

sports

HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL

The Albany Herald's 2026 Football Season Preview

AN ADVERTISING SUPPLEMENT OF THE ALBANY HERALD

DCSS FOOTBALL PREVIEW 2026 SEASON

The Dougherty County School System is proud to cheer on our student-athletes as they take the field for an exciting new football season. From the hard work in the classroom to the dedication on the field, our athletes, coaches, and support teams represent the pride, passion, and spirit of DCSS. Come out. Pack the stands. Show your support.



New era begins as Sherwood Christian makes leap to 11-man football

By Joe Whitfield
Sports Editor

ALBANY — For the past four seasons, Sherwood Christian Academy has been one of the most dominant football programs in the Georgia Independent Athletic Association. The Eagles won three state championships in four years, compiled a remarkable 45-2 record and enter the 2026 season riding a 23-game winning streak. Everything changes next Friday night. Sherwood opens its season at Central Fellowship Chris-

tian in Macon, marking the beginning of a new chapter as the Eagles transition from eight-man football to the traditional 11-man game. The move also places Sherwood in what many consider the toughest Class AA region in the GIAA, forcing the Eagles to replace an accomplished senior class while facing a dramatically higher level of competition. “We have a lot of new faces,” Sherwood Athletic Director Jay Flynt said. “We know what we have signed up for. This will give us a chance to see where we stand against some really tough competition.” No team in Southwest Georgia has undergone a bigger transformation this offseason.

The Eagles must replace perhaps the greatest senior class in school history, led by two-time GIAA Player of the Year Tripp Roberts, who is continuing his football career at Georgia Military College. Also gone are an entire offensive line anchored by all-state performers Micah Hall, Aaron Mackey and Jack NeSmith, along with standout receivers Qwinton Murray, Grady Mills and Wesley Brooks. Defensively, Sherwood must replace impact players David Albano and Dallas Williams. Head coach Doug Eason knows replacing that production won’t happen overnight. “We graduated one of the



Special Photo: Sherwood Christian Academy

The Sherwood Christian Academy Eagles will open their new season playing 11-man football Friday night in Macon against Central Fellowship. The home opener follows next week against defending state champion Robert Toombs.



2026 Sherwood Christian Football Schedule

- Aug. 21 - Central Fellowship Christian Academy - Away - 7:30 p.m.
- Aug. 28 - Robert Toombs Christian Academy - Home - 7:30 p.m.
- Sept. 11 - Windsor Academy - Away - 7:30 p.m.
- Sept. 18 - Chattahoochee County - Home - 7:30 p.m.
- Sept. 25 - Calhoun County - Home - 7:30 p.m.
- Oct. 2 - Southwest Georgia Academy* - Home - 7:30 p.m.
- Oct. 9 - Valwood* - Away - 7:30 p.m.
- Oct. 16 - Brookwood* - Away - 7:30 p.m.
- Oct. 23 - Pataula Charter - Home - 7:30 p.m.
- Oct. 30 - Southland Academy* - Home 7:30 p.m.

*Region game

Fantastic Fifteen: Chuck LaGrange ready to lead

Special Photo: Sherwood Christian Academy

Junior Chuck LaGrange rushed for more than 1,200 yards last season as Sherwood Christian’s main running back. This year he takes over under center to lead the offense at quarterback.



By Joe Whitfield
Sports Editor

ALBANY — Sherwood Christian was losing 56-0 when a seventh-grader who wasn’t even supposed to be on the field caught a kickoff and raced the length of the field for the Eagles’ only touchdown. Now, five years later, that

same player is preparing for the biggest assignment of his football career. Chuck LaGrange will replace record-setting quarterback Tripp Roberts while leading Sherwood Christian into a new era as the Eagles transition from 8-man to 11-man football.

See **LAGRANGE**, 5C

Fantastic Fifteen: More than sacks define Clark

By Joe Whitfield
Sports Editor

ALBANY — For most defensive ends, success is measured by sacks. Dylan Clark is learning that sometimes the biggest play is the one that allows someone else to make the tackle. After spending the past several years chasing quarterbacks in Sherwood Christian Academy’s championship-winning 8-man football program, Clark enters his senior season with a different assignment. Contain. Hold the edge. Force the play back inside. Let the linebackers clean it up. It’s a role that won’t always show up on the stat sheet. It also happens to fit Clark

See **CLARK**, 5C



Special Photo: Sherwood Christian Academy

Sherwood senior defensive end Dylan Clark is ready to lead the Eagle defense as the program opens a new era. The Eagles will move into one of the GIAA’s toughest regions this year and play 11-man football after dominating 8-man football the last four years.

Our Services:

Primary Care

Pediatrics

OB/GYN

Dentistry

Podiatry

Vision Care

Behavioral Health

Pharmacy Services

Mobile Access
Care Units

School-Based
Health Centers



ALBANY AREA PRIMARY HEALTH CARE

EXCEPTIONAL CARE CLOSE TO HOME



Learn More About Us:

Albany Area Primary Health Care (AAPHC) is located across 13 counties in Southwest Georgia with more than 90 health care providers and 28 locations. To learn more about our dynamic medical group, please visit www.AAPHC.org.

AAPHC accepts all major insurance plans, including Medicare and Medicaid. Uninsured? No worries! Ask our team about our Sliding Fee Scale program. We’ll be happy to assist you.

Follow us on Facebook at [www.Facebook/AAPHCINC](https://www.facebook.com/AAPHCINC) for more on your hometown medical group.



Growing Up Fast: Knights face new challenge

By Joe Whitfield
Sports Editor

ALBANY — Winning a state championship has a way of changing expectations.

At Deerfield-Windsor, simply making the playoffs is no longer the standard.

The Knights captured the GIAA state championship two years ago before returning to the title game and finishing as state runner-up last season. Now comes perhaps coach Jake McCrae's biggest coaching challenge yet — replacing a record-setting senior class while trying to keep Deerfield-Windsor among the state's elite.

play and now it's here. This is what they have been waiting for. Love these kids, love this team. I am really excited about some really good underclassmen that are coming up."

The challenge will come quickly. "We have four players on offense who have experience," McCrae said. "Everybody else is new. So we are going to have to grow up quick."

Ground attack takes center stage

For the past two seasons, Deerfield-Windsor's offense revolved around the passing game.

This fall, expect a different identity.

The Knights return perhaps

Sophomores Maddox Skipper and Jay Sceals spent the summer competing for the starting job, with McCrae naming Skipper the opening-day starter while indicating Sceals will also see meaningful playing time.

The coaching staff believes the competition will ultimately benefit both young quarterbacks as they develop.

Defense expected to carry the load

While the offense searches for its identity, McCrae expects the defense to become the foundation of the football team.

"The defense is going to have to lead the way for the Knights," he said. "The defense is going to

pears solid with Daniel Hoerner handling punting duties and Bryson Newsome taking over the kicking responsibilities.

New-look region

Deerfield-Windsor also enters a new region landscape.

With rivals Valwood and Brookwood moving down to Class AA, the Knights now share a region with Terrell Academy, Westfield School, Central Fellowship Christian and Tiftarea Academy.

McCrae expects every Friday night to be a challenge.

"The region is going to be challenging," he said. "This region is full of really good coaches and kids that play really hard. All the teams are like carbon copies of each other."

He declined to identify a favorite.

Brutal beginning

If the young Knights are going to mature quickly, the schedule won't give them much time.

Deerfield-Windsor opens Aug. 14 on the road against longtime rival Valwood, carrying a three-game winning streak into Valdosta after surviving last year's thrilling 21-20 victory.

The Knights then return home Aug. 21 to face First Presbyterian Day of Macon, an 8-4 team that finished third in GIAA Class AAAA last season.

"Brutal," McCrae said of the opening schedule.

It may be exactly what Deerfield-Windsor needs.

The Knights are no longer relying on a veteran roster that has already proven itself. This year's team must establish its own identity, and it will do so against quality competition from the opening kickoff.

For McCrae, that's part of the excitement.

The names may be different, but the expectations remain the same: compete for another championship.

Fantastic Fifteen: Pippin ready to lead the Knights

By Joe Whitfield
Sports Editor

ALBANY — The loudest voices are gone.

The seniors who led Deerfield-Windsor to a state championship two years ago and another trip to the state title game last fall have graduated, taking with them the experience, confidence and energy that helped define one of the most successful eras in school history.

Now, when the Knights look around for someone to lead them into a new season, they turn to senior linebacker and fullback Mangham Pippin.

The player who once followed championship-caliber leaders has become one himself.

See **PIPPIN**, 6C



Staff Photo: Sonja Stroyls
Deerfield-Windsor senior Mangham Pippin will play on both sides of the ball again this year - at running back on offense and at linebacker on defense.

Fantastic Fifteen: Tomlinson chases baseball dreams while anchoring Knights defense

By Joe Whitfield
Sports Editor



ALBANY — Gage Tomlinson smiles when he talks about football.

Not because of touchdowns. Not because of championships. Because of tackles.

"I love hitting people and knocking them down," the Deerfield-Windsor senior said with a grin. "Then picking them back up."

That sentence explains just

See **TOMLINSON**, 6C

Staff Photo: Sonja Stroyls
Deerfield-Windsor senior Gage Tomlinson is one of the returners who played in two state championship games and will now be one of the defensive leaders as the Knights try to maintain their spot as one of the top football programs in the GIAA.



Staff Photo: Sonja Stroyls
Deerfield-Windsor seniors Mangham Pippin, left, and Gage Tomlinson are expected to lead a tough defense this season. Coach Jake McCrae said his team will lean on the defense while it figures out what the offense is good at.

Fortunately for McCrae, his young roster has one quality he values above all else.

"I feel really good," McCrae said. "Me and my coaches love coaching and we are going to get to do a lot of that this season. The thing is, these kids we have, love to be coached. They are eager and hungry. They have been waiting for the chance to

their deepest position group at running back with senior Turner Simmons joined by Mangham Pippin, West Rushton and JP Hutchins, all of whom carried the football last season.

"Turner is going to have to be our guy this year," McCrae said.

Replacing the quarterback production from recent seasons won't happen overnight.

have to hold down the fort until our offense figures out what we are good at."

The unit returns considerably more experience than the offense, led by Simmons, Pippin, Gage Tomlinson and Hutchins.

The biggest question comes in the secondary, where the Knights must replace every starter.

Special teams, however, ap-



At **Georgia Community Bank**, we know south Georgia pride shines brightest under the Friday night lights. We're proud to stand behind all of our local student-athletes, coaches, and fans across Southwest Georgia. Because for us, *community* isn't just a part of our name, *it's who we are.*

GCB
Georgia Community Bank

www.GCB.bank

A Relationship You Can Bank On

ALBANY 704 N Westover Blvd Albany, GA 31707 229-514-1760	LEE COUNTY 3000 N Slappey Blvd Albany, GA 31701 229-446-0102	DAWSON 250 E. Lee St Dawson, GA 39842 229-995-4461
--	--	--

ALBANY BLAKELY DAWSON DONALSONVILLE
LEESBURG REYNOLDS ROBERTA

★ — ★

FRIDAY KNIGHTS

GO KNIGHTS!

— **DEERFIELD-WINDSOR SCHOOL** —

PRIDE. TRADITION. EXCELLENCE.



JOIN BIG DAN'S UNLIMITED CLUB!

UNLIMITED
WASHES EVERY
MONTH



New Member Promo

FIRST MONTH FOR PRICE OF A SINGLE WASH!

UNLIMITED
WASHES!

**JOIN
TODAY!**

UNLIMITED
SHINE!

ENJOY THESE FREE AMENITIES

Free Vacuums • Interior Cleaner
Compressed Air • Window Cleaner
Micro-Fiber Towels • Mat Cleaners
License Plate Reader

**ALBANY'S
ULTIMATE
XPRESS CAR
WASH**

Big Dan's CAR WASH



375 N. Slappey Blvd.
Albany, GA

bigdanscarwash.com

*Only available to new members.
Sign up at the 375 N. Slappey Blvd. location.



Staff Photo: Sonja Stroyls
Lee County's Carter Blackwell, Jordan Bush and Jace Murray are three of the nine Trojans who have made Division I commitments as Lee County prepares to open the 2026 football season Friday night against Hapeville Charter.

Talented Lee County Trojans looking for big season

By Joe Whitfield
Sports Editor

LEESBURG — Carter Blackwell could have talked about the college prospects scattered throughout Lee County's lineup. He could have talked about the experience, the expectations or the possibility of another state championship run.

The Clemson-bound tight end chose three words instead. "Just wait and see."

There may not be a more appropriate message for the 2026 Lee County Trojans.

On paper, they have almost everything.

Nine seniors have already committed to Division I programs. The roster includes some of Georgia's most highly recruited players, experienced starters on both sides of the football and enough firepower to make Lee County one of the state's most intriguing teams.

Coach Dean Fabrizio doesn't dispute the talent.

He also knows championships aren't won in August.

"We have a lot of experience and talent returning," Fabrizio said. "We have to get it done on the field to be mentioned in the same rank as championship teams we have had."

That's the challenge.

The Trojans don't have to prove they're talented. They have to prove they're a championship team.

The opportunity begins next Friday night when Hapeville Charter visits Leesburg. The Hornets finished 10-5 last season and advanced to the Class AA state championship game.

It's hardly a warm-up. Then again, Lee County isn't

looking for one.

"Our players and community like the big games," Fabrizio said. "I believe playing great competition makes us better."

Few players will attract more attention than senior wide receiver Jaden Upshaw.

The Texas A&M commit is regarded as the No. 1 wide receiver recruit in Georgia and was recently selected to the Atlanta Journal-Constitution's Super 11, recognizing the state's elite senior football players. After catching 47 passes for 902 yards and eight touchdowns last season, Upshaw gives Lee County a game-breaking threat every time the ball is snapped.

And he is hardly alone.

Running back Dominique Ball provides another explosive option in the backfield. Ball is expected to play college football but has yet to publicly announce his destination.

Then there is linebacker Gregory Batson, one of the centerpieces of a defense that expects to be physical and fast. Batson had been committed to Florida State before reopening his recruitment and figures to be one of the most heavily watched prospects on the Trojans' defense.

Beside him is Army commit Jace Murray, a rare four-year starter who has accumulated 168 tackles, 44 tackles for loss and 14 sacks during his first three seasons.

Murray doesn't shy away from what he believes this group can accomplish.

"I know we can win state this year," Murray said. "We have a lot of talented players and we have really good team chemistry. We work together really well."

LEE

2026 Lee County Football Schedule

Aug. 21 - Hapeville Charter - Home - 7:30 p.m.

Aug. 28 - Carol City (Fla.) - Home - 7 p.m.

Sept. 4 - Sequoyah - Away - 7:30 p.m.

Sept. 11 - Colquitt County - Home - 7:30 p.m.

Sept. 25 - Thomas County Central* - Home - 7:30 p.m.

Oct. 2 - Coffee* - Away - 7:30 p.m.

Oct. 9 - Veterans* - Home - 7:30 p.m.

Oct. 16 - Northside-Warner Robins* - Away - 7:30 p.m.

Oct. 23 - Tift County* - Away - 7:30 p.m.

Nov. 6 - Houston County* - Away - 7:30 p.m.

*Region game

Fabrizio believes that chemistry may be as important as the scholarship offers.

"We have been blessed that the big-time recruits we have had in the past were focused on leaving their legacy at Lee County," he said. "They handled their recruiting, but their main focus always stayed on having a great senior year."

Fabrizio believes this senior class has adopted the same mentality.

"This year's senior group is very close and very focused on having a great season," he said.

There are weapons throughout the offense.

Mercer commit Jordan Bush

See **LEE**, 4C

Fantastic Fifteen:

Carter Blackwell - a matchup nightmare

By Joe Whitfield
Sports Editor

LEESBURG — There isn't a defense in Georgia that can comfortably decide how to cover Lee County's Carter Blackwell.



Staff Photo: Sonja Stroyls

Lee County tight end Carter Blackwell has emerged as one of Georgia's top college football prospects, earning a commitment to Clemson.

Line him up next to the tackle and he's powerful enough to block defensive ends.

Split him out wide and he's athletic enough to beat defensive backs.

Put him in the backfield and he can serve as a lead blocker or slip into the passing game.

It's the versatility that has made Blackwell one of Georgia's premier tight ends and earned him a scholarship to Clemson.

It's also what makes him so difficult to defend.

"Carter is a lot like Tyrus Washington in that he can play as an attached tight end, as a fullback and split out wide," Lee County coach Dean Fabrizio said. "He is truly a matchup nightmare."

The Clemson commitment is the first player featured in

the Albany Herald's Fantastic Fifteen, a preseason series highlighting Southwest Georgia's top high school football players entering the 2026 season.

For Blackwell, football has been part of his life almost as long as he can remember.

He began playing flag football at age 7 and begged to make the jump to tackle football. His mother finally agreed when he turned 9.

He hasn't looked back. "I loved it ever since then," Blackwell said. "I wanted to be better and be the best. Football can get you so many different places."

Those places now include Clemson, one of the nation's premier college football programs.

But before Blackwell heads to

See **BLACKWELL**, 6C

Fantastic Fifteen:

Jordan Bush embraces every role

By Joe Whitfield
Sports Editor

LEESBURG — Most football players spend their careers trying to earn one position.

Jordan Bush has spent his learning all of them.

Quarterback.
Running back.
Wide receiver.
Slot receiver.

Ask Bush where he wants to line up on Friday nights, and his answer has never changed.

Wherever Lee County needs him.

That mindset will likely be tested again this season.

Bush spent much of the summer taking snaps at quarterback after filling in admirably last fall when starter Marcus Snipes was injured. He is expected to begin the season behind center, but

the arrival of Colquitt County transfer Cohen Lawson gives the Trojans another experienced quarterback.

For Bush, it changes nothing. He'll simply play wherever the next snap takes him.

"Jordan Bush is a versatile and unselfish player," Lee County coach Dean Fabrizio said. "He helps us in so many ways—quarterback, running back, wide receiver. He plays wherever we need him to and he plays it well."

That willingness to embrace any role stems from something much deeper than football.

Bush hopes the game can open doors not only for himself, but for his family.

"I want football to help improve my family's life," he said.

That dream began when he was just 4 years old.

Bush started playing flag foot-



Staff Photo: Sonja Stroyls

Jordan Bush doesn't care what position he plays as long as he is helping the team. He prepared as Lee County's quarterback most of the summer, but will also likely see time at running back and receiver for the Trojans this year.

See **BUSH**, 6C

Colquitt County embraces new identity for 2026 season

By Joe Whitfield
Sports Editor

MOULTRIE — Few football programs in Georgia begin a season with a greater challenge—or higher expectations—than Colquitt County.

The Packers will find out exactly where they stand on Aug. 21 when they travel to Thomasville to face defending Class 5A state champion Thomas County Central, opening a season that also includes one of the state’s most demanding region schedules.

After finishing 9-3 a year ago, Colquitt County enters 2026 with a new quarterback, a roster built on chemistry and physicality, and the expectation of competing for another Region 1-7A championship.

Head coach Sean Calhoun believes this year’s team already has developed its own personality.

“Fast, focused and physical,” Calhoun said. “That’s who we want to be.”

The Packers face one of their biggest offseason changes under center.

With two-year starter Cohen Lawson transferring to Lee County, the offense is expected to be led by Khi Mitchell, a transfer from Mount Zion in Jonesboro. Mitchell steps into one of the state’s most scrutinized quarterback positions, replacing a proven starter while guiding one of Georgia’s perennial powers.

Calhoun believes Mitchell is one of several players poised to make a major impact this fall.

Offensive lineman Canyon Cook, defensive lineman Ty’Mhyr Moore, running back Jason Stephenson Jr. and linebacker Markeverin Graham are also among the players the veteran coach expects to emerge as difference-makers.

While talent has never been an issue at Colquitt County, Calhoun believes this team’s greatest strength may be something less measurable.

“This team enjoys being around each other and playing for each other,” he said.

That chemistry, he said, has been built through months of preparation that extend well beyond football practice.



Special Photo: Colquitt County High School

The Colquitt County Packers will open their season in Thomaville against defend- ing state champion Thomas County Central next Friday night.

The message to his players has remained consistent since they returned to school in January: success begins with daily habits.

“We’ve got to stay focused on the task that we’re involved in,” Calhoun said. “That means off-the-field decisions, in the classroom and hallways, in the weight room, in film, and lastly on the field.

“We can become better football players by being better people.”

That mindset will be tested every week.

Region 1-7A again figures to be among Georgia’s toughest, with longtime rivals Lowndes and Valdosta both earning preseason top-10 rankings. Calhoun believes Colquitt County’s demanding non-region schedule is intentional, giving the Packers the opportunity to prepare for the weekly grind awaiting them in region play.

“Our non-region schedule is difficult to prepare us for our region schedule,” Calhoun said. “To become region champions, we must be the most consistent team each week and make more plays than our opponent.”

If consistency becomes this team’s trademark, the Packers believe they’ll once again be playing meaningful football deep into November.

But before region championships and playoff runs take center stage, Colquitt County’s season begins with a cham-



2026 Colquitt County Football Schedule

Aug. 21 - Thomas County Central - Away - 7:30 p.m.
Aug. 28 - Monroe - Home - 7:30 p.m.
Sept. 4 - Cook - Home - 7:30 p.m.
Sept. 11 - Lee County - Away - 7:30 p.m.
Sept. 18 - Lincoln (Tallahassee) - Home - 7:30 p.m.
Oct. 2 - Rickards (Tallahassee) - Home - 7 p.m.
Oct. 9 - Richmond Hill* - Away - 7 p.m.
Oct. 16 - Valdosta* - Home - 7:30 p.m.
Oct. 30 - Camden County* - Away - 7:30 p.m.
Nov. 6 - Lowndes* - Home - 7:30 p.m.
*Region game

pionship-caliber opponent on opening night. This test should reveal just how quickly the Packers’ new identity has taken shape.

From 2C SHERWOOD

best senior classes in school history,” Eason said. “Those seniors set a tremendous standard for leadership, preparation and unselfishness.”

The encouraging sign, Eason said, is how quickly the next generation has embraced those expectations.

“Our young players are beginning to understand what it takes to prepare every day,” he said. “The biggest area we’re still developing is consistency. Young players have great moments, but great teams learn to perform at a high level every single day.”

The move to 11-man football presents another significant challenge.

While Sherwood’s winning tradition provides confidence, Eason said the physical demands and strategic differences require adjustments across the roster.

“Moving from eight-man to 11-man football has been exciting, but it’s been an adjustment,” Eason said. “Schematically, there are more moving parts, more personnel to manage, and the game is much more physical at the point of attack.”

Even so, he believes the core principles that fueled Sherwood’s championship success remain unchanged.

“Whether it’s eight-man or 11-man football, we focus on discipline, physicality and doing your job every single play,” Eason said. “Our players have embraced that challenge. We’re not trying to prove we belong; we’re trying to build a program that can compete at a high level for years to come.”

The Eagles won’t have much time to ease into their new surroundings.

Sherwood joins a loaded Class AA region featuring defending state runner-up Southwest Georgia Academy, perennial contender Southland Academy and former Class AAA powers Valwood and Brookwood. Valwood captured the GIAA state championship three years ago and reached the state finals

again two seasons ago before falling to Deerfield-Windsor.

“Playing great opponents forces you to improve every week,” Eason said. “You quickly find out your strengths and weaknesses, and there’s no room for complacency.”

The schedule doesn’t get any easier after opening night. Sherwood hosts defending GIAA Class AA state champion Robert Toombs on Aug. 28 in its home opener, giving the Eagles another early opportunity to measure themselves against one of the state’s elite programs.

Despite the inexperience, Eason believes several players have emerged as leaders during the offseason. Dylan Clark, Hunter Gregg and Chuck Lagrange have helped fill the leadership void, while the team’s work ethic has impressed the veteran coach.

“The biggest surprise has been how quickly this group has embraced the challenge,” Eason said. “They know people have questions about how we’ll transition to 11-man football, but instead of being intimidated, they’ve been motivated.”

As campus pastor in addition to head coach, Eason said his mission extends well beyond the scoreboard.

“Coaching has always been about more than wins and losses,” he said. “It’s about developing young men who love God, love people and become leaders in their homes, churches and communities.”

That philosophy also shapes how he will judge the season. Sherwood certainly hopes to contend for a playoff berth, but Eason believes success will be measured by more than victories.

“If this team finishes the season more disciplined, more united, stronger mentally and spiritually, and playing its best football in November, then we’ve had a successful season,” he said.

The Eagles may no longer be the experienced powerhouse that dominated eight-man football, but they enter a new era determined to establish the same championship standard in 11-man football.

The journey begins Friday night in Macon.

From 2C CLARK

perfectly.

“It’s a little humbling,” he said. “You’re going for the tackle, but sometimes you’ve got to let the linebacker make the play. That’s just part of it.”

That willingness to sacrifice personal statistics for the good of the team has become one of the defining qualities of the Eagles’ senior leader.

At 6-foot-5 and 200 pounds, Clark returns as an All-State defensive end after recording 51 tackles and six sacks during the Eagles’ final 8-man football season. Now one of only four seniors on the roster, he’ll anchor a defense as Sherwood makes the historic transition to 11-man football.

The challenge doesn’t intimidate him.

“Thankfully, we’ve got a very coachable team,” Clark said. “A lot of us already knew a little bit about 11-man football, so the adjustment hasn’t been that hard. We’ve got good athletes, and I feel pretty good about the season.”

His football journey began almost before he can remember.

Clark was only 3 years old when he first stepped onto a football field.

While many young athletes are drawn to individual accomplishments, football appealed to him for a different reason.

“I think football is the best team-building sport,” he said. “It’s the family aspect of it.”

That family atmosphere has been especially meaningful during his six years at Sherwood.

His favorite football memory came as a sophomore when the Eagles captured the 2024 GIAA state championship at Georgia Southern University.

“It was our first state championship,” Clark said. “Playing in that huge stadium with all the lights—it was awesome.”

Now Clark hopes to help lead Sherwood into a new era.

The Eagles move from 8-man

to traditional 11-man football this fall while stepping into one of the GIAA’s toughest classifications, a challenge that will test one of the youngest rosters in Southwest Georgia.

Clark embraces that responsibility.

A quiet leader by nature, he’s become someone younger teammates naturally follow.

His teammates respect his work ethic, and his willingness to put the team’s success ahead of individual recognition has helped strengthen an already close-knit locker room.

Football, however, has never been the center of Clark’s life. Faith is.

“Our skill is secondary,” he said. “Our faith should always be first. The main focus is glorifying God.”

That conviction shapes his plans long after his playing days are over.

Clark hopes to continue playing football in college if given the opportunity, but his ultimate calling reaches beyond the football field.

He plans to devote his life to children’s ministry or sports ministry, using athletics as a way to share his faith with others.

The son of Samantha and Bo Clark believes football has prepared him for that mission.

Not because of the tackles.

But because the game has taught him what it means to serve something bigger than himself.

Sherwood will celebrate Meet the Eagles Night on Friday before hosting Brookwood of Thomasville in a preseason scrimmage at Legacy Field. The Eagles open the regular season Aug. 21 at Central Fellowship Christian in Macon, beginning a new chapter in school history.

For Clark, that chapter won’t simply be about adjusting to 11-man football.

It will be another opportunity to lead the only way he’s ever known.

By example.

Fantastic Fifteen: Murray brings leadership, physical edge to Trojans

By Joe Whitfield
Sports Editor

LEESBURG — Jace Murray was 4 years old when he discovered what he loved most about football.

He could hit somebody. “I realized I could hit the crap out of somebody,” Murray said.

Thirteen years later, the enthusiasm hasn’t disappeared. “I love to hit people,” Murray said. “And that’s what I’m going to do.”

For four seasons, that mentality has helped make Murray a fixture in the middle of Lee County’s defense. But the senior linebacker has become much more than one of the Trojans’ hardest hitters.

He has become one of their leaders.

Murray enters his senior season as a rare four-year starter for one of Georgia’s most successful high school football programs, and earlier this summer he committed to continue his career at Army.

For those accomplishments, Murray has been selected to the Albany Herald’s Fantastic Fifteen, recognizing 15 of Southwest Georgia’s top high school football players entering the 2026 season.

“Jace is a rare four-year starter for us,” Lee County coach Dean Fabrizio said. “He’s a leader on our team, a great student-athlete and one of the most physical players I’ve ever coached here at Lee County.”



Staff Photo: Sonja Stroyls

Lee County linebacker Jace Murray is focused on helping the Trojan defense contain opponents this season. He is committed to playing college football at Army after graduation.

From 2C LAGRANGE

“I’m really excited for the opportunity to play a different position and to lead the team,” LaGrange said. “I want to be able to help the team in any way I can.”

Sherwood athletic director Jay Flynt still remembers the day he realized LaGrange was special.

“I remember when Chuck was in seventh grade, we were at a middle school game in Vidalia and getting killed 56-0,” Flynt said. “The ball was kicked to Chuck — he wasn’t even supposed to be the guy on the field — and he caught it and ran it all the way back for a touchdown. It was the only time we scored that day.”

LaGrange didn’t begin playing football until he arrived at Sherwood Christian in the seventh grade. The son of Jon and Virginia LaGrange, he quickly developed into one of the Eagles’ top offensive weapons, rushing for more than 1,200 yards as a sophomore while helping Sherwood build one of the state’s premier eight-man football programs.

Now comes an entirely different challenge.

The Eagles have a new quarterback, a new offensive line and new receivers while adjusting to the wider field and different spacing of 11-man football. They also move into what many

consider the toughest region in GIAA Class AA.

“It’s definitely going to be different,” LaGrange said. “We’ve got a whole new offensive line and new receivers. Plus now the field is wider since we are moving from 8-man to 11-man. There is more room, but there are also more players on the field, so the gaps to run through are smaller.”

Despite all the changes, LaGrange likes what he has seen throughout preseason practice.

“We have a lot of talent on this team — new faces but talented,” he said. “We’ve just got to adjust and work together and play together.”

Although quarterback is new territory, football itself isn’t. LaGrange says what he enjoys most about the game hasn’t changed.

“I really love playing football,” he said. “I like the contact, the competition and being able to be with the team and my friends.”

He hopes football continues after high school and plans to play at the collegiate level if given the opportunity.

Before then, he’ll help lead one of the biggest transitions in Sherwood Christian history. The Eagles open the season Aug. 21 at Central Fellowship Christian before hosting defending GIAA Class AA state champion Robert Toombs Academy the following week at Legacy Field.

Sherwood’s championship run in eight-man football is over.

Its next one begins with Chuck LaGrange.

Anderson lays foundation for Terrell County turnaround

By Joe Whitfield
Sports Editor

DAWSON — Before Art Anderson can rebuild Terrell County football, he believes he must first rebuild something else.

Trust.

The Greenwave’s new head coach inherited more than a football program that finished 1-9 last season. He inherited a group of players who have experienced constant change, with the current junior and senior classes already playing for three different head coaches during their high school careers.

“My staff and I are building trust,” Anderson said. “The senior and junior classes have had three head coaches during their time here. Building trust will help everything else come easy.”

Anderson, who spent the past several years as the head football and basketball coach at Merry Acres Middle School, was hired earlier this summer to replace Marco Kirk, now an assistant coach at Lee County

High School.

His mission extends well beyond wins and losses.

“My staff and I are holding them accountable, building character as well as integrity,” Anderson said. “We are establishing faith. They must believe they can be successful on and off the field.”

The Greenwave will take the first step in that process Aug. 21 when they open the season at Chattahoochee County before hosting Scintilla Charter Academy in Dawson on Aug. 25.

As Anderson prepares for his debut, he already knows the identity he wants his team to embrace.

“We will be relentless,” he said. “We will fight until the triple zeros are on the clock. We will be disciplined, be able to handle adversity as well as success. Most importantly, be humble and hungry at the same time.”

Although Anderson has been on the job only a few months, he has been encouraged by what he’s seen since meeting the team in late May.



Special Photo: Submitted

The Terrell County Greenwave will travel to Cusseta next Friday night to take on Chattahoochee County in the football season opener. New head coach Art Anderson and the team have been working through the summer to prepare for the upcoming season.

“I’m very impressed with the hunger they already have,” he said. “When I met these young men, I told them my expectations. Since then, a consistent 25 players have responded every day.”

What has impressed him most isn’t one standout player. It’s the progress of the entire roster.

“These young men have gotten stronger and faster from June 1 to July 24, and I’m talking about significantly stronger,” Anderson said. “They’re finishing workouts that challenged

them when we first started. I’m very proud of the progress we’ve made this summer.”

Anderson said those improvements won’t matter unless they translate into Friday nights.

His only expectation in the season opener is that his players compete with confidence.

“We as a staff just want our young men to compete to the best of their abilities,” he said. “We’re giving them the tools to be successful. We just want them to use those tools.”

For Anderson, success in Year 1 won’t be measured solely by

victories.

He hopes to see his players become better students, stronger leaders and young men prepared for life after football.

“Success is giving these kids the keys to be successful,” he said. “That means in the classroom, being leaders on and off the field, graduating, playing on the college level or becoming pillars of the community.”

Anderson also knows restoring the Greenwave will require the support of the Dawson community.

“We need their support,” he said. “It takes time, patience and a strong will to be great. We have the right people in place to have this program grow and become one to be proud of.”

The wins may not come overnight.

The turnaround won’t happen in a single season.

But if Anderson succeeds in restoring trust, accountability and belief inside the program, the foundation for Terrell County football’s future may already be taking shape.



2026 Terrell County Football Schedule

Aug. 21 - Chattahoochee County - Away - 7:30 p.m.
Sept. 4 - Jordan - Home - 7:30 p.m.
Sept. 11 - Baconton Charter - Away - 7:30 p.m.
Sept. 18 - Calhoun County - Away - 7:30 p.m.
Oct. 2 - Early County* - Home - 7:30 p.m.
Oct. 16 - Miller County* - Home - 7:30 p.m.
Oct. 23 - Pelham* - Away - 7:30 p.m.
Oct. 30 - Randolph-Clay* - Away - 7:30 p.m.
Nov. 6 - Seminole County* - Home - 7:30 p.m.

*Region game

From 4C LEE

rushed for 976 yards and 14 touchdowns last season and gives the Trojans unusual versatility with his ability to play quarterback, running back or receiver.

Blackwell creates another matchup problem. The Clemson commit can play as a traditional tight end, line up in

the backfield or split wide, giving Lee County another way to force defenses into difficult decisions.

Add Upshaw and Ball, and opposing defensive coordinators won’t have many obvious places to focus their attention.

The Trojans are loaded defensively, too, with Murray and Batson among the leaders of a unit Fabrizio expects to play the physical brand of football that has become a Lee County trademark. The defensive back-

field is full of Division I recruits for 2028, including Trey Bush and Montravius Clay.

Fabrizio also points to Murray, Batson and Shavezz Dixon as players who have emerged as leaders.

“The expectations are high every year here in Lee County, so that isn’t anything new for our kids,” he said.

Neither is a difficult schedule. After opening against Hapeville Charter, Lee County eventually enters a Region 2-6A gauntlet

featuring Thomas County Central, Coffee, Houston County, Veterans, Northside-Warner Robins and Tift County.

There won’t be many oppor-

From 5C

MURRAY

three years of starting for the Trojans, he believes his final one could be special.

Really special.

“I know we can win state this year,” Murray said. “We have a lot of talented players and we have really good team chemistry. We work together really well.”

Talent will certainly give the Trojans an opportunity.

Murray believes their ability to play for one another could make the difference.

And as one of the few players who has been in Lee County’s lineup for four seasons, he understands the responsibility he carries in making sure that chemistry survives when games get difficult.

Eventually, Murray will trade Leesburg for West Point. Someday, if everything goes according to his plan, he will trade his football helmet for a classroom and a coach’s whistle.

But there is still one season left.

One more season to lead.

One more season to hit.

And, Murray believes, one more opportunity to help Lee County bring home a state championship.

tunities to coast.

Fabrizio wants improvement in the kicking game, but his larger concern is making sure the Trojans continue progressing as the season unfolds.

“The competition level we play is as good as it gets,” Fab-

rizio said. “We have to be prepared to play our best every week and improve throughout the season.”

If there is a formula for turning all this talent into a cham-

See **LEE**, 7C

From 3C

PIPPIN

“They were our hype men,” Pippin said. “Now it’s more of a challenge to get the energy up, but we will get it.”

Pippin is the latest player featured in the Albany Herald’s Fantastic Fifteen, a preseason series highlighting Southwest Georgia’s top high school football players entering the 2026 season.

For Deerfield-Windsor coach Jake McCrae, Pippin’s leadership isn’t measured by speeches or statistics.

It’s measured by the example he sets every day.

“Mangham is the guy everyone looks at when they need to remind themselves what it takes to be great,” McCrae said. “He understands the benefits of hard work and being a great teammate. Selfless, but also knows his hard work gives him the best chance of attaining everything he wants.”

That work ethic has made Pippin one of the school’s premier multi-sport athletes.

Fall belongs to football. Winter brings wrestling and basketball.

Spring means soccer and track. Before stepping away last sea-

son, he was also one of Deerfield-Windsor’s top cross country runners.

If there’s a scoreboard anywhere on campus, chances are Pippin has competed in front of it.

The son of Trey and Shena Pippin, he began playing football after enrolling at Deerfield-Windsor in the third grade. More than a decade later, he has become one of the most respected players in the Knights’ locker room.

Last season, Pippin finished with 76 tackles and 12 tackles for loss, helping Deerfield-Windsor reach the state championship game for the second straight year.

This fall, he’s chasing another goal.

“I want to break the school record for sacks,” he said.

His aggressive style has been shaped by watching one of football’s greatest linebackers.

Pippin studies Hall of Famer Ray Lewis, admiring the passion and relentless intensity that made Lewis one of the NFL’s all-time great defensive players.

He hopes to bring that same edge to the Knights’ defense every Friday night.

But statistics aren’t what concern him most entering his senior season.

Replacing a championship senior class is.

“It’s been kind of sloppy up until now,” Pippin admitted. “But we will get it together. We will be organized and ready.”

He believes this year’s team has the talent to keep Deerfield-Windsor among the state’s best.

The challenge is making sure everyone believes it.

For the first time, that responsibility falls on players like him.

Instead of looking to older teammates for motivation, Pippin has become the player younger teammates expect to set the standard.

It’s a role he embraces.

His teammates don’t follow him because he demands it.

They follow him because they see him putting in the work long before Friday nights arrive.

Pippin plans to attend college after graduation and hopes to study at the University of Georgia.

Before then, however, one mission remains.

Help Deerfield-Windsor stay where it has become accustomed to being — competing for championships.

Two years ago, Mangham Pippin helped carry a state championship trophy.

This fall, he’s trying to carry the responsibility that comes with keeping a championship tradition alive.

From 4C

BUSH

ball and immediately felt at home.

“I loved it from the beginning,” he said. “It just felt natural.”

Natural has become an appropriate description for almost everything he does on a football field.

As a junior, Bush rushed for 976 yards and 14 touchdowns despite constantly moving from

one position to another. His quickness, vision and versatility made him one of the most dangerous offensive weapons in Southwest Georgia.

Now, with one final high school season ahead of him, he’s aiming even higher.

His goal is 2,000 all-purpose yards.

College coaches have already recognized his unique skill set.

Bush has committed to Mercer University, where he plans to study finance and market-

The game has taught him resilience, helping him overcome adversity while preparing him for challenges beyond the field.

Those lessons will serve him well at Clemson, where he hopes to eventually reach the NFL.

Still, Blackwell knows football won’t last forever.

He plans to major in construction management and someday own a construction or land-clearing business.

His fascination with heavy equipment began long before recruiters began calling.

“I fell in love with big machines,” he said.

For now, however, Clemson can wait.

Blackwell’s focus remains on one last season in a Lee County uniform, one more opportunity to chase a state championship with teammates he considers brothers.

The scholarship is secured. The future is waiting.

But before the next chapter begins, Blackwell believes the Trojans have unfinished business.

“I think this team is very special,” he said. “Wait and see.”

From 4C

BLACKWELL

Death Valley, he has one final mission in Leesburg.

“I think this team is very special,” he said. “Wait and see.”

Lee County returns one of the state’s deepest and most talented senior classes, and Blackwell believes the Trojans have everything needed to compete for a state championship.

His personal goals are simple. Win games.

Keep improving. Play into December.

While recruiting rankings and scholarship offers have followed him throughout high school, Blackwell said those aren’t what he’ll remember most about wearing a Lee County uniform.

Instead, he’ll remember the relationships.

“The brotherhood,” he said. “Everybody’s drive to help me ... being out here with so many different friends and relationships.”

Football has shaped him in other ways as well.

From 3C

TOMLINSON

about everything anyone needs to know about Tomlinson.

He plays football with controlled violence, but he never forgets there’s another player on the other side of the collision.

That’s the way Deerfield-Windsor has taught the game for years.

It’s also why Tomlinson has become one of the emotional leaders of a Knights defense expected to be among the best in the GIAA this season.

Ironically, football wasn’t always part of the plan.

The 6-foot-2, 180-pound senior dreams of playing college baseball and, if everything breaks right, one day pitching professionally.

On the diamond, he’ll be one of Deerfield-Windsor’s top pitchers while anchoring the infield at shortstop.

Football was almost an afterthought.

Tomlinson didn’t put on shoulder pads until he arrived at Deerfield-Windsor as a freshman.

At first, football was simply another sport.

Then came his sophomore season.

He fell in love with the weight room.

He became stronger.

He became more confident.

And somewhere along the way, he realized he had become a pretty good defensive football player.

That season ended with Deerfield-Windsor celebrating a state championship after defeating Valwood in Statesboro.

Suddenly, football wasn’t just preparing him for baseball.

It had become one of the best parts of his life.

Not because of the wins.

Because of the people.

“It’s these brothers that you meet and spend so much time with,” Tomlinson said. “They are friendships that will last a lifetime.”

Those relationships are now driving a defense filled with experienced players.

While the Knights must replace much of last year’s offensive production, Tomlinson believes the returning defense can keep Deerfield-Windsor among the state’s elite.

The focus throughout the offseason has been simple.

Play faster.

Pursue the football.

Finish every play.



2026 Deerfield-Windsor Football Schedule

Aug. 14 - Valwood - Home - 7:30 p.m.

Aug. 21 - First Presbyterian Day - Home - 7:30 p.m.

Aug. 28 - Frederica Academy - Away - 7:30 p.m.

Sept. 11 - Southwest Georgia Academy - Away - 7:30 p.m.

Sept. 25 - St. Anne-Pacelli - Home - 7:30 p.m.

*Region game

Oct. 2 - Lakeland Christian - Home - 7 p.m.

Oct. 9 - Terrell Academy* - Home - 7:30 p.m.

Oct. 16 - Tiftarea Academy* - Away - 7:30 p.m.

Oct. 23 - Central Fellowship Christian Academy* - Away - 7:30 p.m.

Oct. 30 - Westfield School* - Home - 7:30 p.m.

Harrell, veteran defense anchor Blazers’ hopes

By Joe Whitfield
Sports Editor

BACONTON — Four straight victories at the end of last season gave Baconton Charter confidence.

A veteran defense led by two-time Defensive Player of the Year Carson Harrell has the Blazers believing they can turn that confidence into their best season yet.

Head coach Jermaine King enters his fourth season with a program that finally has something it hasn’t enjoyed in years — stability.

Instead of learning another new system, returning players have spent the offseason refining the one they already know. The result, King said, has been a dramatic shift in the team’s culture.

“We’ve seen a big change,” King said. “We’ve had 42 kids out here working during the summer. And the kids are holding each other accountable to be at practice and to be focused on what we are doing — not just be here, but be here.”

That message has become the standard inside the program.

King said players are no longer simply showing up for workouts. They’re investing in one another, pushing teammates through offseason conditioning and spending extra time in the weight room.

“Our improvement in the weight room has been very significant,” King said. “The kids have been working hard, and they’ve spent a lot of time together.”

That chemistry could pay immediate dividends on defense.

King believes the Blazers return one of their deepest defensive units since he arrived, with most of last year’s starters back in the lineup.

At the center of it all is Harrell.

The standout linebacker has been named Baconton’s Defensive Player of the Year in each of the past two seasons and is expected to anchor the defense once again.

“I expect Carson to be there again,” King said. “He has a nose for the football.”

While the defense appears ahead of schedule, several offensive questions remain.

Quarterback is still the team’s most competitive position battle.

If the season opened today, King said Kayden Logue would get the starting nod, although Preston Hurst continues to make the decision difficult.

“Both of them are working hard and doing a good job,” King said. “Kayden is just a step ahead at the moment.”

Logue is also expected to

handle the kicking and punting duties.

King believes running back Braylen Hundley could become one of the team’s biggest offensive weapons after an impressive offseason.

“Braylen has had the best offseason and made huge gains,” King said. “I’m looking forward to a big season from him.”

Perhaps the biggest key to the offense, however, won’t be in the backfield.

It will be up front.

King said Baconton’s emphasis on strength training was designed to improve offensive line play, and he’s looking for a group of six linemen who can develop chemistry before the opener.

“We’re looking for five starters and one guy who can rotate in,” King said. “If those guys can gel together, it’ll make a big difference in us moving the football.”

King also expanded his coaching staff by adding Ryan Marnard as offensive line coach, Jay Tully to coach the receivers and Marcus Singletary to work with the running backs.

The Blazers will again play an independent schedule while continuing to build toward future region competition.

Baconton opens the season Aug. 21 at home against Southland Academy before traveling to neighboring Pelham for a rivalry game on Aug. 28. The schedule also includes perennial GIAA power Southwest Georgia Academy.

“We put some teams on our schedule that will push us,” King said. “We’re working toward being able to compete in the region.”

The Blazers also welcome eight freshmen to the varsity roster. King believes they’ll make an immediate impact because they already understand the system after coming through the middle school program under coach Zack Dallas.

“They know the schemes, the expectations and the terminology,” King said.

For King, that’s another sign the program is heading in the right direction.

Four years ago, Baconton Charter was trying to estab-



Special Photo

Baconton Community Charter School 2026 football team.

lish an identity.

Today, the Blazers believe

they have one.

“I’m looking forward to our

best year yet,” King said. “The

kids are really buying into

what we’re teaching, and good things are coming.”

Fantastic Fifteen: Williams focused on helping Patriots surprise doubters

By Joe Whitfield
Sports Editor

There are plenty of things that can distract a high school football player entering his senior season.

Recruiting. Social media. Expectations. The opinions of everyone who thinks they know what comes next.

Morgan Williams has learned to tune them out.

“Block out all the outside voices and focus on what’s in front of me,” the Westover senior said.

What’s in front of Williams is one final high school football season — and an opportunity to make it his best one yet.

The 6-foot-1, 185-pound defensive back enters the 2026 season as one of the players Westover coach Corey Joyner believes can make a significant difference for a Patriots team with championship aspirations.

“Morgan is one of the most dedicated players we have,” Joyner said. “He plays multiple positions. His speed allows him to help us contain

Division I-type athletes. He’s a great player and a vital part of our defense.”

Williams played in seven games as a junior and has lined up at cornerback and safety while also seeing time at running back and wide receiver during his Westover career.

But defense is where the Patriots need him most now.

His combination of size, speed and versatility gives Westover someone capable of matching up with different types of offensive weapons, and Williams has spent the offseason working to make sure his senior season looks different from his junior year.

He has concentrated on becoming stronger and faster while sharpening the technique required to play in the secondary. Running track has helped develop the speed that has become one of his biggest assets on the football field.

Now Williams wants to turn all that work into something bigger.

A championship. Westover enters the season



Staff Photo: Sonja Stroyls

Westover senior defensive back Morgan Williams will lead the Patriot defense in the backfield this season as the Patriots look to make some noise in the region and push for state prominence.

with plenty to prove after a difficult 2025 campaign, and Williams knows the Patriots aren’t necessarily the team everyone expects to emerge from the region.

That’s fine with him.

“We’re going to shock them again,” Williams said. “Everybody believes in each other. We’ve got to push hard and fight every game.”

That confidence comes from someone who has spent most of his life around the game.

The son of Nature and Tracy Williams, Morgan started playing Pop Warner football when he was 5 or 6 years old, initially drawn to the sport in part because of his older brother.

“I enjoyed being around my brothers playing football,” Williams said.

What began as something a little boy enjoyed doing with his brother has grown into something Williams hopes can change his future.

His goal is to play Division I college football.

Joyner believes Williams has the physical tools to make that possible, particularly the speed and versatility required of modern defensive backs. Williams knows, however, that college opportunities will take care of themselves if he takes care of what is immediately in front of him.

That’s why recruiting isn’t consuming him.

Neither are rankings, predictions or outside expectations. Williams would rather concentrate on Friday nights, his teammates and helping Westover become the team he believes it can be.

Away from football, world history is his favorite subject. On the field, however, Williams is much more interested in writing a little history of his own.

He has one season left to do it.

And if people are overlooking Westover — or overlooking him — Williams isn’t interested in arguing with them.

He’d rather show them.

His football role model is Pro Football Hall of Famer Champ Bailey, one of the greatest defensive backs in NFL history.

Like Bailey, Williams wants to make his biggest impact by shutting down opposing receivers.

And if he continues developing the way Joyner expects, the recruiting attention may soon follow.

For now, Williams is content letting his play do the talking.

After all, that’s exactly what’s in front of him.

From 6C LEE

pionship, Fabrizio believes two ingredients are essential.

Stay healthy.

Stay hungry.

“We have to stay healthy during the season,” he said. “Also, we need to avoid coasting during the season and continue to improve every week.”

That may ultimately determine how this Lee County team is remembered.

Recruiting rankings won’t do it. Neither will college commitments or preseason expectations.

Fabrizio’s championship teams earned their place in Lee County history between August and December. This group must do the same.

Murray believes it can end with another state championship.

Fabrizio wants a team that plays hard, plays physical and enjoys doing it.

And Blackwell?

“Just wait and see.”

Beginning next Friday night, the waiting is over.

Dougherty Trojans push for big gains

By Joe Whitfield
Sports Editor

ALBANY — The turnaround didn’t begin on a Friday night.

It didn’t begin with a touchdown.

Or an interception.

Or even a victory.

It began in the weight room.

Just days after the Dougherty Trojans’ season ended with a first-round playoff loss to top-ranked Jefferson, players who had endured a 2-9 season made a decision.

They were going to become stronger.

Nearly nine months later, head coach Uyl Joyner believes that decision could change the direction of his football program.

“These guys started working in the weight room as soon as they could when they got back from Jefferson, and they have kept working,” Joyner said. “They have worked hard, they have transformed their bodies and now they can do things that they could not do before.”

For Joyner, the transformation isn’t measured only by pounds lifted or muscle gained.

It’s measured by confidence.

“These guys are hungry,” he said. “We’ve definitely seen a change in the attitude and the confidence. These guys are raring to play and they are tired of losing. They have worked really, really hard in the off-season and it shows.”

Now entering his third full season as Dougherty’s head coach, Joyner believes the players who arrived as freshmen when he took over are finally ready to become the team he envisioned.



Staff Photo: Sonja Stroyls

Dougherty seniors Eric Spann, David Burgess and Trevion Williams will lead the Dougherty Trojans to an improved season as Dougherty moves into its fourth season under Head Coach Uyl Joyner.

“I believe this could be our best year yet,” Joyner said. “These guys that were freshmen when I took over, they are seniors now. They have stuck with us and they are all starting somewhere on the field.”

Where it all starts

Ask Joyner about his football team, and he doesn’t begin with his quarterback or his playmakers.

He starts with five players whose names rarely make headlines.

Richard Washington.

Amari Jones.

Jayden Walker.

K’nyron Holliday.

Kyle Jackson.

Joyner believes those five offensive linemen have transformed not only themselves but the entire football team.

“They’ve made a big jump in the weight room and are lifting varsity weight now,” Joyner said. “The offensive line determines what we can do and

can’t do on the football field.”

Because that group is stronger, the Trojans expect every part of the offense to improve.

Sophomore quarterback Micah Joyner returns after throwing for nearly 1,000 yards as a freshman.

His favorite target will once again be senior David “Blue” Burgess, one of Southwest Georgia’s top college prospects who can also line up at quarterback.

The running game will feature Morris Hill, Jayden Richardson and Zion Johnson, while sophomore receiver Jherel Gibson emerged as another offensive weapon during summer workouts.

Iron sharpens iron

The offensive line hasn’t just improved the offense.

It has made the defense better.

“We say iron sharpens iron,” Joyner said. “But sometimes you just get tired of being whipped

See **DOUGHERTY**, 8C



2026 Baconton Charter Football Schedule

Aug. 21 – vs. Southland

Academy, 7:30 PM (home)

Aug. 28 – vs. Pelham,

7:30 PM, (away)

Sept. 4 – vs. Brookwood,

7:00 PM (away)

Sept. 11 – vs. Terrell

County, 7:30 PM (home)

Sept. 18 – vs. Aucilla

Christian, 7:00 PM (home)

Sept. 25 – vs. Terrell

Academy, 7:30 PM (home)

Oct. 9 – vs. Southwest

Georgia Academy, 7:30

PM (home)

Oct. 16 – vs. Jordan,

7:00 PM (away)

Oct. 23 – vs. Southwest

Georgia STEM Charter,

7:30 PM (away)

Oct. 30– vs. Calhoun

County, 7:30 PM (away)

Fantastic Fifteen: Williams leads Dougherty’s defensive charge

By Joe Whitfield
Sports Editor

ALBANY — Every great defense needs a heartbeat.

At Dougherty High School, that player is Trevion Williams.

The senior linebacker doesn’t just lead the Trojans in tackles. He sets the standard for how the defense practices, plays and prepares. When Dougherty needs a big stop, Williams is usually in the middle of it. And when the offense needs a couple of tough yards, he becomes the bruising running back coaches trust to move the chains.

After leading the Trojans with 93 tackles as a junior, Williams enters his final high school season as one of Southwest Georgia’s top defensive players and is the latest member of the Albany Herald’s Fantastic Fifteen, a preseason series spotlighting 15 of the area’s top football players.

Football has been part of Williams’ life for as long as he can remember.

The son of Orlando and Lowrinzo Williams, he began playing for the Georgia Sting-ers when he was just 4 years old and hasn’t looked back.

Now, nearly 14 years later, he’s hoping the game he loves opens the door to a college education.

“I want to go to college to become a physical education teacher and coach,” Williams said.

His play has already attract- ed attention from college re- cruiters. Williams has received six scholarship offers, but he believes a strong senior se- son could bring even more opportunities.

Before thinking about re- cruiting, however, Williams has unfinished business at Dougherty.

The Trojans struggled to a 2-9 record last season but still earned the final playoff berth in Class 3A before running into the state’s top-ranked



Staff Photo: Sonja Stroyls

Linebacker Trevion Williams is the “heart of the defense” for the Dougherty Trojans and will also play running back again this season. A first-team All-Region standout a year ago, Williams is looking to make a big impact as the Trojans have big expectations in 2026.

team in the opening round.

Williams believes that ex- perience will pay dividends.

“We are all buying in,” he said. “Everybody is on the same page. We are focused on the goal to get to state.”

He believes Dougherty has enough talent to make that happen.

The biggest obstacle isn’t physical.

It’s mental.

Williams said learning how

to win consistently is the next step for a program that hasn’t experienced much recent suc- cess.

“It’s just because we haven’t won a lot,” he said.

Even as one of the team’s unquestioned leaders, Wil- liams says accountability goes both ways.

Some of the younger Tro- jans have no problem chal- lenging him when his effort slips, something he appre-

ciates.

Rather than taking of- fense, he sees it as proof the culture inside the pro- gram is changing.

Those are the kinds of moments that give Wil- liams confidence the Tro- jans are headed in the right direction.

As one of the team’s senior leaders, he knows setting the example starts with him.

Whether he’s delivering a tackle, powering through a defender for a first down or encouraging a teammate during practice, Williams understands leadership isn’t about words.

It’s about actions.

If Dougherty is going to take the next step in 2026, Williams expects to be lead- ing the way.

And if he continues mak- ing plays the way he has throughout his career, he’ll also be moving one step closer to his dream of play- ing college football before one day returning to the sidelines as a teacher and coach.



Staff Photo: Sonja Stroyls

Dougherty’s David Burgess will again be a dangerous re- ceiver or maybe the quarterback for the Trojans. Burgess doesn’t care where he plays as long as he can help Dough- erty win. He said he hopes to make a college commitment during mid-season.

Fantastic Fifteen: Wherever needed, Burgess delivers

By Joe Whitfield
Sports Editor

ALBANY — In an era when many of the nation’s top foot- ball recruits want the ball in their hands every snap, David Burgess has spent his high school career asking a much different question.

“What does the team need?”

Sometimes the answer has been quarterback.

Sometimes it has been wide receiver.

Sometimes it’s been safety.

For Burgess, the position has never mattered nearly as much as the result.

“I’ve always had the mind- set of doing whatever was best for the team,” Burgess said.

That attitude has made the Dougherty High senior one of Southwest Georgia’s most respected athletes—and one of its most heavily recruited.

The 6-foot-4, 195-pound play- maker enters his senior season with 15 Division I scholarship offers, including national pow- ers Florida State, Oklahoma and Stanford. More offers could arrive before Burgess announces his college de- cision, something he expects to do during the football season.

Despite excelling on the bas- ketball court as well, the choice of sport has become clear.

“Football can take care of me better,” Burgess said. “I like football better, and I think it’s the best option for me.”

His rise has been anything but conventional.

As a freshman, Burgess wasn’t expected to be Dougherty’s quarterback. That changed almost overnight when re- cord-setting quarterback Kam Davis suffered an injury, forc- ing Burgess into one of the most demanding positions on the field.

He stayed there throughout his freshman and sophomore seasons.

Then last year came anoth- er change.

With Micah Joyner emerg- ing at quarterback, Burgess shifted much of his attention to wide receiver while con- tinuing to help at quarterback whenever needed.

Some highly recruited ath- letes might have viewed the move as a sacrifice.

Burgess saw it as another opportunity.

The transition has helped transform him into one of Georgia’s most versatile pros- pects, capable of changing a game with his arm, his hands or his athleticism in the sec- ondary.

“I work on my craft every day so when game time comes I can be prepared,” Burgess said. “I work smarter at the game and try to outthink my opponents.”

Those traits have caught the attention of college coaches across the country.

But Burgess insists his focus remains much closer to home.

The son of Chantelle and David Burgess Sr. believes Dougherty’s greatest improve- ment this offseason hasn’t been measured in speed, strength or statistics.

It’s been unity.

“Our brotherhood got stron- ger,” he said. “We’ve come together more and play for each other.”

That bond, he believes, gives the Trojans a chance to com- pete with anyone if they can block out the distractions that inevitably come with high ex- pectations.

“We’ve got to stay in our cir- cle and keep pushing,” Bur- gess said. “Not listen to the outside noise.”

His individual goals are am- bitious—1,000 receiving yards while adding another 500 through the air—but they’re secondary to what he hopes will be a memorable final season. “Our way is to the state cham- pionship,” he said.

The recruiting process will eventually end.

One school will win the battle for one of Georgia’s premier athletes. Until then, Burgess isn’t worried about hats on a table or commitment cer- emonies.

He’s worried about Friday nights.

One play he may be throw- ing a pass.

The next he may be catch- ing one.

Wherever Dougherty needs him most, that’s where one of Georgia’s top recruits ex- pects to be.

And that’s exactly where he’s been all along.

Fantastic Fifteen: New school, same big dreams for Spann

By Joe Whitfield
Sports Editor

Eric Spann didn’t leave Mon- roe because he wanted to.

Life simply pointed him in a different direction.

When his mother moved and Monroe underwent a coaching change, the talented defensive back faced a difficult decision. Staying where he was com- fortable or embracing a new opportunity at Dougherty.

He chose the challenge.

“I loved Monroe,” Spann said. “But with friends grad- uating, the coaching change and everything going on with my family, it just felt like the right time.”

Now the 6-foot-2, 180-pound senior hopes that decision be- comes the first step toward an even bigger dream.

Spann has already committed to Georgia Southern, choos- ing the Eagles over 15 Divi- sion I scholarship offers after an official visit to Statesboro earlier this summer.

“The coaching staff really impressed me,” Spann said. “I believe they can help me develop and eventually get to the NFL.”

He plans to major in crimi- nal justice while chasing that dream.

Football, he said, represents far more than a game.

“I’m hoping football can improve life for me and my family.”

Ironically, football wasn’t even his favorite sport grow- ing up.

During middle school, Spann spent most of his time think- ing about basketball.

Everything changed when he arrived at Monroe as a fresh- man.

He discovered a passion for football that has turned him into one of Southwest Geor- gia’s most sought-after defen- sive backs.

Last season, Spann filled



Staff Photo: Sonja Stroyls

Dougherty transfer Eric Spann is one of the most highly recruited defensive backs in South Georgia. Spann has committed to play college football at Georgia Southern.

the stat sheet with 76 tackles, two interceptions, two forced fumbles and two fumble re- coveries, proving he could im- pact a game in almost every way imaginable.

Those numbers attracted college recruiters from across the Southeast, but Spann never allowed recruiting to distract him from improving.

This offseason, he’s focused on refining the details that separate good defensive backs from great ones.

He’s worked extensively on man-to-man coverage, tak- ing better pursuit angles and becoming a more consistent tackler in space.

Now he’ll bring those skills to a Dougherty team he believes is ready to surprise people.

Spann immediately noticed a difference after joining the Trojans.

“These guys want it more,” he said. “They’re hungry.”

That mentality convinced him he had made the right decision.

His arrival gives Dougherty one of the area’s premier de- fensive playmakers and an experienced leader in the sec- ondary.

More importantly, it gives Spann one final opportunity to help change a program before beginning the next chapter of his football journey.

The son of a determined family who has supported him every step of the way, Spann knows his commitment to Georgia Southern isn’t the finish line.

It’s the beginning.

His goal isn’t simply to play college football.

It’s to use football to create opportunities that last long after his playing days are over.



2026 Dougherty Trojan Football Schedule

Aug. 28 – vs. Sumter County, 7:30 PM
Sept. 4 – vs. Spencer, 7:30 PM
Sept. 11 – vs. Monroe, 7:30 PM
Sept. 18 – vs. Crisp County, 7:30 PM
Sept. 24 – vs. Columbus, 7:30 PM
Oct. 2 – vs. Shaw, 7:30 PM
Oct. 16 – vs. Cairo, 7:30 PM
Oct. 23 – vs. Bainbridge, 7:30 PM
Oct. 30 – vs. Westover, 7:30 PM
Nov. 6 – vs. Hardaway, 8:00 PM

From 7C DOUGHERTY

and you fight back. I think that’s kind of where our defensive line got to.”

The strength of the defense will be an experienced linebacker corps led by Trevion Williams, JerMarcus Potts and Tyrone Canady.

One is a four-year starter.

The other two have started for three seasons.

Joyner believes few teams in Geor- gia can match that kind of experience.

Behind them, the secondary has added another difference-maker.

Transfer Eric Spann arrives as one of the area’s most highly recruited defensive backs and joins Amari El- lison, sophomore Jaidynn Snow and freshman Makhi Hill.

Snow, Joyner said, had the best summer of anyone on the roster.

“He picked off more passes than anybody during our 7-on-7s and padded camps,” Joyner said. “These guys are looking for an opportunity. If that ball gets near, they will get it.”

Building a program

Joyner believes the future is just as bright as the present.

Every eighth grader from Albany

Middle School chose Dougherty this year, giving the Trojans one of their strongest freshman classes in years.

“I’m not sure how much they’ll play on varsity this year,” Joyner said. “But this group of freshmen is really talented, and I’m excited they’re at Dougherty.”

Special teams should also remain a strength.

Senior Christian Hernandez re- turns for his fourth season as Dough- erty’s kicker.

Joyner still smiles when he re- members finding him kicking soccer balls into a basketball goal inside the

school gym.

“Christian has always been a pretty good kicker,” Joyner said. “Now he is really good, so he can be a weapon for us when we need him to.”

A new beginning

Joyner knows Region 1-3A won’t hand the Trojans anything.

Cairo enters the season as the fa- vorite.

Bainbridge has a new head coach with multiple Alabama state cham- pionships.

The Columbus schools are loaded with athletes.

Still, Joyner believes Dougherty

belongs in the conversation.

“I think we can match up with any- body in the region,” he said.

Friday night’s preseason scrim- mage against Northside-Columbus at Hugh Mills Stadium will offer the first glimpse of the new-look Trojans. The regular season opens Aug. 28 at Sumter County.

Those games won’t determine wheth- er Dougherty has changed.

They’ll simply reveal what nine months of work have already built.

The turnaround didn’t begin un- der the Friday night lights.

It began in the weight room.

A New Chapter: 2026 Rams ready to write their own story

By Joe Whitfield
Sports Editor

SYLVESTER — Worth County can celebrate 15-0 forever. The Rams just can't take any of those 15 victories with them into Friday night.

The defending state champions will begin again when Brooks County comes to Syl-vester for the season opener, and head coach Jeff Hammond has spent the offseason reminding his players that the championship trophy they earned last December guar-antees them nothing in 2026.

"That is the challenging part," Hammond said. "Each team has its own identity. What will be the identity of this year's team? We will have to use experi-ences from last year, but what we did last year won't win us any

games in the future."

That's the balancing act fac-ing Worth County.

The Rams don't want to for-get the lessons that carried them through a perfect season and delivered the program's first state championship since 1987. But this isn't the same football team.

A special senior class is gone. Worth County has moved into Class 3A. A difficult new region awaits. And every Friday night, the Rams will take the field with a target that comes with be-ing the defending champions.

What they do have is a cham-pionship culture and some elite talent returning to lead the transition.

Quarterback Lyndon Worthy, defensive end Malik Muham-mad and place kicker Brodey Hancock were all named pre-season Class 3A All-State selec-tions, giving the Rams proven difference-makers in all three phases of the game.

Worthy may be the most important.

The senior quarterback enters his fourth season as a starter after directing Worth County's championship offense a year ago. He has already experi-enced just about everything a high school quarterback can encounter, and Hammond believes that experience will be especially valuable while younger players settle into larger roles.

"Lyndon has progressed quite nicely throughout his career," Hammond said. "He's a dedi-cated worker and has been very successful throughout his career. We may need to lean on him more at times this upcoming year. It will be fun watching him finish his career for sure."

Muhammad gives the Rams a disruptive presence on de-fense, while Hancock provides a proven weapon in the kick-ing game.

Their experience matters be-

cause Worth County must re-place a senior class that Ham-mond believes was special for more than simply its talent.

"The 2025 senior class was a special class," Hammond said. "It seems like each game there was a different player that stepped up and made great plays in major moments."

Now Hammond is waiting to discover who will become those players for this team.

"I do think each group this year is progressing to fill those gaps," he said. "We will rely heavily early in the season on who comes back with experi-ence until our young guys catch up."

That's where the residue of a championship season can help.

Hammond doesn't have to convince his players what win-ning football looks like. The old-er Rams have lived it, and the younger ones have watched it.

"The culture has been set here in Worth County," Ham-mond said. "My kids really love playing football. They enjoy practicing. Every day I see a younger kid doing something better that day than they did the day before."

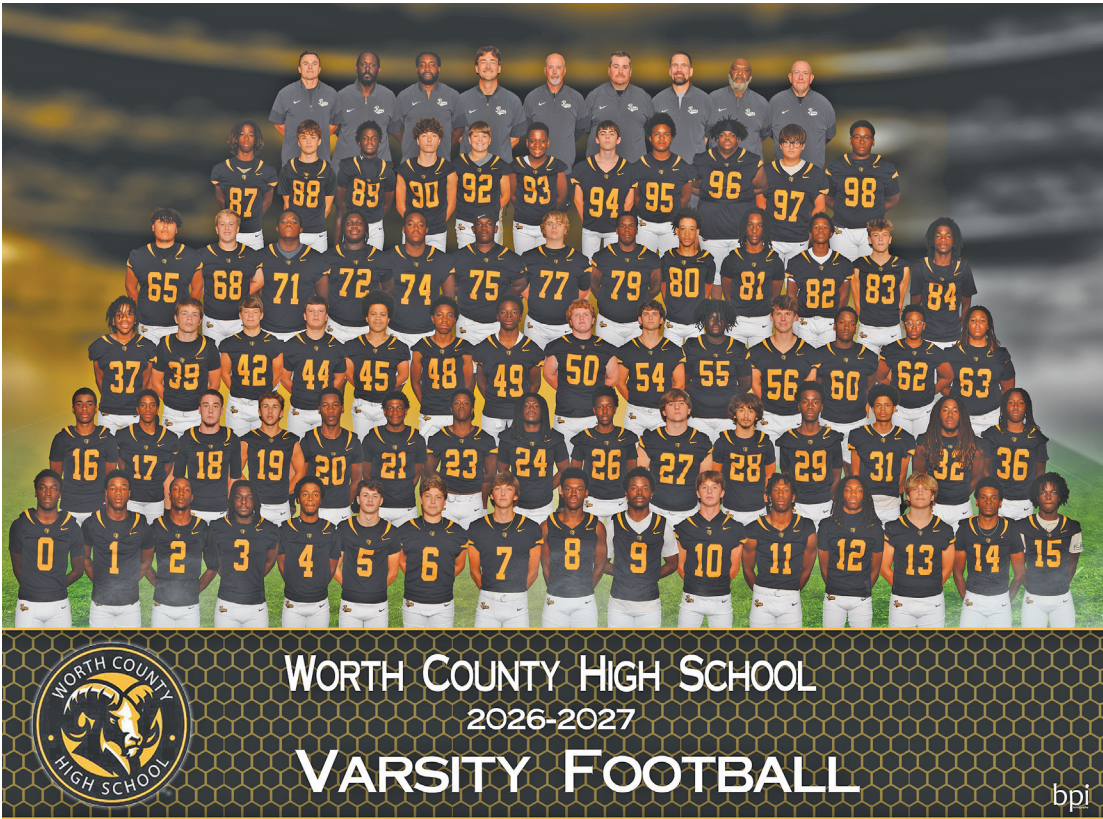
They may need to grow up quickly.

The move to Class 3A puts Worth County into a region that includes Carver-Columbus and Sumter County and leaves little room for an off night.

Hammond isn't complaining. "Our entire schedule is filled with quality programs," he said. "Every game will be a challenge, and we will have to be mentally tough enough to treat each week as a playoff-type game to have a chance to be successful."

If the Rams survive it, Ham-mond believes the schedule could make them dangerous when the games really do be-come win-or-go-home.

"We will definitely be battle-tested when the playoffs begin," Hammond said. "With the qual-



ity of teams in our region, the fan base for all the teams will see some good football each and every week."

The expectations haven't changed.

Hammond said the goals remain the same as they were before Worth County became a state champion: make the playoffs, win the region and win a state championship.

Getting there again, how-ever, will require this team to find its own way.

"Can we continue to improve from week to week? Can we overcome adversity?" Ham-mond said. "Can we tune out the outside noise and focus on us being the best version that this football team can be?"

Those questions can't be an-swered in August.

But Hammond already knows what he wants people to see when they watch the Rams, regardless of the final score.

"Those kids play with class and effort," he said. "They are

poised and disciplined. I just want the people from Worth County to be proud that these boys represent them."

Last year's team gave Worth County a season people in Syl-vester will talk about for gen-erations.

This year's Rams don't have to recreate it.

They have to create some-thing of their own.

That opportunity begins Friday night against Brooks County.



**2026
Worth County
Football Schedule**

Aug. 7 – vs. Valdosta, 8:00 PM
Aug. 21 – vs. Brooks County, 7:30 PM
Aug. 28 – vs. Cairo, 7:30 PM
Sept. 4 – vs. Early Coun-ty, 7:30 PM
Sept. 11 – vs. Thomas-ville, 8:00 PM
Sept. 18 – vs. Fitzgerald, 7:30 PM
Oct. 9 – vs. Kendrick, 7:30 PM
Oct. 16 – vs. Crisp Coun-ty, 7:30 PM
Oct. 23 – vs. Sumter County, 7:30 PM
Nov. 6 – vs. Carver-C, 7:30 PM

Fantastic Fifteen: Jordyn Shorter, From defender to leader

By Joe Whitfield
Sports Editor

ALBANY — Jordyn Shorter never dreamed about becom-ing a quarterback.

He dreamed about making tackles.

Long before he was reading defenses and throwing touch-down passes for Monroe High School, Shorter loved football for one simple reason.

"I liked defense," he said. "I liked being aggressive, hitting people and being around the guys. Winning made me love

football even more."

Ironically, the position he never imagined playing has become the one that now de-fines his senior season.

Quarterback wasn't part of the plan.

It became his opportunity.

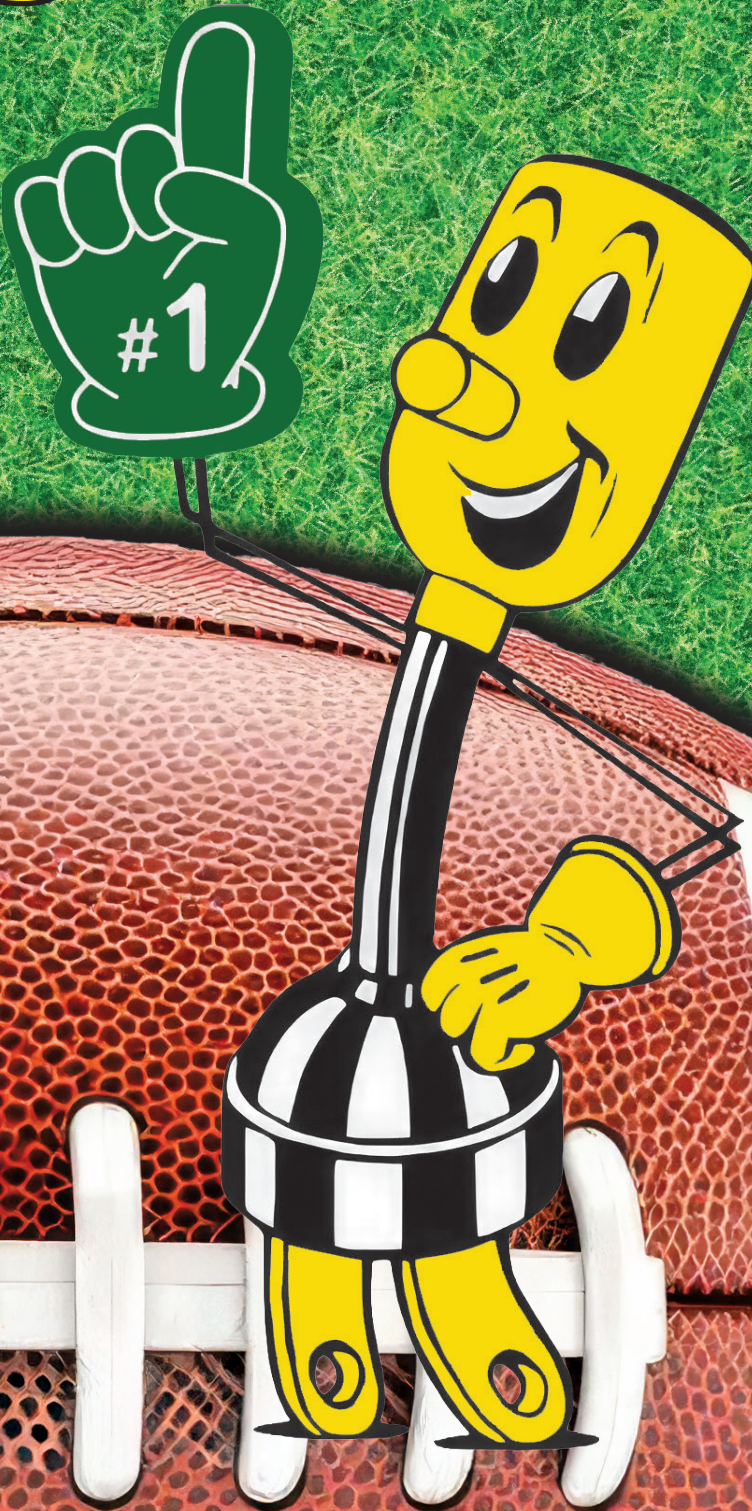
Football wasn't even Shorter's first sport. Soccer came first, followed by basketball and baseball. Growing up, he spent as much time outdoors as he could, and admits he carried extra weight as a youngster



Staff Photo: Joe Whitfield
Monroe quarterback Jordyn Shorter is looking to help his team win and his teammates earn college offers as the Monroe Golden Tornadoes start the season with new head coach Bo Daniels.

See **SHORTER**, 11C

Mitchell EMC wishes you a winning season



**5807 Newton Road
Albany, GA 31706
229-436-0070**

Be Monroe: Daniels gives Tornadoes an identity

By Joe Whitfield
Sports Editor

ALBANY — Bo Daniels has spent the summer talking about what he wants Monroe football to become.

Friday night, the Golden Tornadoes offered the first glimpse.

Monroe defeated Mitchell County 14-6 in a preseason scrimmage, and perhaps fittingly for a program now led by a coach who built his reputation on defense, the Golden Tornadoes made their biggest statement without the football.

It was only a scrimmage. It won't count in the standings. But for Daniels, who has spent his first offseason as Monroe's head coach preaching fundamentals, discipline and attention to detail, it was evidence that the foundation he has talked about all summer is beginning to take shape.

Now comes the real test.

Monroe opens the 2026 season Aug. 28 in Moultrie against perennial state power Colquitt County, and Daniels isn't interested in changing his message simply because the opponent will be one of Georgia's most recognizable programs.

"No matter who we are playing, we've got to be Monroe," Daniels said. "It doesn't matter who it is or what the scheme is. We've got to go and be Monroe, be fundamentally sound and be organized."

That has been the message almost from the moment Daniels returned to his alma mater this spring.

The former Monroe player came home after serving as an assistant at Westover, where he coached the defensive line on Corey Joyner's staff. His first head coaching opportunity brought him back to a program with which he already had a deep connection, but Daniels knew familiarity alone wouldn't rebuild Monroe football.

He wanted a foundation first.

"When you're coming in as the new head coach, you have to start from the ground up," Daniels said. "You have to work with the players, the parents and the coaching staff to get everybody on the same page."

His expectations are straightforward: no excuses, complete commitment and a willingness to sacrifice for the program.

Daniels has emphasized standards for everyone — not just players, but coaches as well — and believes consistency will eventually show up on Friday nights.

"Things come up and you just work through it," Daniels said. "You can't catch me off guard if you lean on your standards and your rules."

Those standards are particularly evident on defense.

Daniels wants a unit that doesn't have to reinvent itself every week depending on the opponent. Alignment, assignments, technique and communication have been stressed repeatedly throughout the summer.

The idea is to give players rules they can trust regardless of what an opposing offense

throws at them, allowing them to play faster without sacrificing discipline.

Monroe's performance against Mitchell County provided an encouraging first return.

The Golden Tornadoes surrendered only six points in the 14-6 victory, showing the kind of defensive toughness Daniels hopes will become a trademark.

He has helped installing that mentality.

Daniels brought four new coaches into the program, including offensive coordinator Cecil Lester and defensive coordinator Roscoe Byrd.

Daniels likes Lester's ability to adapt an offense to the personnel available to him, describing him as a coach with experience getting "a lot with a little."

Byrd brings college coaching experience from Benedict College and Savannah State, along with an attention to detail that fits Daniels' philosophy.

That coaching staff also has some proven players to build around.

Quarterback Jordyn Shorter enters the season as one of Monroe's most important offensive pieces, while receiver Kohlin Brownlee gives the Golden Tornadoes an experienced playmaker on the perimeter.

Jayvin Range, Arzoreion Bryant and Isaiah Rivers are among

the other veterans Daniels expects to provide leadership.

But one of the most encouraging developments of the offseason has been what is happening behind them.

Daniels has been impressed by a sophomore class that includes Jayden Alexander, Robert Adams, Trayshawn Wallace, Curtis Ware and Javion Shavers. Several young players have pushed for larger roles and given Daniels reason to believe Monroe isn't simply trying to put together one successful season.

It is trying to build something sustainable.

"The future of Monroe football is looking very bright," Daniels said.

That doesn't mean Daniels intends to wait for the future.

He expects this team to compete now.

"We're going to show up every game and leave our footprint," Daniels said.

The schedule will provide plenty of opportunities.

Starting with Colquitt County means Monroe won't have the luxury of easing into the season. The Packers represent a dramatic step up in competition from a preseason scrimmage, but Daniels sees that challenge as another opportunity to reinforce the identity he wants his program to develop.

Fundamentals don't change

because the opponent does. Neither do expectations.

And neither, he insists, should Monroe.

The opportunity to establish that philosophy at his alma mater has made Daniels' first offseason particularly meaningful. He has been encouraged by the response from former players and alumni, many of whom have donated to the program and helped provide what the Golden Tornadoes need.

He has also praised the support of principal Lawanna Johnson and the Monroe administration.

For a coach trying to convince players that everyone must be invested, Daniels sees the community doing exactly that.

Now comes the part everyone has been waiting for.

Friday's scrimmage offered the first evidence — a defense that allowed six points, a victory and a team beginning to take on the personality of its new coach.

The next time Monroe takes the field, it counts.

And whether the opponent is Mitchell County, Colquitt County or anyone else on the schedule, Daniels wants the Golden Tornadoes to be recognizable by something more important than the green and gold on their uniforms.

He wants them to play like Monroe.



Staff Photo Joe Whitfield

Monroe senior Kohlin Brownlee has earned his spot in the Fantastic Fifteen for being one of Monroe's hardest-working players since Coach Bo Daniels took over the program. Daniels said Brownlee's speed will make him hard to catch when he catches a pass this season.

Fantastic Fifteen: Monroe's Brownlee focused on earning his shot

By Joe Whitfield
Sports Editor

The dream started in a front yard.

As a young boy, Kohlin Brownlee watched his older cousins, family members and neighborhood friends throw a football around after his family moved to Albany. Before long, he wanted to be part of every game.

Then came a family trip to Ohio when he was 10 years old.

Meeting several well-known football players transformed a childhood interest into something much bigger.

Today, Brownlee is entering his senior season at Monroe with one goal in mind — earning the opportunity to continue playing football in college.

"I want to do well enough to earn a scholarship," Brownlee said.

For Brownlee, however, individual success means little if it doesn't translate into team success.

The Golden Tornadoes endured a difficult season a year ago, missing the playoffs after struggling to find consistency. Brownlee admits that was the toughest part of the season.

"Not winning and not making the playoffs," he said.

This fall, he believes Monroe has the opportunity to change that.

His favorite part of football isn't necessarily making spectacular catches or scoring touchdowns. It's spending Friday nights with teammates, riding the bus to games and celebrating victories together afterward.

Winning, he says, makes all of those moments even more meaningful.

New Monroe head coach Bo Daniels quickly recognized Brownlee as one of the players capable of helping restore that winning culture.

"Kohlin is a very high-character football player," Daniels said. "He wants to win and he works for it."

Daniels was impressed long before the first official practice.

"When I first came over to Monroe, he was there every time, even when he didn't really have to be there," Daniels said. "We were doing condi-

tioning and he didn't have to come because he was involved in other things, but he was here."

That commitment is one reason Daniels expects Brownlee to become one of the area's most dangerous playmakers this season.

At 6 feet tall, Brownlee has developed a reputation for his speed and his ability to make difficult catches in traffic. His favorite route leaves little doubt about the kind of receiver he wants to be.

"I like going deep and catching the ball," Brownlee said with a smile.

Daniels believes those deep routes often end the same way. "When he catches the ball, he's gonna score," Daniels said. "I'm excited for him. He's a kid I'm pulling for."

The son of Natasha Godwin and Caelton Brownlee, Brownlee understands this season represents more than one final opportunity to wear Monroe's purple and gold.

It's a chance to show college coaches he belongs at the next level.

Daniels has little doubt his senior receiver will be successful wherever life takes him.

"He has shown a lot of character and leadership," Daniels said. "He is going to be successful."

Brownlee hopes that success begins with helping Monroe return to the postseason.

If he can do that while turning long receptions into touchdowns, the scholarship offers he's chasing may not be far behind.



Special Photo

Terrell Academy 2026 football team.

Peachey, Eagles ready for fresh start

By Joe Whitfield
Sports Editor

DAWSON — Jack Harris doesn't need anyone to remind him what happened last season.

He lived it every Friday night. One injury became two.

Two became five. Eventually, nearly half the roster was affected.

Approximately 30 Terrell Academy players missed at least one game during Harris' first season leading the Eagles, forcing lineup changes that made consistency nearly impossible. Quarterback Bryse Peachey suffered a broken leg after earning Albany Herald Fantastic Fifteen honors, quarterback Josh Cabitat was also sidelined, offensive linemen were shuffled from position to position, and a promising season unraveled into a 4-7 finish.

Now entering Year 2, Harris believes the Eagles are finally positioned to move forward.

"We're still climbing the hill," Harris said. "But we've got our foot in the door."

The biggest reason for optimism begins with Peachey.

Now fully recovered, the senior quarterback has returned at full strength and reminded teammates why he's been one of southwest Georgia's most respected competitors.

"You don't get to coach many kids like Bryse," Harris said. "He's accepted his role as a leader. He leads by his actions, practices hard every day and he's been giving our defense fits this summer."

Harris laughed when describing the challenge.

"You can't corral him," he said. "He's physical. He's not going to shy away from contact. He'll bring it."

Peachey's return gives Harris the experienced leader the offense lacked for much of last season.

It also helps that the Eagles have more weapons around him.

Senior Hudson Massey takes over at running back after what Harris called an outstanding offseason.

"He's quick, explosive and hard to handle," Harris said.

Junior transfer Alex Klughart arrives from Lee County, bringing exceptional speed and reliable hands to the receiving corps, while sophomore Colt Eisenhart, a transfer from Deerfield-Windsor, has quickly adapted to the Eagles' system.

Cal Powell enjoyed one of the best summers on the team, according to Harris, becoming bigger, stronger and faster while emerging as another dependable receiving target.

Veteran Sam Hester provides additional experience at split end, giving Terrell more depth than it enjoyed a year ago.

One familiar name will have a different assignment.

After serving as the Eagles' top receiver last season, Walt Lee will spend most of his time in the defensive secondary, returning to offense only in selected situations.

The player Harris may be happiest about, however, doesn't carry the football.

"Everything starts with the offensive line," he said.

It's a phrase Harris repeated often while discussing this year's team.

Senior tackles Billy Summerfield, a three-year starter, and Quint Henley center the edges, while junior center Levi Ivey provides stability in the middle. Dylan Freeman, Braden Harris and Jason Birdsong headline the competition at guard, with younger players pushing for playing time.

Perhaps most importantly, Harris believes improved depth will allow many of those linemen to focus primarily on offense instead of playing both ways.

For a small-school program, that's a significant advantage.

"It lets those guys stay fresh," Harris said.

Defensively, Terrell returns much of the same philosophy but with more experience and competition.

Charlie Oosterveen and Grant Suber rotate at nose tackle, while Trey Parrish and Jace

Berry work at defensive end.

The linebacking corps features Freeman, Lex Bryant, Brody Cowart and Liam Kelley, who also handles kicking duties.

"He can kick the heck out of the ball," Harris said.

Lee headlines the secondary alongside Willis Henley, Carson Miller, Landon Parrish, Kipton Fraser and Brooks Strickland, while Mathis Chester and freshman Jackson Moore compete at safety. Charlie Proctor is among several young players pressing for playing time.

Harris said numerous backup positions remain undecided — exactly the type of competition he wants.

"Iron sharpens iron," he said.

The Eagles will need every bit of that depth.

Their schedule offers little margin for error.

Terrell opens Aug. 21 at home against Southwest Georgia Academy, last year's GIAA Class AA state runner-up.

Region play won't get any easier.

Defending state finalist Deerfield-Windsor remains one of the league's measuring sticks under Jake McCrae, while Westfield joins the region with one of the state's most accomplished coaching staffs. Central Fellowship adds another athletic challenge.

"All of the coaches in this region are top-notch," Harris said. "If you're not prepared every week, they'll find your weaknesses."

Still, Harris likes the direction of his football team.

The injuries that derailed last season have healed.

The roster is deeper.

The seniors have embraced leadership.

And after spending the summer becoming stronger both physically and mentally, the Eagles believe they're better equipped for the grind ahead.

"We're excited," Harris said. "Our kids have worked hard. They want to be better, and that's where it all starts."



2026 Terrell Academy Football Schedule

Aug. 21 – vs. Southwest Georgia Academy, 8:00 PM

Aug. 11 – vs. Pataula Charter, 7:30 PM

Sept. 18 – vs. Southland Academy, 7:30 PM

Sept. 25 – vs. Baconton Charter 7:30 PM

Oct. 2 – vs. Central Fellowship, 7:30 PM

Oct. 9 – vs. Deerfield-Windsor, 7:30 PM

Oct. 16 – vs. Calhoun County 7:30 PM

Oct. 23 – vs. Westfield School 7:30 PM



2026 Monroe Golden Tornadoes Football Schedule

Aug. 28 – vs. Colquitt County, 7:30 PM

Sept. 11 – vs. Dougherty County, 7:30 PM

Sept. 18 – vs. Cairo, 7:30 PM

Sept. 25 – vs. Hardaway, 7:30 PM

Oct. 2 – vs. Sumter County, 7:30 PM

Oct. 9 – vs. Bainbridge, 7:30 PM

Oct. 15 – vs. Columbus, 7:00 PM

Oct. 23 – vs. Westover, 7:30 PM

Oct. 29 – vs. Spencer, 7:00 PM

Nov. 5 – vs. Shaw, 7:00 PM

Battle-tested Patriots eye bigger goals in 2026

By Joe Whitfield
Sports Editor

ALBANY — When Westover kicks off its 2026 football season Aug. 21 against Kings Ridge Christian Academy at Hugh Mills Stadium, the Patriots won't look anything like the team that limped through much of last fall.

They're older. They're faster. And perhaps most importantly, they're battle-tested. The adversity that threatened to derail Westover's 2025 season has become the foundation of the Patriots' optimism entering Year 3 under head coach Corey Joyner.

"I think we are going to be better for the next two years because all of these young guys got a lot of playing time," Joyner said. "All of the injuries and transfers might have actually been a blessing in disguise."

That's not something Joyner would have said a year ago. Transfers claimed quarterbacks Keyon Thomas and Jordyn Shorter and running

back Dominique Ball before the season even settled in. Then came injuries to running back Saylor Edwards, quarterback Jayshun Bobbs and Louisville commitment Kyson Mallard, one of Southwest Georgia's premier offensive linemen.

By midseason, Gabriel Hopper — Westover's fourth-string junior varsity quarterback only months earlier — found himself leading the Patriots' offense.

Instead of collapsing, Westover fought its way to a 6-4 record and a second consecutive state playoff appearance. Now those emergency replacements have become experienced veterans.

Hopper returns after starting seven games, while running back Malik Young gained experience in 10 contests after being thrust into a featured role. Young receivers Ahmad Mitchell and Jaden Thomas were only freshmen when they were called upon last season. Today, they enter the fall as proven contributors instead

of promising prospects. "He has improved so much," Joyner said of Hopper. "That game time last season plus the work he has put in ... he is much better."

Westover's offense should also be considerably more explosive.

Young provides speed in the backfield, while Mikhail Simmons has developed into one of the Patriots' most dangerous deep threats. Jordan Joyner gives Westover another game-changing athlete in the return game, and 6-foot-5 tight end Josiah Daniels has emerged as one of the area's most intriguing college prospects.

But Joyner believes the biggest difference may not be at any one position.

It could be team speed. After talking with former Westover coach and athletic director Octavia Jones about improving overall athleticism, Joyner revamped the Patriots' offseason conditioning program with speed as its central focus.

"We are going to be a very

fast team," he said.

The Patriots expect to be just as physical on defense.

Mercer commitment William Owens and versatile defender Matthew Martin headline a veteran front that should set the tone each Friday night. K.J. Weaver and Dan Wallace also return after gaining valuable varsity experience during last season's injury-plagued campaign, while Joyner believes the secondary has made tremendous strides.

"I think we're a whole lot better back there," he said.

Westover's coaching staff also features a unique family connection.

Defensive coordinator Cleatus Hopkins coaches alongside his son, Kameron Hopkins, a former quarterback at both Westover and Albany State who now serves as the Patriots' junior varsity offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach.

The Patriots will need every bit of that experience in a loaded Region 1-3A.

Defending region champi-



Staff Photo: Sonja Stroyls

Westover seniors William Owens, Kyson Mallard and Williams are three reasons why the Patriots are expected to be among Class 4A's best this season.

on Cairo again figures to be one of the state's best teams, while Monroe, Bainbridge, Spencer, Shaw, Dougherty and Columbus ensure there will be few easy Friday nights.

Joyner believes Monroe has improved significantly, says Spencer annually produces outstanding athletes and expects Shaw's young roster to mature quickly.

But after watching his own team grow up under difficult circumstances, he isn't shying away from the challenge. "If we do what we're capa-

ble of," Joyner said, "I think we can play with anybody." For much of last season, Westover simply fought to stay afloat.

This fall, the Patriots believe they're ready to do much more than survive.

They believe they're ready to contend.

Fantastic Fifteen: Mallard returns with unfinished business

By Joe Whitfield
Sports Editor

ALBANY — The season ended before it ever began.

One routine practice. One awkward step. One torn ACL. In an instant, Westover's biggest college football prospect traded Friday night lights for surgery, rehabilitation and the long, uncertain road back.

For Kyson Mallard, it wasn't just a devastating injury.

It was the loss of the season he had spent years preparing to play.

Now, nearly a year later, the 6-foot-5, 320-pound senior is finally preparing for the moment he wondered if he'd ever experience again.

"I'm getting better every day," Mallard said. "I'm still working to get used to the brace on my knee."

Those words have defined the past year.

Every workout. Every therapy session. Every step toward returning to the football field.

Long before he became one of Georgia's premier offensive line prospects, football represented something much bigger than touchdowns and scholarship offers.

Mallard started playing football when he was 5 years old, although his size often created some entertaining moments. "We always had to take my

birth certificate to prove my age," he said with a laugh.

Football became serious after sixth grade, when he realized the game might someday change his family's future.

"I realized I might be able to help my family get into a better position if I became really good at football," he said.

That realization fueled years of hard work that eventually turned Mallard into one of the nation's top offensive linemen. More than 20 Division I programs extended scholarship offers.

Georgia landed his commitment for a time.

Today, his future belongs to Louisville.

After reopening his recruitment, Mallard committed to the Cardinals and says his decision is final.

Now 100 percent committed, he plans to study business management while continuing his football career.

But before Louisville comes one last opportunity at Westover.

Many athletes spend their senior season thinking about Saturdays in college.

Mallard has spent his thinking about Friday nights.

"I'm focused on this season," he said. "I think it will be a big year for us. We've got a lot of talent and I believe we can win the region."

He believes the Patriots have everything necessary to com-

pete for a championship.

"Everything is in place," he said. "We've just got to work through it. We're going to practice hard and follow our coaches. We've got a really good group of coaches, and I really don't think anybody can beat us if we keep working."

Off the field, Mallard enjoys history—especially if it's taught by Westover head coach Corey Joyner, he joked.

The son of Kayla and Bennie Lofton has already accomplished something few high school players ever do by earning the opportunity to play Power Four football.

But that isn't what has driven him over the past year.

His motivation has been much simpler.

Getting back. When Westover opens the 2026 season, most fans will notice Mallard because of his imposing 6-foot-5 frame.

Few will notice the brace supporting his knee beneath the uniform.

For Mallard, that's perfectly fine.

Because after spending nearly a year watching football from the sideline, he isn't thinking about the injury anymore.

He's thinking about the first snap.

The first block. The first Friday night.

And the final season he worked so hard to get back.



Staff Photo: Sonja Stroyls

Louisville commit Kyson Mallard is back and ready to help Westover win this year. The 6'5", 320 offensive lineman is one of Georgia's top recruits and recently earned preseason All-State honors from the AJC.



2026 Westover Patriots Football Schedule

- Aug. 21 – vs. XX King's Ridge Christian, 7:30 PM
- Aug. 28 – vs. Seminole County, 7:30 PM
- Sept. 4 – vs. Columbus, 7:00 PM
- Sept. 10 – vs. Cairo, 7:30 PM
- Sept. 18 – vs. Shaw, 7:30 PM
- Sept. 25 – vs. Bainbridge, 7:30 PM
- Oct 9 – vs. Spencer, 7:00 PM
- Oct. 15 – vs. Hardaway, 7:00 PM
- Oct. 23 – vs. Monroe, 7:30 PM
- Oct. 30 – vs. Dougherty, 7:00 PM

From 9C SHORTER

before sports helped transform him into the athlete he is today.

His first opportunity to play quarterback came almost by accident when his junior varsity team suddenly needed someone to take the snaps.

He answered the call.

At first, he wasn't convinced quarterback was where he belonged.

"My heart really wasn't at quarterback at that moment," Shorter said. "I just wanted to help the team."

That team-first mentality has followed him throughout his career.

Before his junior season, Shorter made one of the biggest decisions of his football career when he transferred from Westover to Monroe, believing the Tornadoes offered him the best opportunity to continue growing as both a player and a leader.

The move wasn't easy.

But it proved to be the right one.

"When I got to Monroe, I knew I could help this team," Shorter said. "Everything took off from there."

A year later, Monroe hired Bo

Daniels as its new head coach. Daniels already knew Shorter from their time together at Westover, and that familiarity helped make the transition into a new coaching staff seamless.

Now entering his first full season as Monroe's starting quarterback, Daniels has complete confidence in the player leading the Tornadoes' offense.

"I think Jordyn possesses everything he needs to be successful," Daniels said. "I know how hard he works, and I believe in him. I'm very comfortable having him back there. He can run or throw—whatever the play requires."

For Shorter, the biggest challenge hasn't been making throws.

It's been making decisions. "Quarterback is a challenge mentally more than anything," he said. "You've got to know what the defense is doing before the snap. There's a lot of responsibility."

Every practice has made those responsibilities feel more natural.

Returning to an offense built on discipline also accelerated the learning process.

"It came easier because everybody was disciplined," Shorter said. "The new plays came easy."

After graduation, the son of Lakota and Phillip Robinson plans to continue his football

career at Judson University in Chicago, where he'll likely play wide receiver or tight end.

Before then, however, his focus remains firmly on Monroe.

"My goal is to win more games, make the playoffs and help my teammates get college offers," he said.

Those words reveal as much about Shorter as any statistic ever could.

Even as the starting quarterback, his greatest goal isn't personal recognition.

It's helping those around him achieve their own dreams.

That journey begins with Friday night's preseason scrimmage against Mitchell County at Hugh Mills Stadium before Monroe opens the regular season Aug. 28 on the road against Class 7A powerhouse Colquitt County.

"I'm excited to play Colquitt," Shorter said. "That's another team in our way."

For a player who once measured football by how hard he could hit somebody, success now looks much different.

It's found in reading a defense. Leading a huddle.

Making the right decision.

And helping an entire team believe it can accomplish something special.



INVISION
TECHNOLOGIES
IT NETWORKING • SECURITY • TELEPHONE • FIRE

WE PROUDLY
SUPPORT OUR
ALBANY AREA
FOOTBALL
TEAMS!

INVTECH.COM
229-446-2004





**EVERY DAY HOLDS
AN OPPORTUNITY TO GET BETTER**

At Georgia-Pacific we know that success requires dedication and hard work.
As a leader in the building products industry for more than 100 years,
we are proud to sponsor all the hard-working teams in our community.

Visit us at www.KochCareers.com/GP to learn more.



Georgia-Pacific
Albany Lumber

www.gp.com