw. It’s something we’ve tried to preach in the past, and our kids never understood it. ... They are taking some ownership.”

— Macomb coach Tanner Horrell

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Coming off a playoff appearance in 2021 and returning a handful of talented starters, the Macomb football team is hungry to chase glory. | Photo courtesy KHQA Sports Director Chris Duerr

Saukees embrace opportunity to alter program's trajectory

By Matt Schuckman

MuddyRiverSports.com Editor

PITTSFIELD, Ill. — Zach Ferguson doesn't mind a little rambunctiousness from the Pittsfield football players.

"They have an ornery streak in them," the second-year Saukees coach said.

Applying it the right way is key.

"If you take that and they learn to focus it, they can become really good football players," Ferguson said.

They'll put the Pittsfield program on a new trajectory in the process.

The Saukees finished 4-5 last season,

one victory shy of the program's first playoff berth since 2009.

"I like their desire," Ferguson said. "I think they're hungry to get past that. They don't want to be just 4-5. They want to get past that. We have some seniors who have been here since they

were 0-9 or 1-8. They want to leave here having changed things."

In a sense, they already have. The Saukees face heightened expectations.

"The guys are feeling the excitement that is around the area for us," Ferguson said. "But they have to meet that, too. They have to rise up to that level of expectation."

For many, that means more playing time. The Saukees graduated four of their five starting offensive linemen and return five total starters on offense and seven on defense. However, Ferguson is encouraged by the fact 22 lettermen return.

On the airwaves

Central Illinois Sports will livestream every Pittsfield football game on its YouTube channel. Follow Central Illinois Sports on Twitter at @CentralILSports for game updates.

“We’re not starting fresh by any means,” Ferguson said. “Everyone always looks at who started. I look at who got playing time. And we have guys who have playing time.”

Better yet, there are 68 players in the entire program, which is allowing the coaching staff to divide into a varsity and freshman/sophomore squads during practice.

“They are getting 10 times the amount of reps because of that,” Ferguson said. “They are all going to be better football players.”

It creates depth, too.

“We’re going to have the luxury this year of being able to sub on both sides of the ball,” Ferguson said.

The Saukees also have the luxury of experience in the backfield. Senior quarterback Weston McAllister gives Pittsfield the right person to orchestrate a run-pass option offense. He completed 59 percent of his passes a year ago and threw for 964 yards, while scoring two rushing touchdowns.

McAllister has two experienced backs to hand the ball to in Lane Yelliott and Jason McKee.

“Lane is more of a power guy,” Ferguson said. “Jason is the kind that will make a man miss. Lane is just going to run over you.”

Although several of the receivers — Jeremiah Jackson, Konnor Allen and Elijah Leonard in particular — will also play defensive back, but the added depth the Saukees have created ensures no one gets too fatigued.

“They are going to have breaks on one side of the ball or the other because we have the depth to do it,” Ferguson said.

They also have the ability to create mismatches because of they can shift people to different spots.

“We have athletes we can put into space,” Ferguson said. “We have two pretty dang good running backs who are

“The guys are feeling the excitement that is around the area for us. But they have to meet that, too. They have to rise up to that level of expectation.”

— Pittsfield coach Zach Ferguson

really going to help us.”

That’s only if the line blocks. Sophomore Jaron White has moved from guard to tackle and junior Tracer Mowen has shifted from center to tackle, giving the Saukees quality bookends for a line they believe can hold up in the Sangamo Conference.

Plus, there is the benefit of running the same system for the second year in a row.

“We were much more run focused last year than we have to be this year,” Ferguson said. “My goal is to always be 50-50 in the run-pass, which I know doesn’t happen in high school.

But I feel we are going to be more toward that balance this year than we were able to be last year based on kids feeling comfortable in the system.

“I feel like we are leaps and bounds ahead of where we were last year as far as their understanding.”

The improvements defensively that correspond with the Saukees’ comfortability are significant as well. It’s going to make Pittsfield more competitive in what is traditionally a very competitive conference.

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Bryan Dieker, an honorable mention all-state linebacker a year ago, will be the Unity-Payson football team's workhorse in the offensive backfield as well. | *Matt Schuckman photo*

With Dieker leading charge, Mustangs to challenge in WIVC

By Matt Schuckman

MuddyRiverSports.com Editor

MENDON, Ill. — Matt Woodworth calls it “natural instincts.”

Add size and speed to that and it explains how Bryan Dieker became one of the most feared linebackers in the area from a field of linebackers being coveted by college coaches. Now, the Unity-Payson defensive stalwart carries the moniker of being one of the top playmakers in the Western Illinois Valley Conference, too.

That's an advantage the Mustangs

will exploit.

Flanked by other high-motor athletes — Ryle Duke, Cody Shaffer and Nick Maynard to name a few — Dieker is the dominant force on both sides of the ball for a team fighting to challenge WIVC North Division heavyweights Central and Brown County for supremacy.

Dieker amassed 134 tackles a year ago, and he teamed with Cecil Hunt to be a lethal 1-2 punch in the offensive backfield. With Hunt having graduated, Dieker will get a high percentage of carries this season, but Duke's expe-

rience under center is a tremendous boon.

The experience across the board is key.

The Mustangs return 15 starters from a team that went 6-4 and reached the Class 2A playoffs. A three-week stretch in which Unity-Payson beat Triopia, Beardstown and Brown County in succession allowed it to tie for second in the WIVC North.

All three of those victories were by 12 points or less, including a 14-13 victory over Triopia to kickstart it.

The intangibles that come from win-



The effort and energy provided by the Unity-Payson offensive line will help the Mustangs chance a third consecutive playoff berth.
 | *Matt Schuckman photo*

ning close games — the confidence, the determination and the know-how — played a role in the offseason workouts and the early practices. Woodworth said effort, intensity and enthusiasm had increased across the board.

It might be the edge to get Unity closer to a league championship once again.

The Mustangs won the WIVC North in 2016 — their only championship since joining the league — but have continually been in the mix. Consistently beating the teams on top of the standings is the challenge. Central has won or shared seven of the last 10 titles, with Brown County claiming four titles since 2009.

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Offseason commitment gives Titans chance to alter future

By Matt Schuckman

MuddyRiverSports.com Editor

HAMILTON, Ill. — What Travis Cook experienced in the offseason is encouraging and motivating.

Coming off a 1-8 season in which the West Hancock football team struggled offensively throughout, the Titans showed committed and renewed vigor in the offseason to the tune of having the largest weight room attendance during Cook's 10 years at the helm.

It's a sign a program that has just five victories in the past four seasons has the pieces in place to change its trajectory.

Having size and strength up front helps.

The Titans return five seniors total, but three of those anchor the offensive with 6-foot-2, 240-pound Tyler Price, 6-foot, 260-pound Alex Woods and 6-foot-2, 210-pound Luke Jacquot. Their experience and leadership is vital with a vast number of young players around them.

The coachability and the adaptability of the underclassmen is what also has Cook encouraged.

The challenge is a tough schedule. The Titans open the season at home against South Fulton, a program that went 4-5 a year ago. Then comes four consecutive games against teams that went to the playoffs last season, including a Week 3 home game against Farmington, which reached the third round of the playoffs and finished 11-1 last season.

Fighting through tough times can bring out the best in a team, something Cook has experience with at West Hancock.

He took over as head coach in 2013 with the Titans having endured five consecutive losing seasons. His first team finished 0-8, but in Cook's second season, West Hancock went 4-5. It set the stage for four consecutive playoff appearances and an 11-1 record in 2017.

That tied the single-season school record for victories shared by the 1977, 1986 and 2006 teams.

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Valuable game experience key part of Chargers' reloading

By Matt Schuckman

MuddyRiverSports.com Editor

CARTHAGE, Ill. — Lyle Klein won't ever forget to give his linemen a much deserved pat on the back.

"I'm a big guy," the Illini West football coach has said in the past. "I can't forget the big guys."

The Chargers' size, strength and mobility could be the key to turning last year's 4-5 season into a playoff appearance this fall. Illini West went into the fourth quarter of last season's finale at Macomb with a 22-20 lead, but the Bombers snared a late interception and scored twice in the final period for a 36-28 victory.

It kept Illini West out of the postseason for the second time in as many playoff-eligible seasons, saddling the Chargers with a 4-5 record each time.

So what changes the outcome this time? The ability to move people both off the line and into different positions to accentuate the Chargers' speed and skill.

Illini West will employ a variety of weapons in the backfield after the graduation of Ethan James, who was a first-

team All-Prairieland Conference selection at both running back and linebacker. The Chargers will lean heavily on a young but strong line to make holes.

"How are you getting there if you're not blocking for them?" Klein told KHQA.

More importantly, the Chargers head into this season with vastly more game experience, having relied heavily last season on unproven sophomores and juniors to fill roles. Their experience led into a successful offseason and camaraderie which is evident every day, according to Klein.

Team chemistry could be the X factor in reviving the playoff tradition.

The Chargers went to the playoffs in four of Klein's first five years at the helm and rebounded nicely from the one hiccup in that stretch, going 10-1 and reaching the second round of the playoffs just two seasons after going 2-7. Having gotten past the COVID-19 shortened season and last year's near miss, a postseason return feels imminent.

The schedule is set up to get off on the right foot. Only one of the Chargers' first three opponents went to the playoffs last season.

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Wolves to rely on experienced seniors against tough schedule

By Matt Schuckman

MuddyRiverSports.com Editor

PLEASANT HILL, Ill. — Winning in the Western Illinois Valley Conference, no matter which division you reside, isn't easy. But having experienced players can change a team's fortunes rather quickly.

That's how Pleasant Hill is looking at this season.

The Wolves went 1-8 last season and scored eight or fewer points in six games. However, they found success on the

ground and through the air with Carter Dolbeare at quarterback and J.T. Walston at fullback. The combination enabled them to move the ball efficiently in the victory against North Greene.

Both return to give the offense a boost.

Dolbeare played in seven games, averaging 4.5 yards per carry and churning out 408 yards total and three touchdowns. He also threw for 125 yards and tossed the Wolves' lone passing touchdown of the season. Walston rushed for 204 yards and three touchdowns.

Walston also started at linebacker and finished among team leaders with 62 tackles. Dae Corrian Dolbeare returns in the defensive backfield after plucking one interception and snaring a team-best two fumble recoveries.

The schedule doesn't do the Wolves any favors. They open the season with a pair of WIVC crossover games, facing Jacksonville Routh and Camp Point Central — two teams expected to be in the playoff chatter at the end of the season.

The WIVC South Division slate begins with back-to-back teams that reached the playoffs last season in Carrollton and Winchester West Central.

The challenge for the Wolves will be to stay through the opening gauntlet and get to some potentially winnable games in the middle of the season.



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Schedules

Quincy High School

Aug. 26 at Quincy Notre Dame
 Sept. 2 Alton
 Sept. 9 at Moline
 Sept. 16 United Township
 Sept. 23 at Galesburg
 Sept. 30 Sterling
 Oct. 7 at Geneseo
 Oct. 15 at Alleman
 Oct. 21 Rock Island

Quincy Notre Dame

Aug. 26 Quincy High School
 Sept. 2 at Alleman
 Sept. 10 Chicago Hope
 Sept. 17 Hayti
 Sept. 23 Breese Mater Dei
 Sept. 30 at Mahomet-Seymour
 Oct. 7 Normal West
 Oct. 14 at Granite City
 Oct. 22 at John Burroughs

Brown County

Aug. 25 Calhoun
 Sept. 2 at North Greene
 Sept. 9 at Triopia
 Sept. 16 Central
 Sept. 23 at Beardstown
 Sept. 30 Jacksonville Routt
 Oct. 7 Unity-Payson
 Oct. 14 Greenfield
 Oct. 20 at Carrollton

Central

Aug. 26 at Carrollton
 Sept. 2 Pleasant Hill
 Sept. 9 Unity-Payson
 Sept. 16 at Brown County
 Sept. 24 at Jacksonville Routt
 Sept. 30 Triopia
 Oct. 7 at Beardstown
 Oct. 15 at North Greene
 Oct. 21 Calhoun

Hannibal

Aug. 26 Helias
 Sept. 2 at Jefferson City
 Sept. 10 at Troy Buchanan
 Sept. 16 at Fulton
 Sept. 23 Mexico
 Sept. 30 at Kirksville
 Oct. 7 Moberly
 Oct. 14 at Marshall
 Oct. 21 Columbia Battle

Highland

Aug. 26 Putnam County
 Sept. 2 at Scotland County
 Sept. 9 Monroe City
 Sept. 16 at Clark County
 Sept. 23 at Macon
 Sept. 30 South Shelby
 Oct. 7 at Centralia
 Oct. 14 Palmyra
 Oct. 21 at Brookfield

Illini West

Aug. 26 Elmwood-Brimfield
 Sept. 2 at Lewistown
 Sept. 9 Havana
 Sept. 16 at Farmington
 Sept. 23 at Rushville-Industry
 Sept. 30 South Fulton
 Oct. 7 at Knoxville
 Oct. 14 at West Hancock
 Oct. 21 Macomb

Macomb

Aug. 26 Rushville-Industry
 Sept. 2 at South Fulton
 Sept. 9 at Oneida ROWVA
 Sept. 16 West Hancock
 Sept. 23 Farmington
 Sept. 30 at Elmwood-Brimfield
 Oct. 7 at Lewistown
 Oct. 14 Havana
 Oct. 21 at Illini West

Mark Twain

Aug. 26 at Monroe City
 Sept. 2 Winfield
 Sept. 9 at Wright City
 Sept. 16 at Montgomery County
 Sept. 23 North Callaway
 Sept. 30 Louisiana
 Oct. 7 Bowling Green
 Oct. 14 at South Callaway
 Oct. 21 Van-Far

Monroe City

Aug. 26 Mark Twain
 Sept. 2 at Montgomery County
 Sept. 9 at Highland
 Sept. 16 South Shelby
 Sept. 23 at Centralia
 Sept. 30 Palmyra
 Oct. 7 at Brookfield
 Oct. 14 Macon
 Oct. 21 Clark County

Palmyra

Aug. 26 at Hallsville
 Sept. 2 at Bowling Green
 Sept. 9 at Centralia
 Sept. 16 Macon
 Sept. 23 Brookfield
 Sept. 30 at Monroe City
 Oct. 7 Clark County
 Oct. 14 at Highland
 Oct. 21 South Shelby

Pittsfield

Aug. 25 Athens
 Sept. 2 at Stanford Olympia
 Sept. 9 Williamsville
 Sept. 16 at New Berlin
 Sept. 23 Maroa-Forsyth
 Sept. 30 at Pleasant Plains
 Oct. 7 Auburn
 Oct. 14 at Petersburg PORTA
 Oct. 21 Riverton

Pleasant Hill

Aug. 26 Jacksonville Routt
 Sept. 2 at Central
 Sept. 9 at Carrollton
 Sept. 16 West Central
 Sept. 23 North Greene
 Sept. 30 at Calhoun
 Oct. 7 Greenfield
 Oct. 14 Triopia
 Oct. 21 at Beardstown

Unity-Payson

Aug. 26 North Greene
 Sept. 1 at Calhoun
 Sept. 9 at Central
 Sept. 16 Jacksonville Routt
 Sept. 24 at Triopia
 Sept. 30 Beardstown
 Oct. 7 at Brown County
 Oct. 14 Carrollton
 Oct. 21 at West Central

West Hancock

Aug. 26 South Fulton
 Sept. 2 at Annawan-Wethersfield
 Sept. 9 Farmington
 Sept. 19 at Macomb
 Sept. 23 Elmwood-Brimfield
 Sept. 30 at Lewistown
 Oct. 7 at Havana
 Oct. 14 Illini West
 Oct. 21 at Rushville-Industry



Connor Eckler moves from wide receiver to quarterback in order to engineer the Mark Twain football team's offense. | *Photo courtesy Mathew Kirby*

Anchored by defensive bulldog, Tigers set to chase district title

By Matt Schuckman

MuddyRiverSports.com Editor

CENTER, Mo. — Austin Leake didn't leave the cupboard bare.

Nor did he leave without the blessing of his players.

It's the confidence the Mark Twain players have in themselves, the belief in the program Leake helped put in place and the depth of talent the Tigers have built that has allowed for a smooth transition despite a late season coaching change.

Leake, a Mark Twain alum, accepted an offer to become the tight ends coach at Henderson State University, an

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NCAA Division II program based in Arkadelphia, Ark., in late July and roughly two weeks before preseason practices began.

But he did so only with the support of his players and school administration.

Now, he will be watching from afar as the Tigers chase a district championship with all the pieces in place to be dynamic, while under the leadership of Mark Epperson. The Mark Twain defensive coordinator, who was promoted to head coach, has been part of the staff for nearly two decades.

Building from a base that includes three returning linemen and a dangerous weapon on the edge should make the transition smooth.

It starts defensively, where Epperson's son is in the anchor.

Nose guard Coleman Epperson earned Class 1 third-team all-state honors last fall when the Tigers went 10-2 and reached the district championship game. The pieces around him are stout, too. Clayton Turnbull, an all-conference lineman both offensively and defensively, is a quality counterpoint up front, and Austin Shepherd moves from the line to linebacker and is another gap-filling tackler.

Offensively, the Tigers have big-play potential.

An all-conference return specialist, who returned four kicks for touchdowns last season, Lakoda Preston will move from wide receiver to running



Mark Twain tight end Carter Hawkinson catches a touchdown pass against Palmyra during the Hannibal jamboree at Porter Stadium. | *Photo courtesy Mathew Kirby*

back this fall, but he is still expected to get the ball in space where he can use his top-level speed to gain separation.

Running behind the likes of Turnbull, Brayden Moss and Wyatt Evans will make things easier for Preston. It also serves as a security blanket for Conner Eckler, who takes over at quarterback. Eckler played wide receiver last season, but he understands the offense and has built confidence in his

teammates.

Eckler will benefit from having Ayden Dye and Jaxen Lake as wide receiver targets and Carter Hawkinson at tight end.

Still, the biggest attribute that will carry this team to success is maturity.

They embraced change at an unfortunate time and are ready to prove the sky is the limit for a group that believes in each other.

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Palmyra quarterback Marty Smyser III hands the ball to Aaron Ritchey during the Panthers' scrimmage against Mark Twain at the Hannibal jamboree. | *Photo courtesy Mathew Kirby*

Panthers putting trust in each other to adapt, overcome

By Matt Schuckman

MuddyRiverSports.com Editor

PALMYRA, Mo. — Believe in the process. It's a long-standing mantra the Palmyra football team has been able to lean on in building one of the most consistent programs in Northeast Missouri.

This season will be no different.

"Our guys have seen our teams in the past be fine when the season ends and play great in the postseason because they believed in the process," Panthers coach Kevin Miles said. "We want to

carry on the tradition here, and that means letting the process take shape and building on it each week."

With a variety of new faces in several key roles — quarterback included — it will take trust in the process to survive opening the season with three consec-

utive road games and playing Week 1 at Hallsville without Miles on the sideline.

He will serve a one-game suspension imposed by the school administration as the "result of a situation that occurred in an unsupervised locker room." The incident occurred during a previous season.

Defensive coordinator Tyler Kriete-meyer will serve as interim coach and play caller with Mark Hoerr running the defense against Hallsville. Everything reverts to the original plans and positions thereafter with Palmyra play-

On the airwaves

KRRY 100.9 FM will carry Palmyra football throughout the season. Broadcast schedules can be found at 101theeagle.com.



Palmyra quarterback Marty Smyser III takes over as the signal-caller, hoping to guide the Panthers to a district championship. | *Photo courtesy Mathew Kirby*

ing at Bowling Green in Week 2 and at Centralia in Week 3.

Miles wants his players to approach the opener the way they will every other game. Believe in the process and trust the guy next to you.

“I trust those guys, and our motto this year is trust,” Miles said. “We went in with that idea, and I said to our players, ‘You have to trust in them. I trust in them.’ I trust in the kids to get things done.

“We just have to go with the mantra we’re going to get things done. We’re going to use that as that and move on from there.”

Marty Smyser III takes over as the starting quarterback, allowing Aaron Ritchey, who started at quarterback last season, to become one of the Panthers’ featured running backs, alongside Ashton Hankins. Smyser will have Ryan McKeown, Gideon Bogue and others at his disposal as quality wideouts.

It’s a young group that will benefit from the return of all-conference offensive lineman Jose Juarez to anchor a sizable front five that includes Jayden Sharrow and Gage Barnett.

“He’s nothing but a workaholic,” Miles said of Juarez.

The size translates to defense, too, where Miles expects depth along the defensive front to be beneficial. Jeremiah Edwards and Sharrow will be mainstays up front, with Brett Tuter stepping in at middle linebacker. Hankins also is expected to start at linebacker.

Ritchey and McKeown will play significant roles in the defensive backfield.

Admittedly, there might be some growing pains because of this team’s youth, but Miles is confident if they believe in the process, the Panthers will be salty by district play.

“I believe in my guys and I believe in my team,” Miles said.

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Monroe City football coach David Kirby led the Panthers to the Class 1 state semifinals last season and returns a wealth of talent from that team. | *Muddy River Sports file photo*

Strong leadership will give Panthers opportunity to thrive

By Matt Schuckman

MuddyRiverSports.com Editor

MONROE CITY, Mo. — Ceaton Pennewell's mission is clear.

Never let tradition falter.

Following a Saturday practice at the end of the first week of preseason workouts, Monroe City football coach David Kirby and his staff held a meet-

On the airwaves

KWBZ 107.5 FM will carry Monroe City football throughout the season. Broadcast schedules can be found at kwbzfm.com.com.

ing with the seniors. Pennewell, an all-state linebacker who was named the

Missouri Football Coaches Association Defensive Player of the Year in Class 1 last fall, spoke up.

“He says, ‘My goal is to try to teach the young kids to leave this better than what I found it,’” Kirby said. “He wants to teach them how to play this game, in his eyes, the right way and how to be a great teammate. We’re very blessed with what’s going on with this senior

group.”

They are making the graduation losses which seemed daunting at the time not feel as detrimental as the Panthers look to chase another state championship game berth.

Monroe City fell one game short of that last season, losing to Hayti in the state semifinals and finishing 12-1. Gone from that team are three all-staters who were a significant part of a high-scoring offense, but the pieces are in place to reprise the Panthers’ success thanks to Pennewell and others being vocal.

“Our older kids are being true team leaders,” Kirby said. “They are coaching up younger kids. It’s like having 10 or 11 other coaches on the field. They are holding up the level of expectation. They are doing a great job of really teaching the game of football to the younger kids and what we’re all about as a program.

“I really, really like that. I can’t say enough good things about how they’re stepping up and being servant leaders to the other kids.”

Beyond that, the Panthers are fast, maybe faster than last year’s team.

Three of the four sprinters on the school record-setting 4x100-meter relay team — Pennewell, Waylon DeGrave and Cameron Jones — play a significant role on both sides of the ball, but they aren’t the only ones with the ability to close quickly.

Kirby says defensive end Landon Utterback, who also will tight end, is deceptively fast.

“He’s like a stick of dynamite,” Kirby said. “Once he gets there, there’s a big bang.”

Add Jack Hays at defensive end and Landon Holland and Dawson Carr at defensive tackle and the Panthers may have the quickest front four in the Clarence Cannon Conference.

“They play really fast and at a really high level,” Kirby said.

Then there’s Pennewell, the clean-everything-up linebacker roaming the middle of the field.

“He’s going to make a lot of great plays and he’s going to have a lot of people’s attention,” Kirby said. “But he’s a selfless player. He understands 10 other guys are going to work

their butts off to the best of their ability and try to make plays. He recognizes their efforts.”

Although a few players have switched positions, Kirby sees chemistry and continuity building.

“I really like what I’m seeing as far as their effort and the ability to pick up what we’re teaching them and go implement it very quickly,” Kirby said.

Offensively, DeGrave is coming off a first-team all-state season as a wide receiver and will have Pennewell and Jones in the backfield to help Reece Buhlig settle in at quarterback. If there were any questions about Buhlig’s toughness, they were answered in one practice sequence.

“It was Reece and a linebacker at the goalline,” Kirby said. “Reece wasn’t backing down, and he ran through the kid and made a great play.”

Up front, Landon Friday graded out as the Panthers’ most consistent offensive lineman last season.

“I don’t think enough people know his name,” Kirby said.

In time, they will. That has a lot to do with the Panthers wanting to do more than win games and conference and district titles. They want to leave a legacy.

“They like to compete and they have a little bit of a chip on their shoulder,” Kirby said. “This group is wanting to put their stamp on the program and they want to get out after it. They want to leave their mark.”

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Highland quarterback Brayden Logsdon, left, hands the ball off to Alex Oenning during a scrimmage against Mark Twain during the Hannibal jamboree. | *Photo courtesy Mathew Kirby*

Being healthy, wealthy, wise gives Cougars chance to shine

By Matt Schuckman

MuddyRiverSports.com Editor

EWING, Mo. — Health is the word of the day for the Highland football team.

Devin Stutsman is healthy. Shon Stark is healthy. And the Cougars' chances of replicating last year's historic season and ability to chase a district championship are healthy, too.

That's what Caleb Arnsman has inherited.

After five seasons as an assistant coach helping Dave Degarmo turn

around a program that had been in a three-decade malaise, Arnsman was elevated to head coach when Degarmo resigned to pursue an opportunity in school administration.

What has changed? Not much.

The Cougars still plan to throw the ball and put their speedy wideouts to work. They will lean heavily on an offensive line that has four of its five starters returning. And they want to remain as aggressive and tenacious as they have been in recent years.

The ability to do all of that comes back to being healthy. And they are.

Stutsman played in seven games last fall before suffering a season-ending leg injury. He averaged 22 yards per reception, hauled in 484 yards worth of passes and caught a team-leading nine touchdowns. In fact, 41 percent of his receptions went for scores.

He also is a safety who can walk down and be a linebacker and deliver punishing blows. And Stutsman looks as quick and dangerous as he did before the injury, which is trouble for the Clarence Cannon Conference cornerbacks trying to blanket him.

Stark is the defending Class 2 state



Highland running back Alex Oenning will be part of an explosive offense that returns all-conference wide receiver Devin Stutsman. |

Photo courtesy Mathew Kirby

champion in the discus whose upper body strength and powerful legs make him the perfect bulldozer in the middle of the Cougars’ offensive line. He doubles as an overwhelming defensive end.

It allows Highland to be big and physical up front. “They are going to be the cornerstone of our offense,” Arnsman said.

Replacing record-setting quarterback Drew Mallett and fullback Robert Goehl won’t be easy, but Brayden Logsdon’s move from wide receiver to quarterback gives Highland a signal-caller with experience in the offense and a good knowledge of how plays are supposed to unfold.

Alex Oenning likely will be the feature back, but junior

Will Goings will get carries and touches where the Cougars would like to see him get into space.

Defensively, Goehl was a tackling machine and turned his productive career into a chance to play at Truman State University. Highland will replace by building from the front back as Toby O’Brien returns after an all-conference season at defensive end and Isaiah Strub returns at linebacker.

There will be some new faces defensively, but the pieces are in place to replicate the eight-win season from a year ago if the Cougars can build consistency early.

They open the season with two non-conference games before facing Monroe City in the Clarence Cannon Conference lid-lifter.

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