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What to look for this football season

BY MATT HATFIELD

out by No. 6 seed Clarke County, 21-7.

Of the seven James River District football teams, just three were playoff-bound in 2023 with Amelia County, Buckingham and Lunenburg filling the spots.

Amelia finished with a 9-4 mark, advancing to the Region 2A Championship game, where they were ousted by Poquoson, 57-18.

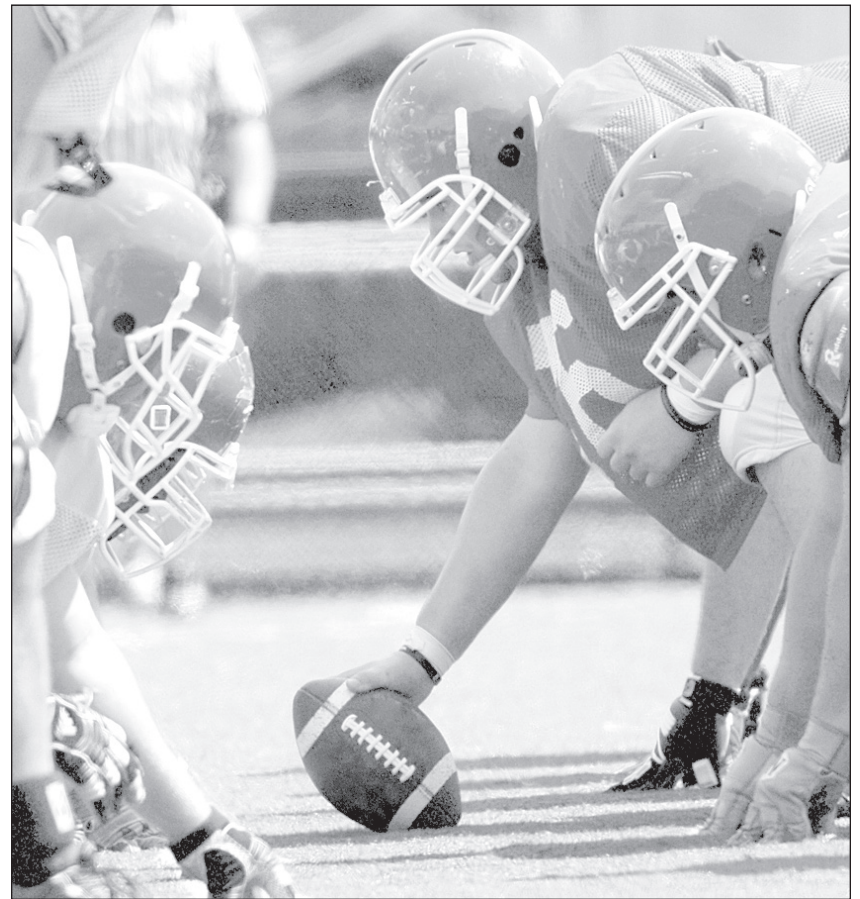
The flag carriers of the district the last two seasons, Lunenburg and Buckingham, each did enough to secure first round home playoff games, but got knocked off in the opening round of the postseason by higher seeds.

Lunenburg, the No. 2 seed in Region 2A, saw its season come to an end at 8-3 overall when they beaten by No. 7 seed Southampton, 44-30. Meanwhile, Buckingham, the No. 3 seed in Region 2B, went 9-2 overall and got knocked

WHAT WILL HAPPEN THIS SEASON?

There are questions galore and plenty to find out about the district's full assortment of teams, which also includes Cumberland, Notoway, Prince Edward and Randolph-Henry. All will be trying to crash the postseason party with the exception of Cumberland, which has pressed the pause button on football for 2024.

For those who missed our coverage of the decision last week, Cumberland didn't have enough older players return to the team this season. Not wanting to put eighth and ninth graders up against 11th and 12th grade players, Cumberland officials decided to shut down the varsity squad for this season. They'll take another look at it next season. But with that being said, it's time to focus on



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the teams that will be competing this year.

We'll be chronicling the storylines and standout performers as well as teams throughout the season, but for the time being until the games kick off, let's give you our six matchups involving JRD squads that most intrigue us heading into the season . . .

**FIVE TO SEE:
August 30**

Nelson County at Randolph-Henry

Let's just call this what it is and that's the rubber match with the all-time series deadlocked at two wins apiece between the Governors of Nelson County and Randolph-Henry's Statesmen. Doubled up by Nelson 28-14 a year ago, Randolph-Henry struggled through a 1-9 mark, but when they prevailed by margins of 26-6 in 2021 and 19-6 in 2022, the squad was on the playoff bubble with 5-5 overall finishes. This is a game that can be a tone setter for Ray Conner's program, hoping to rebound in a big way.

**September 6
Greensville at Nottoway**

These two teams have played nine times since 2009 and seven of those games have been decided by exactly one possession, being eight points or less. That included a head-spinning 50-44 win for Greensville last year. Both teams have designs on being

among the eight playoff participants in Region 2A and winning here is critical. Nottoway might have the best pure running back in the JRD with junior Anton Carter, who already holds offers from Appalachian State and William & Mary. He's the grandson of three-time Super Bowl Champion linebacker Robert Jones.

**September 13
Brunswick at Lunenburg**

Perhaps the most exciting game of the season last year for the Chargers was their 42-41 overtime thriller they won in Lawrenceville over Brunswick. The Bulldogs ended up bouncing back from that loss to finish 9-3 overall and reach the regional semifinals in Region 1B. That win moved Lunenburg to 23-3 in the head-to-head series since 1975. Coach Will Thomas would certainly prefer this one get settled in regulation in favor of the home team.

**September 27
Lunenburg at Buckingham**

These games are generally tough, hard-nosed battled. Twice, the Knights and Chargers have needed overtime to determine a winner with Lunenburg prevailing 14-7 in 2018 in the extra session, while Buckingham won under that scenario, 20-14, back in 2021. It doesn't get much tighter than last year's affair, which Buckingham won on the road 13-10. Another low-scor-

ing slugfest could await these two rivals.

**September 28
Northumberland at Prince Edward**

This is one that you should put on the calendar for a Saturday afternoon, 1 p.m. kick-off, to close out the month of September. Last year's game produced plenty of excitement with Northumberland winning 72-46. Melvin Mitchell, the new head man of Prince Edward's Eagles, should feel confident about his team being able to move the ball and score. Despite a 3-7 overall record, the 2023 Eagles put up 30.4 points per game. Question is will their defense that surrendered 46 PPG last year be improved enough to compete in this game and for a postseason spot in Region 2A? This is a measuring stick game.

**November 8
Buckingham at Amelia**

We'll call this the bonus special because this one figures to have huge playoff ramifications; for Amelia in Region 2A and Buckingham in 2B. Buckingham's 49-6 thumping in the regular season finale last year halted a six-game winning streak for the Raiders, who then recovered to win a couple of playoff games. Amelia has a new head man in 23-year-old Ziyahn Jackson, but can he guide them to the program's first victory over the Knights since 2018?

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'We're gonna have us a solid house'

BY BRIAN CARLTON

For Melvin Mitchell, it's about laying a strong foundation. That's how Mitchell, the new varsity football coach at Prince Edward County High, sees this season. Just like any house, if you want the building to be strong, you have to start with a good foundation.

"It's about building a mindset, developing or encouraging the competitiveness," Mitchell said. "One of the things is we do competition in practice. We've incorporated that. It could be tug of war, sprints, racing or relays."

Mitchell sees the mental aspect of the game as important as the physical, especially when you're just getting started. He joined the team late, taking over as the previous coach had to step aside due to health concerns. As a result, the Eagles haven't had a full off-season to get his offensive and defensive schemes installed. And that's ok. Mitchell isn't looking for them to be perfect right off the bat. What he wants instead is that desire to win, that focus on getting better every day in practice.

Growing up as a San Francisco 49ers fan, Mitchell

PRINCE EDWARD

remembers seeing players like Ronnie Lott explode off the tv screen. If there's an example he wants the Eagles to follow, it's that one, playing with passion and never quitting until the whistle blows. He wants both the players to work hard and for opponents to dread when they see that trip to Farmville coming up on the schedule, because of how much effort his team puts in.

And he sets the tone by example. During practice, you'll see him and his coaches doing push-ups with the players. You'll see them running alongside, offering both encouragement and urging team members to keep going. If the argument is that a team mirrors the nature of their coach, Mitchell wants to make it clear that this is a time for everyone to put in the work.

SETTING THE PACE

It's also not going to be team focused on numbers. Mitchell believes in an up tempo style. That factors in a spread offense, with a lot of run-pass options. That means plugging in the pistol offense at times.

"It's an up tempo offense with just as fast of a defense," Mitchell says of his scheme.



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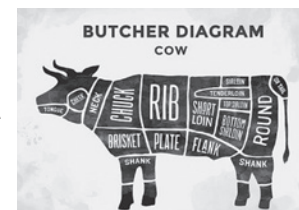
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And he recognizes the challenges that come with taking over at Prince Edward. Mitchell is the third coach in less than a year at the school. Coach White officially retired at the end of the 2023 season. Delquan Bigelow took over, but he had to step down due to some health issues. And now Mitchell takes over a team that went 3-7 overall and 3-3 in James River District play, Mitchell knows the players struggled at times last season, especially on defense. The numbers weren't the best. The Eagles gave up 460 points, surrendering an average of 46 per game. But there were positives too, including a two-game winning streak to end the season.

Mitchell wants to build on that, to apply what he learned in 10 years of coaching in youth league and four years as commissioner. When he first started, there were roughly 40



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to 50 kids showing up for games. By the end of his time as commissioner this past year, that number had spiked to 153.

"I think we're going to surprise a lot of people this year," Mitchell said. "We don't have large numbers, but the guys here, their attitudes and work ethic are in the right place. I look for us to compete."

BUILDING A BASE

But as we said before, part of building a successful program involves laying the foundation. Mitchell says



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that goes beyond the varsity team. Over the last few years, there haven't really been enough players to successfully set up a junior varsity program. That's part of what Mitchell wants to change.

"Varsity is always the end goal, but we're building our JV team strong," Mitchell said. "Hopefully we can build our numbers up through JV and then that can feed into varsity. We need to start at the base, because I feel like for the last three to four years, they haven't had a big JV team. And that kills the varsity because you have 8th, 9th and some 10th graders on JV. If they don't get any playing time, if they just sit on the bench, then some don't come back to the game. And that hurts the varsity, because they're supposed to be suiting up against juniors and seniors in one or two years."

Beyond just maintaining that love of the game, Mitchell said it's hard to get better at something if you just sit on a bench and don't get any reps in. How's a player just out of middle school supposed to be ready to take on a monster running back when they never practiced their tackling technique during a game? This year, the JV squad has also been traveling with the varsity to compete in scrimmages.

"We've got about 15 guys right now for the JV

program but all of them are athletes and awesome guys," Mitchell said. "Their attitudes, their competitiveness is off the charts. Once we get this base going, we're gonna have us a solid house."

LOOKING AHEAD

The team's first game is away on Friday, Aug. 30, going on the road to face Chatham High. The next week, Friday, Sept. 6, the Eagles will be at home to take on Parry McCluer High. Kickoff is set for 7 p.m. in both games.



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Knights primed for repeat playoff run

BY BRIAN CARLTON

BUCKINGHAM

Things didn't quite end as planned last season for the Buckingham County Knights. A strong regular season put them in the playoffs, where they played a tough, physical game. But in the end, Clarke County scored three touchdowns and sent the Knights home in the first round, winning 21-7.

But there was plenty to build on, after last season. Buckingham improved in almost every way over 2022. In 2022, they were 8-3. In 2023, they finished 9-2. In 2022, they went 5-1 in the James River region. One year later, they went undefeated in the region, clinching both a regular season title and holding the rank of #1 defense in the area for most of the year.

And there's the improvement made on the field, on both sides of the ball. Buckingham gave up a total of 99 points

on the year. There are some teams that gave up more than that in one game. Dividing that over 11 games, the Knights gave up an average of 9 points, by far the best in the region. And that's an improvement over the 2022 season, where they only coughed up an average of 11.9 per game.

Now here's where it gets scary for some opponents. The majority of last year's squad were juniors and underclassmen, meaning the Knights seem primed to make another run into the playoffs this year.

LOOKING AHEAD

Last year, the James River region had three teams competing for the top spot. It was Buckingham, Amelia County and Central Lunenburg, then everyone else. Central, as we mention in this publication, appears ready to go for another

round. And there's nothing to say Buckingham won't be vying for the top seat again at the end of the year. Amelia, however, could face some challenges with a younger team, including a couple 8th and 9th graders on this year's squad.

Last year's lone faceoff between Buckingham and Lunenburg turned into a defensive battle, one favoring the Knights. They shut down the Lunenburg offense and picked up the 13-10 victory on the road. Flash forward 12 months and the Knights



welcome Lunenburg to town, halfway through the season. Looking at the rest of the region, barring any upsets, it's not too early to say that Sept. 27 battle could determine the regular season champion in the James River region.



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Why no football this year?

BY BRIAN CARLTON

CUMBERLAND

Last year didn't exactly go as planned for the Cumberland Dukes football team. The group went winless, and struggled on both sides of the ball. They coughed up 446 points on defense, giving up 40.5 on average, while only scoring a total of 126. That's 11 per game. And part of that, coaches told us at the time, was simply because of the age of the players. Cumberland had a very young team, with several 8th graders and freshmen on the roster.

It's hard to ask a 9th grade offensive lineman to suit up and block a 12th grader standing 6'4 ft. and weighing 250 lbs. That 9th grader should be on a JV team, competing against players his own age. When the team this year appeared to be just as young, if

not more so, after losing roughly 13 upperclassmen and replacing them with more 8th and 9th graders, the Cumberland High and district staff made a decision. It was time to put the varsity program on hold.

"After careful consideration of several key factors, including the number of players in the upper grade levels and the safety of our younger athletes, we have decided to cancel the varsity football season for this year," Cumberland Superintendent Dr. Chip Jones wrote in a message that went out on social media.

Now this isn't a permanent shutdown. As Jones mentioned in that statement, this is just a one-year "freeze" to give time to start building up the JV program. As Prince Edward Coach Melvin



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Mitchell mentioned earlier in this publication, a strong JV team makes the varsity's job a lot easier. It helps players develop, much like the minor leagues in baseball. Instead of sitting on the bench or being expected to take on players three times their size, the Cumberland boys will be able to face off against junior varsity opponents their own age. It also gives them reps in game, experience that helps each player improve. That way, when it is their time to "get the call up" to varsity, the players are ready.

And Cumberland isn't the only school where this is happening in Virginia. Auburn High in Montgomery County announced this past week they too were shutting down their varsity program, for at least a year.

The reasons given were the same, with the same plan in place.

WHAT HAPPENS TO THE SCHEDULE?

The biggest problem for the rest of the district is how late in the season this happened. The decision was announced Aug. 15, less than three weeks before each team's first game. And all of the district had Cumberland scheduled at some point in the year.

Prince Edward, Lunenburg, Buckingham, everyone is scrambling to fill the spot left open. Athletic directors and coaches responded the same way to texts and phone calls. They all have a hole in the schedule now and it needs to be filled. The only problem is finding a team with

a similar hole in the schedule on that exact date. Since this process started late, most schedules are made.

And what about Cumberland High? The varsity football season is typically when homecoming week is held. If there's no varsity football, parents and students asked, will there be a homecoming? The answer is the same as back on Aug. 15.

Jones said there will still be a Homecoming Court, Homecoming King and Queen and everything else

that students and alumni expect. It just won't be at a varsity football game.

"Plans are underway to have a Homecoming Week 2024 for Cumberland High, as well as any recognitions," Jones said.

As for the Cumberland Dukes, Jones and his staff are confident this is just a one year pause, to help the program rebuild. They expect to see the team suit up and compete in the near future.

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Undeclared season continues for Statesmen

BY BRIAN CARLTON

While some teams are just getting started, the Randolph-Henry golf team has been going strong since early August. And going strong is an understatement. The team, as of Saturday, Aug. 24, is 11-0.

“We had to play good and get lucky,” said Randolph-Henry Coach Eddie Pyle. “And we’ve played really well. When one person doesn’t play as good, his or her teammates pick them up.”

CHARLOTTE

Coming into the season, Pyle wanted his team to build on last year’s run. Yes, the team finished with a strong 25-2 record, but they fell just short in the district tournament, where the top two advance to the state competition. And nobody with Randolph-Henry wants to be left out this time.

“We hated missing that,” Pyle said.



A look at this year’s Randolph-Henry High golf team. On the front row is Aiden Bryant. On the second row, from left, are Spencer Gibbs, Brennan Evans, Cole Toombs, Garrison Agee, Caden Powell and Garrett Mason. The third row includes, from left, Liam Hottle, Parker Allen, Raegan Barton, Brody Bolton, Sam Critzer and Jack Walker. On the back row, from left, are Coach Kelly Powell and Coach Eddie Pyle.



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"The goal is pretty clear. We want to be one of the top two this year, so we can go to state."

And he's getting some help in doing that from an unexpected source. This year's team adds seven freshmen to the mix and Pyle said instead of struggling, those seven are actually pushing the top players in every way.

"We haven't had a group of freshmen that's been this good in a while," Pyle said. "I think it's great. The more they push the upperclassmen, the better the whole team will be."

He credits the junior golf program in the area for helping develop strong golfers. It's not about just developing your skills. In Charlotte County, the junior golf program makes young golfers think differently about their game.

You use different clubs, you have the opportunity to go compete at different country clubs, so you learn more about the sport and become a well-rounded golfer.

"They're just super organized," Pyle said. "With all they do, it makes you think a little bit more."

LEARNING LESSONS ALONG THE WAY

The one thing Pyle wants to improve on from last season is how the team competes away from home. Their home course is at Briery Country Club in Keysville. And it's clear the golfers for Randolph-Henry love competing there. But last season, the team struggled a bit on the road. Pyle said he thinks it's because the other courses are designed differently, so the golfers had to use

clubs they weren't used to.

"Some of these other courses are a lot longer and our kids just aren't used to it," Pyle said. But the benefit of struggling somewhat last year is twofold, he feels. First, those upperclassmen now are used to the course and know what to do. Beyond that, they can also help their younger teammates know what to expect.

Overall, Pyle just likes what he sees, acknowledging it's still very early in the season. To date, it's almost been a competition between a few golfers to

see who can have the lowest score on a given day. Parker Allen, Caden Powell and Liam Hottle have traded back and forth, finishing 1,2 and 3 each time.

"Everybody has been working hard," Pyles said. "In practice and in competition. I think we're a pretty good team."

Pyles said if everyone keeps that focus, he believes they can achieve their goal this season.

"I really feel like we've got the team that can finish first or second," Pyle said. "We just need to keep working hard."





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'It's a work in progress'

BY MATT HATFIELD

LUNENBURG

With 27 wins over the past three seasons, the Central High Chargers have certainly proved to be one of the top teams on the gridiron in the James River District. Coach Will Thomas is gearing up for his 17th season at the helm and hopes to keep them in contention as the crew from Victoria aims for their 14th consecutive playoff appearance.

To continue with the standard of winning that's been established, Central High will have to do it with a bunch of new faces on both sides of the football. The Chargers graduated 17 seniors, including four players that earned All-Region 2A honors in offensive linemen Hunter Word and Colin Burke, running back/linebacker Connor Mattox (William & Mary), plus versatile defender Seth Bishop.

In fact, just two starters are back on offense junior offensive lineman Jackson Breedlove and senior running back Amarion Moore, who finished just a couple yards shy of breaking 1000 a

season ago. Furthermore, the defense welcomes back only one returning starter. That's junior cornerback Connor Buchanan. Also, longtime defensive coordinator Wallace Owen retired.

Previously the offensive coordinator, Stanley Christopher takes over duties as defensive coordinator, while Thomas will serve as the offensive coordinator for 2024.

So needless to say, Thomas is preparing for some growing pains with several tenth graders up from the junior varsity team filling key roles at quarterback, running back, offensive guard, offensive tackle, center and defensive end.

"With a lot of sophomores, we need some game time and experience. The problem with being new is some of them have never even played in a varsity game before," indicated Thomas, encouraged with portions of his team's August preseason tri-scrimmage with Fauquier and Madison County.

"It's a work in progress"

"I was not upset. It's a work in progress. We really excelled in some things



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and moved the football. We're trying some different things on offense. We're just going to have to be patient. Defensively, we have a lot of work to do, but Stanley's going to get them right. It's just new."

Scoring points has not been an issue for the Chargers, who have averaged over 32 points per game in each of the past four seasons. Moore will serve as the workhorse for the offense from his running back position.

Sophomore Chad Mattox — younger brother of Connor Mattox — slides into the starting quarterback position and will be an impact player on defense from the safety spot.

"Chad actually played some varsity for us at the end of last year and some meaningful snaps, mainly on defense.

He had a really good JV season last year and had some really good runs in the scrimmage," Thomas noted. "He does some things that we don't really specialize in, but we're going to need to utilize."

Another sophomore to watch out for in the backfield is Jalin Freeman, who Thomas says is "really fast," and is expected to make noise sooner than later.

Improvement on defense will be crucial after giving up 30-plus points on five occasions a year ago. Antonio Jones, one of the few seniors on the squad, shined in the scrimmage at defensive end. Damarione Edmonds, a junior who transferred in from Amherst, has been a "pleasant surprise," at the other defensive end spot.

LOOKING AT THE SCHEDULE

Following their season opener, Central High plays three straight home games at Charger Stadium in September against William Campbell, Brunswick and Mecklenburg County, all teams they beat during the 2023 campaign. Their final two regular season contests are also at home, against Nottoway and Amelia County.

Their main focus though is on that first tilt, which comes on August 30th on the road at reigning Region 1B Cham-

pion Altavista, one of the favorites to contend for the Class 1 title.

"There's a team that constantly got better every game," said Thomas of the matchup with the Colonels, who they've beaten three straight times suffering five consecutive losses to them from 2016-2019. "I'm sure they've got tons of dudes coming back. It's always tough and fortunately we've done pretty well against them the past few years. I know they'll be physical and it definitely is going to be a good litmus test for us."

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"Browsers are welcome, and Buyers are adored"

New Eagles squad ready to compete



BY BRIAN CARLTON

PRINCE EDWARD

Before focusing on the season, Prince Edward County High Volleyball Coach Gracen Jones wants to build her team first. We're not just talking about try-outs, even though those were slightly postponed due to Tropical Storm Debby. Jones wants to focus on creating a group, not just a handful of players.

"My goal for this year is team unity," Jones said. "I really want to focus on getting players to gel together, seeing what clicks and what doesn't."

The second-year coach saw the team finish at 6-10 last year, remaining out of the playoffs. But with transfers coming in and younger players moving up, Jones said this is a good time to hit the reset button, to build the team from the ground up.

"I just really think that will take us further than last season," Jones said.

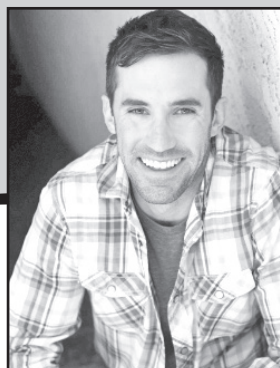
"Last season wasn't what we wanted, of course, but we have an opportunity to learn from that."

Part of that learning comes from Jones herself, as last year was her first as a head coach. She's developing her own style of play, learning what this group of girls does well and where they struggle. She's also seeing a couple players step up so far, even though we're just past tryouts and into team practices.

PLAYERS TAKE ON NEW ROLES

One of those is junior Stephanie Riccio. The rising junior established herself as a leader last season, Coach Jones said, filling a hole made when one of the senior players left.

"She's getting girls to come out of their shells a bit, helping them in areas they might not be as strong in," Jones



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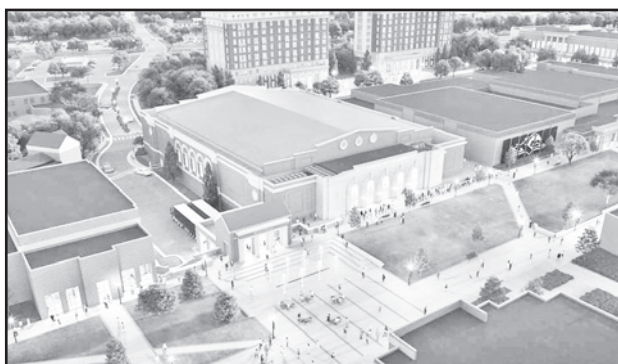
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said, adding that she wants to play Riccio as much as possible at the libero position.

A second player Jones wanted to single out is a new face on the team. Senior Isabella Arbitelle transferred in, after getting her start in soccer. That's how Jones got to know her, as the coach has helped with the soccer team as well. Arbitelle decided she wanted to give volleyball a try and showed up for tryouts.

"She really inspires the girls to come together as a team and try harder," Jones said.

EXPLAINING POSITIONS

In volleyball, there are seven positions on a team. You have the outside hitter, the opposite, the setter, middle

blocker, libero, defensive specialist and serving specialist.

A libero is basically the first line of defense in volleyball. They're the ones who mainly receive serves, pick up the second line of defense against attacks and keep the ball in play once it's been hit over the net by the other team. A libero also works to pass the ball over to the setter, so they can line up an attack. The libero is the #5 position on the team.

As for the rest, let's go in order. The setter is #1 and is responsible, as the name implies, for setting the ball for the hitters. On the Olympic broadcasts this summer, you might have heard a team's setter being compared to a quarterback. The #2 position is outside hitter. This player typically is on the

left side of the court, responsible for blocking and hitting. Coming up on #3 is the middle blocker. This player is found in the middle of the front row, handling blocking and hitting. The #4 player is the opposite hitter. This player is on the right side of the court, opposite the outside hitter, but with the same job. We've already mentioned the libero, coming in at #5 and #6 is the defensive specialist. Much like the libero, but they can play in several different rotations.

Volleyball is something Coach Jones got interested in as a young girl, following her older sister, who also played the sport.

"My older sister actually played quite a bit," Coach Jones said. "Being her little sister, at the time I just had to do everything she did. And it was that, following her around, where I was drawn in. I saw how fast paced it was, and I decided I wanted to learn how to do that."

MORE INTEREST FROM OLYMPICS

One thing that's helped with the turnout for volleyball this year has been the Olympic Games. Jones said she's had

girls come in, saying they want to learn how to play like the women they saw on tv.

"I think with any exposure to a sport, it really lights a fire," Jones said. "Some of these girls had never heard of volleyball before and now they're wanting to play just like the people they saw. They want to learn how to pass just perfectly, how to set up a good attack."

That's also something Jones plans to use as a teaching tool, during the season. She feels everyone on the team, including herself, can learn a lot from the men's and women's matches at the Olympic Games and so there might be times this season when the video is brought out to study gameplay.

As for this season, Jones said she's looking

forward to competing, to testing out her young team. Amelia County, last season, was a bit of a struggle, with the Eagles losing both matches 3-0. Jones is ready to see how this new team does against the defending champions.

"In order to be the best, you have to beat the best," said added. "I'm ready to see what we can bring."



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'You can't worry about the past'

BY BRIAN CARLTON

FUQUA

Last season was a trial by fire in several ways for the Fuqua Falcons. First off, they didn't really get a full off-season with their new coach, as Tyler Cristo took over two months before practices started. More than that, they were switching to an entirely new concept, going from the traditional 11-man football to 8-man, which is very much a different game. It was a challenge for the team, which went 1-8 overall and 0-3 in the region.

"I think they handled it the best way they could," Fuqua Coach Tyler Cristo said. "The schedule was a little daunting, with some teams like Covenant, with bigger enrollments and just bigger athletes. We had a bumpy ride but we weathered the storm. We got better each and every game."

It was, in many ways, learning an entirely new sport. In 8-man competition, the width of the field for 8-man competition is 40 yards. That's about 13 1/3 narrower than the traditional field, which is 53 1/3 wide. All of that translates to a much faster game than regular high school football, with scores that can reach the 70s at times. Typically, most

offenses have two fewer offensive tackles and one less receiver, but a creative coach can mix and match. And overall, Cristo said he was impressed with how players adapted to the game.

"We were in every game until the second half, where we gassed out a lot," Cristo said. "We just ran out of juice. We were tired and couldn't get off the field on third down to save our lives."

THE BENEFITS OF A FULL OFF-SEASON

This time around, things are a bit different. The Falcons had a full off-season to study up, both on the game itself and Cristo's playbook. Cristo also took advantage of the extra time to help build up the team's conditioning. He brought in Tim Evans from the FIT Academy, to work with and help condition players from February through the end of school.

This year, Cristo is also switching the scheme a bit, incorporating more of the Pistol offense. Switching to the Pistol means the quarterback lines up four yards behind center, instead of the seven in a traditional shotgun formation. The running back is three yards

behind the quarterback, giving some more options. The goal for Fuqua is to run with a three-man offensive line, then two receivers and a slot, playing off the ball.

"I just think we needed some more misdirection, some more motion in our offense," Cristo said about why he made the move to the Pistol. "Most of our plays have three options in it. The quarterback has to be quick, he's got to be decisive and this is a timing offense

now, so he and the others have to be in sync."

That quarterback will be sophomore Colton Reynolds. Cristo praised Reynolds' dedication to learning the plays and improving.

"He and his family went to Denmark last month and he took his playbook," Cristo said. "He asked for and I gave him work to do while over there. He studies. He wants to do great. That's always a plus, when you have coachable kids."




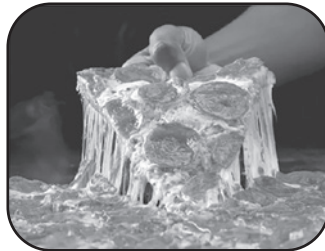
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Cristo also singled out Jackson Hicks as a key part of this year's offense. The junior, who comes in at 6'1" and 191 lbs., is part running back, part wide receiver and part free safety, playing all over the field.

"He's gonna be our go-to guy," Cristo said. "He's gonna have the ball in his hands a lot."

And one other player who came in and surprised during camp was freshman Reilly Carter.

"He's a ninth grader, but he's going to get significant time," Cristo said of the linebacker, who will also suit up as a running back this year. "He's probably one of the hardest hitters already on

our team. He is going to be a force to be reckoned with as he gets older and matures. I'm anxious and excited to see him in action."

BUILDING FOR NOW AND THE FUTURE

This is a young group suiting up for Fuqua, with just two seniors on the team. Cristo said the biggest thing he wants to do this season is change the mindset, not just from players but the community as well. A mindset that says the team is already the underdog before they even take the field.

"I want them going into the game and thinking we have a chance," Cristo said. "Not being defeated before they



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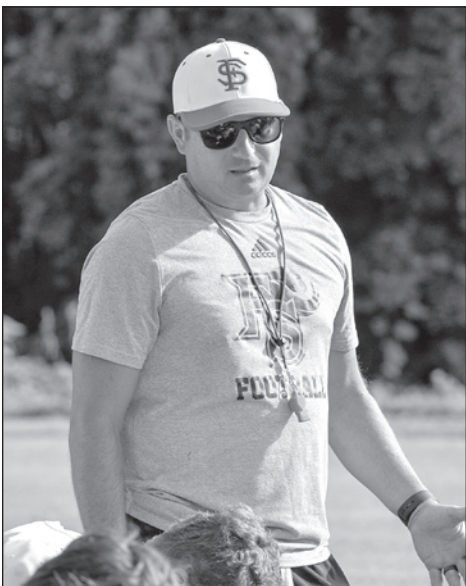


even walk out on the field. That's the biggest thing with these kids. If they look down the schedule and say oh we don't even have a chance, we have to change that mind-set."

And so far, through practice and scrimmages, Cristo likes what he sees. Now it's time to put that into practice, with the season set to start.

"It's about believing in yourself," Cristo said about keys to winning. "You've got to do your job. We have to quit worrying about someone else's job. You also can't worry about the past. It's about each and every day, getting better than the day before."

Fuqua starts their season on the road Friday, Aug. 30, as they travel to take on Quantico. Their first home game is set for Friday, Sept. 6, as they'll play host to Greenbrier Christian Academy, with kickoff set for 7 p.m.



PHOTOS BY JOHN KARRATTI

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Statesmen ready to get to work

BY BRIAN CARLTON

CHARLOTTE

It was just bad luck. Last season, the Randolph-Henry Statesmen coaching staff saw positives heading into the season. They saw young players taking a next step and upperclassmen stepping into leadership roles. Overall, Coach Ray Conner was encouraged by what he saw. And then the injuries hit. It wasn't just one or two. Multiple players in key roles went down early in the year and didn't return, putting the games on the shoulders of very young competitors. Those injuries also took away the team's depth, leaving them shorthanded at times en route to a 1-9 finish.

It's hard losing one starter in a high school football season. Losing two is a challenge. But lose three or more, like the Statesmen did, and it completely changes things. You have to restructure game plans, as the replacement players often have different skillsets. There are some plays you can't run anymore and new ones you have to draw up, to play to the strengths of the new starters.

"To be honest, last year we just started off with numerous injuries and we never fully recovered," Conner said. "Guys who played game one or game two couldn't make it the rest of the way."



JOHN KARRATTI

Cameron Sizemore suited up as both a tailback and middle linebacker, so it was almost like losing two players at once. The same goes for Colton Mann. The junior played both wide receiver and outside linebacker, meaning that the Statesmen lost a blocker on one side and a key part of the defense on the other. Malachi Gamble was a wide receiver and a defensive back.

SOME BENEFITS FROM LAST YEAR

But the benefit of all that is now you have a much deeper Randolph-Henry team, with younger players that have game experience. That, combined with players moving up to the varsity, gives the Statesmen some depth that just didn't exist last season.

"The guys I have returning are definitely my leaders this year, taking larger roles," Conner said. "I can't say enough about what it means, having a healthy team. Having that depth just puts us in a better position. We can give players a rest, we can use depth we didn't have before, so I feel like we're in better shape."

Beyond just adding depth, Conner said he's been impressed in practice with what the younger players are bringing to the table. There's a good chance plenty of them will see significant playing time.

"We have a good core group of young guys, ready to step up and play this

year," Conner said.

Conner also praised some players who have taken on a variety of roles and others who are transitioning to new positions on the field.

One of those players Conner singled out is Aviaire Jennings. Pulling double duty in 2022 as both tight end and running back, Jennings took on a larger role in the running game last season. Now he steps behind center in a different way, as quarterback for the Statesmen. Mann also returns, as both linebacker and receiver for this year's squad.

"At this point, I feel comfortable now and I really think this group could get us back on track," Conner said.

SAYING THANKS

And beyond the team itself, Conner said he couldn't thank the Randolph-Henry community enough for how they've stuck with the team through the good and the bad. He said people may not realize what having them continue to show up and cheer meant for the team through what they were going through in 2023 and what that continued support means now. Armed with a healthy team and ready to go, Conner said the Statesmen are coming to compete this season.

"We feel like there are some things we left out last year," Conner said. "We're better this time. We're ready to get to work."

The Statesmen start this season off at home, playing Nelson County High on Friday, Aug. 30. Kickoff is set for 7 p.m.

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Kavaliers look to build off success

BY BRIAN CARLTON

KENSTON

Unlike most teams, for Kenston Forest, the football season has already started. The Kavaliers went on the road Friday, Aug. 23, taking on Greenbrier Christian Academy. It was a matchup where Kenston Forest struggled, losing 58-18 on the road.

Last season was an impressive one for the team. In 2022, they had gone 3-7, giving up 126 more points than they scored. Last season, the Kavaliers reversed all that, going 7-3 with an offense that generated more than 4500 total yards. Two key parts of that offensive juggernaut are gone, however. Massive 6'7" senior Gergely Hudak is playing college football at Dartmouth and quarterback Noah Cole has graduated as well.

That leaves a young team heading into the 2024 season, with less than eight seniors. Now all of those players are one year older, with more confidence about what it takes to play on this level. That development has already shown on the field, as Kavaliers Head Coach Joe Kaiser likes what he sees.

"The Kenston Forest football team had a very successful training camp,"

Kaiser said. He pointed to the fact the team beat Fuqua 36-0 in their opening scrimmage this month as evidence of the growth on both sides of the ball. And while the first game of the season didn't exactly go as planned, Kaiser still sees positives from what they've been working on in practice.

WHAT IS KAVALIER FOOTBALL?

Now one thing that might be different, if you're going to your first Kenston Forest game, is the fact they play 8 on 8 football. This is mainly used by schools and divisions with smaller enrollments. Typically, most offenses have two fewer offensive tackles and one less receiver, but a creative coach can mix and match.

Players also compete on a smaller field. The width of the field is 40 yards. That's about 13 1/3 narrower than the traditional field, which is 53 1/3 wide. All of that translates to a much faster game than regular high school football, with scores that can reach the 70s at times.

The schedule also shifts around more than other schools. For the Virginia Independent Schools Football

League, teams play on Wednesday, Thursday, Friday or Saturday, there's just no set day of the week for games to take place.

But for the majority of Kenston Forest players, this is normal. And this time around, they're coming in with a lot more confidence.

That's an attitude they'll need, with some fierce competition on the schedule this year. The Covenant comes to town on Sept. 26, but the biggest

challenge could be on Oct. 10. The Kavaliers go on the road that day to face off against Brunswick Academy. Last season, Brunswick went undefeated at 13-0, dominating on both sides of the ball. The team scored 748 total points last season, averaging out to 74 points per game. Their defense only coughed up 86 total points in the same time.

The team will host its first home game on Thursday, Aug. 29, with kick-off set for 6:30 p.m.



The Kenston Forest Kavaliers chose their leaders for the 2024 season. From left, this year's group includes 11th grade DE/TE Steve Nash (88), 11th grade QB Devin Dunn (12), senior RB and LB/WR Zain Queen (2), senior Middle LB Nathan Daniel (23) and senior Center and DT Dylan Tuck (66).

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New faces, more changes for Tigers

BY BRIAN CARLTON

HAMPDEN-SYDNEY

In order to build a stronger Hampden-Sydney football program, you have to do it from the ground up. And for new head coach Vince Luvara, that means making changes in ways that don't automatically show up on the field. But if all goes according to plan, by the end of the season, the results will be pretty clear.

Luvara and his staff already achieved two records for the Tigers. First, they brought 156 players to camp, the most in school history. And second, out of that 156, a total of 82 are freshmen. That means for the first time in a long

time, Hampden-Sydney will be playing junior varsity games.

"We needed to build the roster up at certain positions to have the depth to play these (JV) games. You don't get better by watching," Luvara said. "You don't get better by being on the scout team. You're only going to get your freshmen better by getting them reps. That's a core belief I have."

At some point in the season, Luvara said, there's a good chance some of those freshmen will be needed due to injuries. And in order to get them ready for those moments, the freshmen

have to be competing now. That's why Luvara set up the junior varsity games. There are five JV games, scheduled for early in the season.

'WE REALLY TRIED TO ELEVATE OUR SPACE'

It's one of several changes Luvara is making with the Tigers, which finished 6-4 last season, including a 49-10 loss in the latest edition of 'The Game' against Randolph-Macon. Some of those changes are cosmetic. The school renovated the practice field, just finished a major revamp to the locker room and set up a full nutrition station in the football office. They also became the only Division III football program with a full-time strength and conditioning coach this season, while also hooking up players in camp with GPS vests and heart rate monitors. Why? So they can track how hard the players are running and how fast they're running.

"We really tried to elevate our space," Luvara said. "We're able to invest a lot into their development here. It's just giving our guys resources so they can reach their full potential on the football field. And we're just trying to make the football experience as close to a Division I school as we can."

To do that consistently, you need playmakers and leaders. Luvara points to several on this Hampden-Sydney squad. There's Logan Cohn, the starting center.

This offseason has been a special one for the rising senior, as he returns to campus as a national champion. Cohn won in the U23 super heavyweight division for National Olympic Weightlifting this summer.

"He has great leadership skills and he anchors that offensive line," Luvara said of Cohn. "Logan is also a great teammate."

The offense will also be led by junior quarterback Carter Sido. The Texas native started the first two games last year before a season-ending injury, lighting up the scoreboard when he was on the field. Sido went 30 for 48 (62.5%), compiling 304 yards and three touchdowns with no interceptions. He also rushed for 210 yards on 26 carries and three rushing touchdowns, totaling 514 yards of total offense in just two games.

"He was the Offensive Player of the Week for the ODAC the first two weeks before (the injury)," Luvara said. "He's a special talent."

Luvara also pointed to his wide receiver corps as one of the most talented he's been around in his career. That includes junior Mason Cunningham, another Texas native. Cunningham, who earned D3football.com Third Team All-Region 3 and First Team All-ODAC a year ago, started all 10 games, catching 79 balls for 794 receiving yards and seven touchdowns. Mason had three 100-yard receiving games and led the



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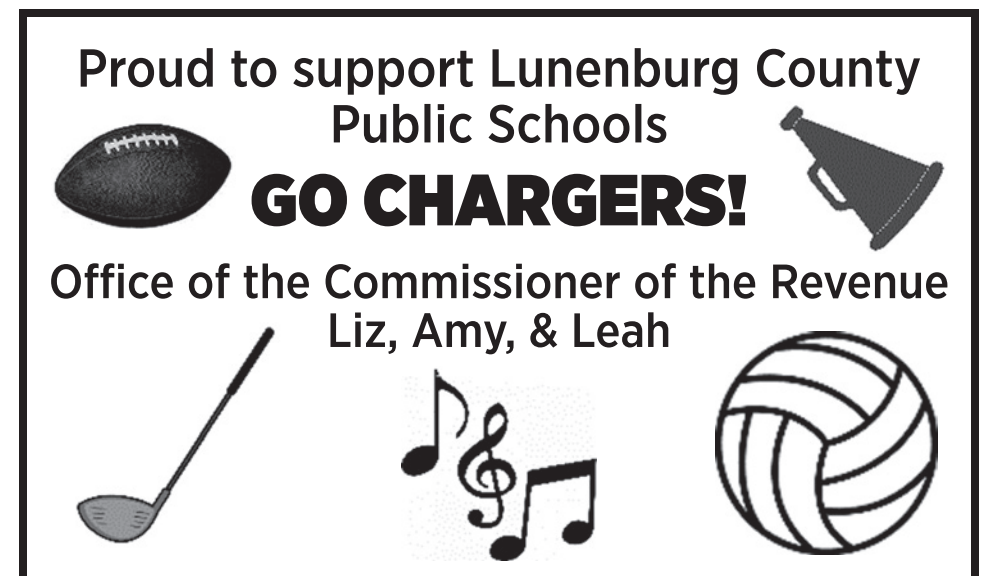
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ODAC in receptions, receptions per game (7.9, ninth nationally), receiving yards and receiving yards per game (79.4).

LOOKING AT THE DEFENSE

As a linebacker at Allegheny College (Pennsylvania) and as a coach, Luvara has mainly stayed on the defensive side of the field. And his defenses shut down teams. At Washington & Jefferson last year, Luvara's defense gave up just 12.7 points per game. That was good enough for 15th in Division III. The Presidents yielded just one touchdown or less in four games during 2023, including one shutout. Since 2017, a Luvara-led defense has not given up more than 18 points per game. That shutdown mentality, a focus on preventing scores is something not just his own staff, but competitors draw attention to.

He takes over a team this season with a defense featuring senior linebacker Jackson Lott as the leading returning tackler. Lott last season had 57 total tackles, including 18 solo and 39 assists, along with 1.5 sacks.

There's also junior cornerback James Townsend, who had 33 total tackles, three pass breakups and two fumble recoveries. Townsend is also remembered for blocking the point after kick against Shenandoah in overtime, to secure Hampden-Sydney's 26-25 win.

RISING IN THE POLLS

The Tigers will enter the season picked to finish fourth in the Old Dominion Athletic Conference Football Preseason Poll. The Tigers garnered 31 points, including one first-place vote, among the eight schools.

Randolph-Macon was picked first with 48 points, ahead of Washington and Lee (43), Bridgewater (33) and H-SC (31), along with Shenandoah (26), Averett (22), Guilford (11) and Ferrum (10). RMC received six first-place votes, while W&L got the other first-place vote.

So when do the Tigers get things started? The first game is set at home against Delaware Valley (PA) University on Saturday, Sept. 7. Kickoff is set for 1 p.m. on Fulton Field at Lewis C. Everett Stadium.



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