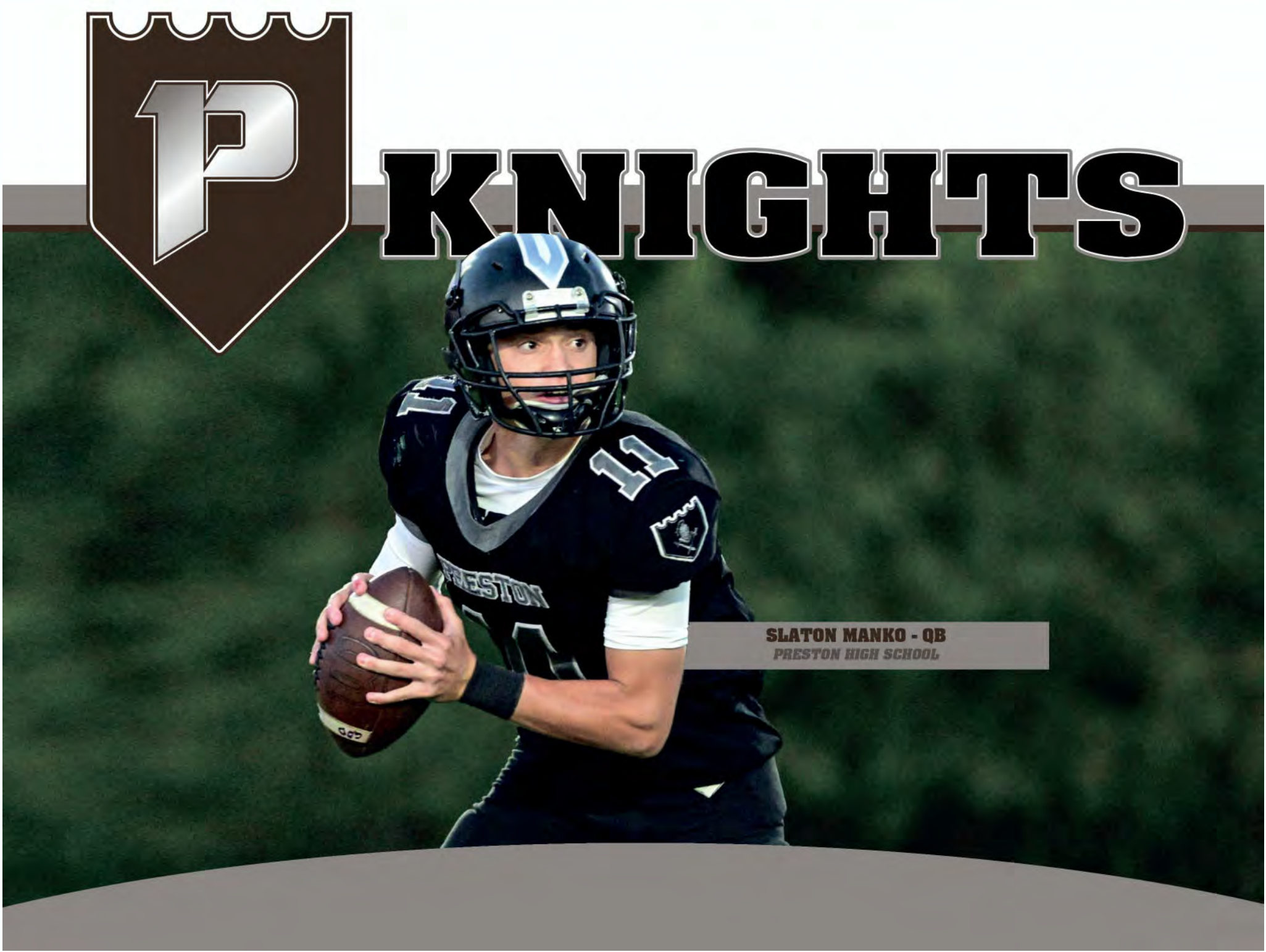


HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL PREVIEW

THE DOMINION POST

2024

AUGUST 23, 2024 SECTION C



Mohigans look to reload, continue raising standard



The seniors on Morgantown High School’s football team. Back row, left to right, Sylas McGinnis (9), Jake Hall (82), Owen Williams (84), Brady Savage (85), Aidan Stire (3), Akir Johnson (55), Alex Himes (8) and Dylan Shinkovich (50). Front, left to right, Armstrong Siakam (54), Owen Monroe (32), Mason Haney (45), Remi Hawkins (7), AJ Thomas (2) and Kylan Blunt (11).

Morgantown returns just 4 starters from 2023

BY MARK SCHRAF
Sports@DominionPost.com

MORGANTOWN — “The standard is the standard.” Pittsburgh Steelers head coach Mike Tomlin is famous for his pithy quotes, and probably the most enduring one listed above can certainly apply at almost any sport at any level, as Morgantown fifth-year football coach Sean Biser will attest.

“When I came in, I didn’t want to focus only on a long-term plan,” he explained. “We wanted to evaluate our immediate needs – pick the low-hanging fruit – while simultaneously establishing our program’s culture and our standards. And while COVID certainly added an extra challenge to that process, I’m pleased with the progress we’ve made, and given every team a chance at success.”

The won-loss record certainly shows steady progress: five to six to seven wins and playoff berths each year from 2021 to 2023. But Mohigan football always has a higher goal – to win the State Championship, and that standard never changes.

There’s an added challenge – and opportunity – for the Mohigans this season, one that often comes with high school athletics: only four starters return from last year. But Biser has seen the benefits of the retooling of the line-up.

“Sometimes, senior-dominated teams can get a little complacent,” he admitted, “and they don’t work quite as hard as they can to improve and prepare. Any head coach will tell you that experience and talent is great, but hard work, dedication, and effort is just as important, maybe more so.

“We have multiple start-

ing positions open right now,” he continued, “and competition at almost every position, and that’s been very encouraging and exciting for us. The guys came into camp in excellent shape, and they’re picking things up quickly, but most importantly, they’re helping each other get better. I see this as helping with our depth and with our team chemistry, and everyone’s on the same page with earning playing time and getting ready for the season. It’s been fun to watch.”

Senior leader A.J. Thomas, counted on as the featured back in the offense, likes what he’s seen so far as well.

“The new kids have such a great work ethic, and they’re really eager to step up and step in,” he said. “We’re holding each other accountable for what we need to do on and off the field, and it’s showing up every day in practice. And

even though our offensive line is young, they are big, strong and talented, and I think they’ve got a chance to surprise some people who might think we’re too young up front. We are all just excited about the season for sure.”

Despite the roster turnover, Biser plans on incorporating the basic Mohigan offensive and defense schemes – with some added wrinkles.

“We run our systems,” he explained. “We’re a lot like WVU — pretty much a power spread with air raid aspects to our offense, although we also have our old wing-t in place. But while that’s the framework, we like to tweak things, and add complexity to try to maximize our personnel. And everyone’s been picking things up really well.

“At this point,” he concluded, “I’d describe us as a work in progress, with lots of potential. We’ve worked hard and if we continue to do that, if our leadership steps up and we keep getting a little better every day, what we will need most to be successful this year is to mature quickly. If we do that, we can meet our potential.”

And that’s something every coach hopes for.

Morgantown Schedule

- AUG. 30 at Parkersburg, 7:30 p.m.
- SEPT. 6 vs. Bridgeport, 7 p.m.
- SEPT. 13 at South Charleston, 7:30 p.m.
- SEPT. 20 vs. Connellsville (Pa.), 7 p.m.
- SEPT. 27 vs. Buckhannon-Upshur, 7 p.m.
- OCT. 4 at Wheeling Park, 7 p.m.
- OCT. 11 vs. Martinsburg, 7 p.m.
- OCT. 18 at Parkersburg South, 7 p.m.
- OCT. 25 at Hedgesville, 7 p.m.
- NOV. 1 vs. University, 7 p.m.
- NOV. 8 OPEN



Sean Biser is in his fifth season as head coach of Morgantown football.

Kylan Blunt

Jake Hall

Mason Haney

Remi Hawkins

Alex Himes

Akir Johnson

Sylas McGinnis

Owen Monroe

Brady Savage

Dylan Shinkovich

Armstrong Siakam

Aidan Stire

AJ Thomas

Owen Williams



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Running back AJ Thomas feels up to the task as Morgantown’s senior leader

BY MARK SCHRAF
Sports@DominionPost.com

MORGANTOWN — Senior year. Large turnover in starting line-up from last season. Feature back on offense, and defensive captain. Additional leadership responsibilities. Looking to get to State Championship. Hoping to grab the attention of college coaches.

Indeed, there certainly appears to be plenty of reasonable reasons for Morgantown High running back/defensive back A.J. Thomas to feel more than a little bit of added pressure heading into the 2024 campaign.

That would be a reasonable assumption – but an incorrect one.

“No, I don’t look at those kinds of things as added pressure,” he explained. “They’re all very exciting opportunities for our team as a whole as well as for me as a football player and as a person, and I’m grateful that I have this chance to show what I can do and to

help us become the team we can be.”

After sharing touches with “three or four dynamic players” last year, Thomas has been well aware of his ascendant status as the offensive focal point heading into the Fall, and he’s been preparing since the end of last year.

“I knew that I’d have my number called a lot this season,” he revealed, “so I’ve been in the weight room plus doing a ton of agility work, trying hard to get my body right. I know I’ll have to be stronger and more durable to handle the increased workload. Besides, lifting with my teammates is always a good time, and a good example to set for the younger guys.”

While Thomas has always been, according to head coach Sean Biser, “a naturally quiet, but excellent leader by example,” he’s asked his dynamic senior to step up as a more vocal presence for his team.

SEE THOMAS, C-0



Morgantown's AJ Thomas (2) reacts after scoring a touchdown against University during the MoHawk Bowl last season. Thomas ran for 196 yards and three touchdowns as Morgantown won 26-18.



William Wotring/The Dominion Post

Morgantown's AJ Thomas (2) rushes the ball against University in the MoHawk Bowl last season. He led the Mohigans with 627 rushing yards and 15 touchdowns in 2023.

THOMAS

FROM PAGE C-0

“AJ is such a dynamic player with the ball in his hands,” Biser smiled. “He has elite vision, burst and he has a real nose for the end zone. He’s got that ‘it factor,’ without question, and there is no doubt in my mind that some college coach is going to get a really good player next year. What we are challenging him to

do this year is to make more splash plays on defense, be ready to be the guy on offense and to become the full package in the locker room. They already look up to him as a playmaker and a hard worker, which means that what he has to say will have a significant impact. That leadership role can be a difference maker for us this year, and I know he’s more than capable of taking that next step as a football

player.”

For Thomas, that vocal role isn’t natural, but he knows it’s necessary.

“I guess I have to remind myself to speak up sometimes,” he admitted with a grin. “I’m not the most talkative guy – I just like doing what I do, working hard and improving myself, and letting that be an example on its own. But I also know that this is it, my senior year. It seems



Benjamin Powell/The Dominion Post

The Morgantown football team runs onto the field prior to their season opener against South Charleston last year.

like I’ve always had more time, even as a junior, but this last year has come so fast, so I want to be sure that I’m doing every possible thing to make myself and my team successful. And speaking up, being the guy that the young players trust and believe – that’s a big part of it.”

Thomas has some personal production goals in mind – 1,500 rushing yards being one of them – but he

also understands the collective dynamic so important in football.

“Sure, I want to do well and put up numbers and maybe get more college teams looking my way,” he explained, “but football is the ultimate team game. Nobody can do it all by themselves. But every guy out there – the offensive linemen and the lead blocking back and the wide receivers blocking at the

next level – they all know that they are just as big a part to a touchdown run as the guy carrying the ball. So, I know we’re all on the same page, that my success is our success, and as long as we trust each other and believe in each other, I think we can go far this year, and we’re all excited and ready to see how good we can be.”

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A large group photo of the West Virginia football team. The players are arranged in several rows on bleachers. The front row consists of seven players wearing camouflage jerseys with "WEST VIRGINIA" and their numbers (1, 10, 16, 53, 0, 7, 14) on the front. They are holding black helmets. The rest of the team, including coaches and staff, are in the back rows wearing dark blue jerseys with "PIERPTON" on the front. The photo is framed by "AUTOMAX" logos on the top, bottom, and sides.

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More experienced Knights have high hopes for 2024



The Preston High School football seniors. Left to right, Hunter Turner (63), Shelden Miller (10), Seldyn Greaser (16), Cody Smith (14), Kaden Hayes (0) and Ethan Likens (7).

Preston thinks stout defense can lead to a winning record and playoff berth

BY ERIC HERTER
Sports@DominionPost.com

KINGWOOD – It’s a mantra that can be heard every preseason on every football field across the country.

Defense wins championships.

Not just championships – it wins games.

Look no further than the 2023 Preston High School football team for a compelling case.

Last season, the Knights finished 2-8 but in the two victories they allowed 14 points to Robert C Byrd and just 13 to Buckhannon-Upshur.

That’s why fourth-year head coach Mark Deep has taken over calling the defensive plays again this season for the Knights. It’s that important to both him and his team in 2024.

“Defense has to be key for us,” Deep said. “We have to do our part. We can’t be in shootouts; we are not equipped for that.”

With four starters back on defense, there are going to be several new faces on the defensive side of the ball.

The key for the PHS defense is going to be on the defensive line where there will be four new starters. The defensive backfield and linebacker group should be tough, led by senior middle linebacker Ethan Likens.

“Ethan loves to hit,” Deep said of his senior who finished with a school-record 121 tackles last year. “He is going to be key in what makes us roll on

defense.”

The defensive backfield returns senior safety Cole Turner, who Deep said is the quarterback on defense, junior safety Slaton Manko also returns along with senior cornerback Cody Smith.

“Cole is a do it all player for us,” Deep said of the senior who will also be the punter and kicker. “He is very talented and really another coach on the field.”

Turner, who is ranked as one of the top kickers in the state, said his hope for the season is to leave a legacy at PHS.

“An above .500 season and playoffs would be great,” Turner said. “But it’s more important to start changing the mindset at Preston. I want to see the freshmen, sophomores, juniors, seventh graders, eighth graders all get consistent. I want to see playoff berths for a long time at Preston.”

Some of that change came earlier this month when the Knights were reclassified from Class AAAA to Class AAA for this season. The hope at PHS is this reclassification will stick for future years.

Joining the four returners on defense is going to be some familiar faces that might not have been starters in the past but have played some football for the Knights.

Gavin Martin, a junior, will likely start at nose tackle alongside junior Michael Moore at defensive tackle. The defensive ends

are expected to be junior Ryder Kilkenny and sophomore Blake Jennings.

Kaden Hayes, a senior, will join Likens at linebacker and junior Hunter Lewellen will play rover back for the Knights.

Currently there is a battle for the last starting cornerback position between junior Aiden Strawser and freshman JJ McLaughlin. Both will see playing time this year. Also expected to play at some point is 6-foot-4, 240-pound freshman Levi Beeghly on the defensive line.

On offense, the focus for the Knights will be a run game centered around Likens at running back with Manko returning at quarterback. Turner and Smith are both back as playmaking wide receivers that will also see some time in the backfield as well.

“Offensively, we want to be able to control the clock,” Deep said. “We are going to be more run than pass and focus on getting the game into the fourth quarter where we are still in the game.”

Unfortunately for the PHS offense, they return just six starters and have to replace 4/5ths of the offensive line.

“Our line is going to be young,” Deep said. “We have two starters out for the year with injuries. We need to find the best five to play there.”

Center Brayden Miller and left tack Max Huggins will both miss their sophomore season. Right guard Matthew Larew, a junior, is

the only returning starter on the line.

Deep said right now there are five players vying for the four remaining spots on the line. Senior Hunter Turner appears to have grabbed the left tackle spot and senior Dylan Haskiell is fitting nicely at left guard. Sophomore Jayden Livengood is expected to start at right tackle, but the center spot is still up for grabs between Jennings and sophomore Hayden Cole.

Hayes, a 6-1, 180-pound tight end, will add some blocking ability and is a big target. He missed all last season with an ACL injury.

“With the experience that everyone has at the skill positions, it really brings a sense of calmness for everyone else,” Deep said. “That’s big especially with a young offensive line. We are still looking at some different combinations on the line, but I think we can compete this year.”

Likens, one of the eight seniors on the team, said this PHS team is going to surprise some people this year.

“I think we have a really good chance to be good this year,” Likens said. “We just have to focus on each game and each play.”

Preston opens its season on Aug. 30 when it hosts Hampshire at 7 p.m. The Knights play four of their first five games at home and face perennial powers Eat Fairmont and Bridgeport as part of a tough Big Ten Conference schedule.

Preston Schedule

AUG. 30 vs. Hampshire, 7 p.m.
SEPT. 6 vs. North Marion, 7 p.m.
SEPT. 13 vs. Fairmont Senior, 7 p.m.
SEPT. 20 at Robert C. Byrd, 7 p.m.
SEPT. 26 vs. East Fairmont, 4 p.m. (Thursday)
OCT. 4 at Woodrow Wilson, 7 p.m.
OCT. 11 OPEN
OCT. 18 at Bridgeport, 7 p.m.
OCT. 25 at University, 7 p.m.
NOV. 1 vs. Buckhannon-Upshur, 7 p.m.
NOV. 8 at Philip Barbour, 7 p.m.



Mark Deep is entering his fourth season as head coach of Preston football.



Seldyn Greaser



Kaden Hayes



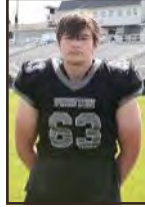
Ethan Likens



Shelden Miller



Cody Smith



Hunter Turner



Top, Preston quarterback Slaton Manko (11) looks to throw during a game last season. Bottom, Preston’s Cody Smith (14) drags a Robert C. Byrd defender into the endzone during a game last season.

Knights move from Class AAAA to AAA for 2024

22 teams win appeal to move down from initial placement in new 4-class system

BY ERIC HERTER
Sports@DominionPost.com

KINGWOOD — The first football game for Preston High School is still a week away, but the Knights have already picked up one victory in 2024.

Earlier this month, Preston, along with 21 other schools, was granted the right to change its WVSSAC classification in foot-

ball for the upcoming 2024 season. PHS will compete in Class AAA instead of Class AAAA this year in football only.

Preston, which is the lone school in the county, consolidated in 1992 and has made the state playoffs in football just three times in the history of the school.

The last time the Knights made the playoffs,

in 2019, they finished the regular season 4-6 and lost to Martinsburg, 84-0, in the first round.

“I think this gives us a chance to be competitive,” Todd Seymour, PHS principal, said. “We are a rural school in a rural county; it gives us an opportunity to compete against similar schools.”

Currently, Preston enrolls roughly 1,100 stu-

dents in the high school in a county that is 650 square miles. Many of those potential student-athletes have bus rides that are 45 minutes-to-an-hour long.

“Some of our students can’t participate in sports because they won’t get home until 8 p.m. or later,” Seymour said. “We have more of a chance to be competitive in Class AAA instead of Class AAAA.”

The appeal process for Preston, and the other 10 schools, was arduous.

First, the appeal was heard by the WVSSAC Board of Directors, and it was denied. The group of schools then went to the WVSSAC Board of Review which sent it back to the Board of Directors. The appeal was once again shot down before the Board of Review made its decision

on Monday.

“The big point we made is that the reclassification was to bring about better competitive balance,” Preston County Superintendent Brad Martin said. “Not only for football but for all the impacted sports, this is going to give us a more-level playing field.”

The WVSAAC made the

SEE CLASS, C-9

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CLASS

FROM PAGE C-7

move to a four-class system for football, baseball, softball, volleyball, cheer, girls', and boys' basketball in December of 2023. The new classification was supposed to look at enrollment along with other factors such as competitive balance.

Martin said that Preston does fall within the enrollment guidelines but falls short on competitive balance. Especially in football, where the Knights have played for 32 years and just recently picked up their 100th win in school history. The school is averaging just 3.2 wins per season in its existence.

Seymour and Martin are both hopeful that the Board of Directors will look at the classifications and put all Preston High sports into Class AAA moving forward.

"We are happy for football this year," Seymour said. "But our hope is that eventually all sports will move to Class AAA and it

"OUR HOPE IS THAT EVENTUALLY ALL SPORTS WILL MOVE TO CLASS AAA AND IT WILL BE PERMANENT."

Todd Seymour
Preston Principal

will be permanent."

Preston will still play its regularly scheduled opponents this season including Class AAAA teams University and Woodrow Wilson along with Class AA opponent Phillip Barbour and the rest of their Big Ten Conference schedule.

"It doesn't change anything this year schedule-wise for us," PHS head football coach Mark Deep said. "But if we can stay in Class AAA it really does open things up for us. There's a chance where we might not have to go more than an hour and a half for a game. That would be great for our students, our coaches, and our community."

Deep said that Seymour, Martin, and community member Craig Jennings were instrumental in getting the Knights' classification changed.

"Who benefits from Preston being Class AAAA? Nobody," Jennings said. "It doesn't help Martinsburg to come in here and beat us by 80. It hurts them and us — no one wants to get their heads beat in. We aren't asking to move down to Class A, we just want to be competitive and give our student-athletes the best opportunity."

Other schools also winning the appeal are Frankfort, John Marshall, Oak Hill, Petersburg, St. Albans, St. Mary's, Sissonville, Spring Valley, Tyler Consolidated, Wayne, Buckhannon-Upshur, Capital, Riverside, South Charleston, Chapmanville, Independence, Lincoln, Nicholas County, Pike View, Ritchie County and Summers County.

Class AAAA will see the biggest change as Preston, John Marshall, Oak Hill, St. Albans, Buckhannon-Upshur, Capital, Riverside, South Charleston and Spring Valley move to Class AAA. That means Class AAAA will consist of just 16

schools with all 16 making the playoffs.

Frankfort, Wayne, Chapmanville, Independence, Lincoln, Nicholas County, Pikeview and Sissonville are moving from Class AAA to Class AA while St. Mary's, Petersburg, Ritchie County, Summers County and Tyler Consolidated are moving from Class AA to Class A.

2024 WVSSAC football classifications

Class AAAA

Cabell Midland
George Washington
Hedgesville
Hurricane
Jefferson
Martinsburg
Morgantown
Musselman
Parkersburg
Parkersburg South
Spring Mills
University
Washington
Wheeling Park
Woodrow Wilson

Class AAA

Berkeley Springs
Bridgeport
Brooke
Buckhannon-Upshur*
Capital*
East Fairmont
Elkins
Fairmont Senior
Hamshire
Grafton
Greenbrier East
Gerbert Hoover
John Marshall*
Keyser
Lewis County
Lincoln County
Nitro
North Marion
Oak Hill*
Point Pleasant
Preston*
Princeton
Ripley
Riverside*
Robert C. Byrd
Shady Spring
South Charleston*
Spring Valley*
St. Albans*
Weir
Winfield

Class AA

Bluefield
Braxton County
Buffalo
Chapmanville*
Charleston Catholic
Clay County
Doddridge County
Frankfort*
Independence*
James Monroe
Liberty (Harrison)
Liberty (Raleigh)
Lincoln
Logan
Midland Trail
Mingo Central
Moorefield
Nicholas County*
Oak Glen
Phillip Barbour
PikeView*
Poca
Ravenswood
Roane County
Sissonville*
South Harrison
Wayne*
Westside
Wheeling Central
Williamstown
Wyoming East

Class A

Calhoun County
Cameron
Clay-Battelle
East Hardy
Gilmer County
Greenbrier West
Hundred
Madonna
Magnolia
Man
Meadow Bridge
Montcalm
Mount View
Paden City
Pendleton County
Petersburg*
Pocahontas County
Richwood
Ritchie County*
River View
Sherman
St. Mary's*
Summers County*
Tolsia
Trinity Christian
Tucker County
Tug Valley
Tygart's Valley
Tyler Consolidated*
Valley
Van
Wahama
Webster County
Wirt County

*Reclassified for 2024

The original version of this story appeared in the Aug. 14, 2024 edition of The Dominion Post.

Tell us about your team

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We hope it has been a wonderful summer and you are all ready to kick off an engaging and exciting new school year.

MCS Student Attendance Requirements 2024-25

Monongalia County Schools values student success, and regular student attendance is the foundation of an exceptional education. Regular Attendance is defined as being physically present at least 95% of the time, engaged in the educational process.

Even excused absences keep a student out of school and unengaged with learning, so excused absences do count against Regular Attendance. Be aware that a parent or guardian note for excused absence must specify a valid excused absence reason listed in the MCS attendance policy 5200. The following excused absence reasons are summarized from state code (<https://code.wvlegislature.gov/18-8-4>) and MCS Policy 5200 (<https://go.boarddocs.com/wv/mono/Board.nsf/Public>)

- Absences that result from school-approved curricular/co-curricular activities; failure of the bus to run/hazardous conditions, SAT Plan, IEP or 504 Plan, and other Board-approved excused absences
- Personal illness or injury of the student*
- Personal illness or injury of the student's parent, guardian, custodian, or family member, with a reasonable explanation for the student's absence caused by the illness or injury in the family*
- Medical or dental appointment with valid written excuse from physician or dentist
- Documented chronic medical condition or disability that may require multiple or regular absences
- Participation in homebound or hospital instruction due to an illness or injury or other extraordinary circumstance that warrants home or hospital confinement
- Documented disabilities consisting of any mental or physical impairments documented annually with a valid physician's approved and reviewed quarterly by the SAT, IEP or 504 team
- Calamity, such as a fire or flood*
- Death in the family*
- Judicial obligation or court appearance involving the student with official documentation
- Military requirement for students enlisted or enlisting in the military with official documentation
- Personal or academic circumstances approved by the principal
- Observation of a religious holiday or attendance at approved religious instruction
- Contagious or parasite conditions:
 - such as lice, not to exceed two (2) days per incident
 - contagious conditions, contact the school nurse

*When absence notes are submitted by a parent or guardian, without additional documentation from a qualified professional, excused absences are limited to five (5) per semester for middle and high school and a total of ten (10) for elementary for the entire school year. If the student's absences exceed two (2) days, the absences shall be unexcused unless written verification from a physician supports a longer time period.

Unexcused Absences: Any absence not specifically included in the definition of an excused absence will be unexcused. This includes out of school suspension and students unable to attend school due to not having the required immunizations. At the secondary level, class periods missed will count as an appropriate fraction of the day and will be used when calculating the total number of days absent.

Make-up Work: Any absence results in missing learning, and it is not possible to fully make up for missed time and engagement. However, students will have the opportunity to make up graded work missed due to absence. Students will have 2 days per day of absence to submit make-up work, up to a maximum of 6 days from the student's return to school. Teachers may, at their discretion, extend the deadline for make-up work beyond 6 days. Students are expected to work with their teachers if more time is needed. When possible, students should obtain make-up work prior to their absence.

Tardiness: Monongalia County believes that preventing student tardiness is very important and will serve students well throughout student and work life. Helping students acquire the habit of promptness requires positive preventive measures as well as appropriate consequences. Therefore, each student is responsible for addressing reasonable prevention of student tardiness. Unexcused tardies will also be used when determining total unexcused absences as follows: Elementary/Middle/High School: Five tardies equal one day of absence

Homebound: Absences incurred during homebound schooling will be assessed as follows: For each day of homebound schooling that is an unexcused absence 2.5 days of absence will be assessed to the student.

Academic Recovery Days: To encourage Regular Attendance and to provide academic assistance to students who will benefit from it, one day of each semester will be designated as an academic recovery day at each high school. These days will be immediately before or after the student comprehensive exam days for that semester. Students may be exempted from physical attendance on academic recovery days if they meet both qualifications:

- 1) They have Regular Attendance for that semester (5 or less days, excused or unexcused); and
- 2) They have a grade of C or better in each class.

Exempt students will be recorded as "Elsewhere" for attendance purposes, or may decide to attend to improve their grades or learning.

On academic recovery days, students will engage in one or more of the following, at their teachers' discretion:

- Completing make-up assignments for grade and content recovery;
- Completing additional projects or assignments to fill knowledge gaps;
- Reviewing for comprehensive exams;
- Other activities of academic value.

***Chronic absence** - missing 10 percent or more of school days due to absence for any reason—excused, unexcused absences and suspensions - can translate into students having difficulty learning to read by the third grade, achieving in middle school, and graduating from high school. (Attendance Works) As a result, Monongalia County Schools is committed to reducing student absences for any reason. Students missing more than 18 days (out of 180 school days) are chronically absent and are at high risk of negative educational outcomes. Students should miss less than 5 percent (9 out of 180 school days) to best prepare them for academic and social success.

The full policy can be read at <http://boe.mono.k12.wv.us/>.

Please take the time to read this policy in its entirety. Should questions arise, please direct them to the Director of Attendance, Teddy Stewart,

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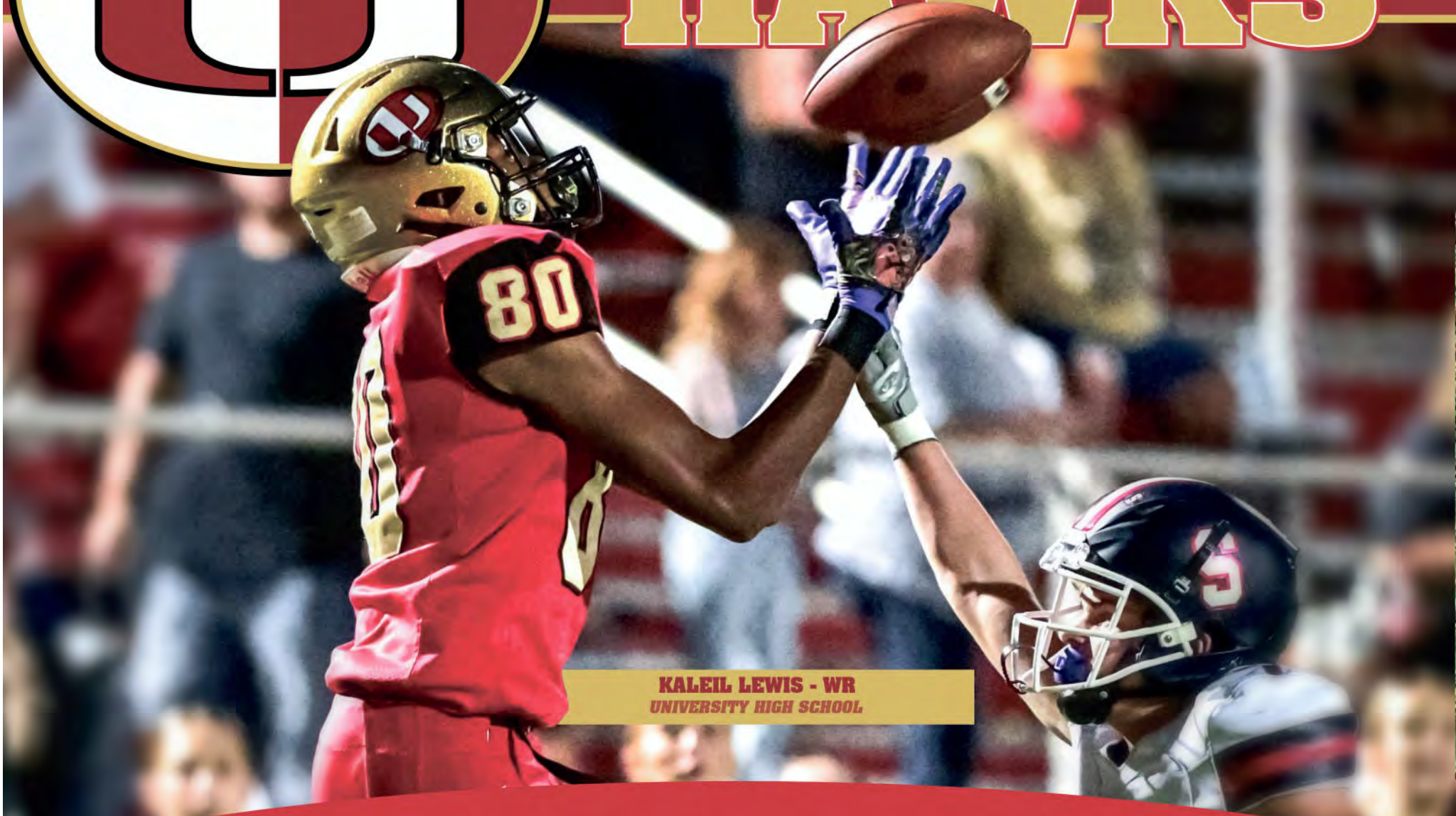
THE DOMINION POST

2024

AUGUST 23, 2024 SECTION D



HAWKS



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UNIVERSITY HIGH SCHOOL



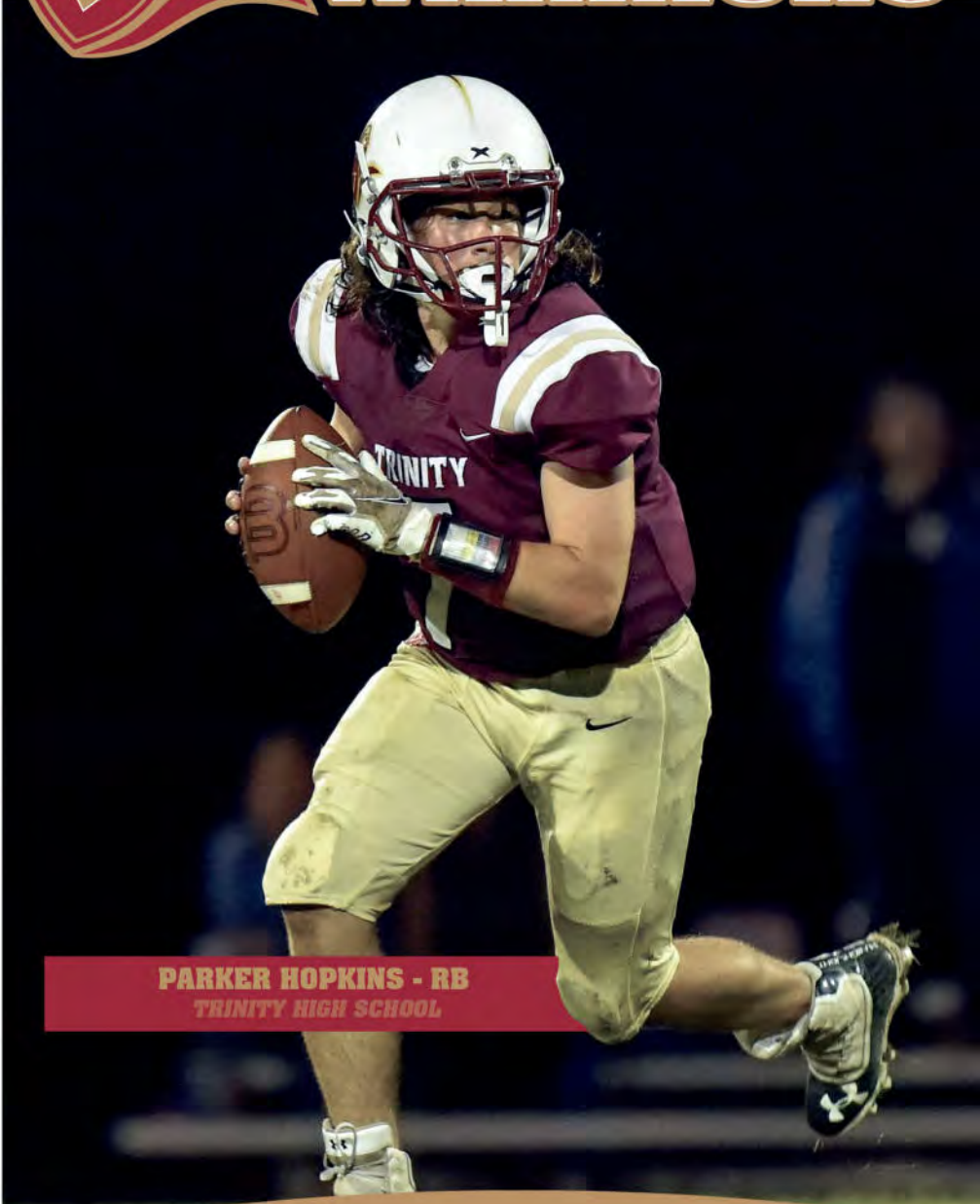
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Youthful Hawks aiming to soar in 1st season under head coach Eric Snyder

University Schedule

AUG. 30 OPEN
SEPT. 6 at Parkersburg South, 7 p.m.
SEPT. 13 vs. Buckhannon-Upshur, 7 p.m.
SEPT. 20 vs. Wheeling Park, 7 p.m.
SEPT. 27 at Fairmont Senior, 7 p.m.
OCT. 4 vs. Butler (Pa.), 7 p.m.
OCT. 11 at Connellsville (Pa.), 7 p.m.
OCT. 18 at Spring Mills, 7 p.m.
OCT. 25 vs. Preston, 7 p.m.
NOV. 1 at Morgantown, 7 p.m.
NOV. 8 vs. Oak Hill, 7 p.m.



William Wotring/Dominion Post
Eric Snyder is entering his first season as University football head coach.



William Wotring/The Dominion Post
University's Josh Jorge (12) is chased down by Morgantown's Caleb Nutter (26) during the MoHawk Bowl last season. Jorge rushed for 235 yards and four touchdowns in 2023.

Josh Brunner

Shawn Carter

Dillon Glover

Jamie Harper

Josh Jorge

Nikolas McCray

Jeremiah Robinson

Max Travis

Antwon Watson

Snyder takes over following John Kelley's 37-year tenure

BY MICHAEL GRIFFITH
Sports@DominionPost.com

MORGANTOWN — It's the beginning of a new era on Baker's Ridge for the University High School football team as Eric Snyder steps into the role of head coach following a 37-year tenure by John Kelley.

As Kelley's longtime assistant, Snyder is no stranger to football coaching or the UHS program. However, he knows what new challenges come with being a program's head coach and says he and his team are facing them head-on.

Following a .500 season at 5-5 that included four wins on the road and four losses at home, the Hawks hope to keep the travel suc-

cess going while being able to defend their home turf.

"Our summer has been very successful in our growth as a group and as individuals," Snyder said. "We incorporated our freshmen in June, about half of the team right now, and traveled to some different seven-on-seven events and did well with those. Our young guys have come in and have been patient while finding a role and opportunity on the team. Everyone has bought into the weight room and conditioning properly, and we have seen explosive growth in strength among the team."

The 2025 senior class of just 11 players out of the roster of 72 leads the way for the Hawks on the field.

Twenty-one freshmen will suit up for Snyder with a sophomore class of 19. A hefty junior class of 21 brings experience and solidarity to the middle of the roster for the Hawks.

Returning as a second-team all-state linebacker, WVU wrestling commit Brock Kehler will look to be productive on both sides of the ball once again for UHS, serving as a tight end on offense.

"I feel as a team we are more prepared coming into this season than in the past with the flex days and the amount of work we've been able to do this summer," he said. "Coach Snyder has done a great job of getting us ready physically and excited and hyped up daily."

With a team that boasts 40 combined freshmen and sophomores, Kehler is embracing the leadership role.

"I want to be the foundation of the team," he said. "I want to be there for everyone. The older guys and younger guys, I want anyone to know they can come to me and ask me questions about the game or anything they need."

Snyder has two quarterbacks, junior Jack Byrer and sophomore Harrison Helbig, who he thinks can be potential starters.

"Jack is a solid quarterback with some experience from last season. Both complement each other's abilities well," Snyder said. "Some of the things one may not do well, the other seems to pick up on and help out with. There will be times this season where each of them is called on to step up and help the offense advance the ball when we need them to."

UHS will begin its inaugural campaign under Snyder with a tough road test against the Parkersburg South Patriots on Sept. 6. After a bye in the season's

opening week, the team will host two games at home against Buckhannon-Upshur and Wheeling Park.

"The opening game will be tough going to Parkersburg South, but having the first week off is good preparation," Snyder said. "We know Buckhannon will be challenging and physical in the home opener. Wheeling Park has excellent numbers and is well-coached every single year. Then we travel to Fairmont Senior, one of (Class) AAA's top teams. You have to be prepared week in and week out no matter who is on the other side of the ball."

UHS adds some new opponents this season, hosting Butler and visiting Connellsville (both in Pa.) in the first two weeks of October. Then, it rounds out the month on the road at Spring Mills and back on Baker's Ridge to host the Preston Knights on Oct. 25.

The 2024 Mohawk Bowl will begin the month of November at Pony Lewis Field on the first, and the Hawks will finish the regular season by hosting the Oak Hill Red Devils on Nov. 8.

"We are looking forward to the schedule this year; the Mohawk Bowl will certainly be a fun time," Snyder said. "It's always great to have a strong, healthy rivalry like that. It's good for the kids and the programs. We want to win games, and we ask our players how they want to do that. If you want to win the way you imagine yourself winning, it means coming to practice, hitting the weight room harder, and improving consistently to come out on top in reaching our goals."

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Hawks feel Jack Gamble is a safe bet

BY MICHAEL GRIFFITH
Sports@DominionPost.com

MORGANTOWN — When over half of your entire roster is freshmen or sophomores, there's a good chance that one of the younger players steps up and shows he has the ways of an upperclassman and fills into a leadership role. Only one senior lines up for UHS on the offensive and defensive lines and head coach Eric Snyder and his staff have used the summer to evaluate their young linemen and identify who among them could take the torch and lead the line into the trenches. Jack Gamble, a 6-foot-1 234-pound sophomore is one of the younger guys Snyder has identified as someone who can not only lead the team this season, but can help be a leader for the future.

"Jack Gamble has shown that he can become a top player up front for us and has made tremendous improvement since he joined us last season as a freshman," Snyder said. "His confidence has grown tremendously. He seems to have a bit of a new swagger to him now that he carries into practice and into the weight room." That swagger Snyder mentioned was present at the UHS football media day as Gamble toled a pair of sledhammers, one slung across each shoulder, as the team posed for pictures and met with the media and families.



William Wotring/The Dominion Post

University's defensive line makes a stop during a game against Fairmont Senior last season.

"Over the offseason I was working as hard as I could because I knew what the expectations were coming in," Gamble said. "I managed to start a couple games last year on varsity as a freshman and I want to build on that experience. I know we are young on the line and there's some mistakes here and there but I want to be able to show my

knowledge and help the team improve as a unit and as players." Although strength is a huge part of being successful on the offensive and defensive lines, Gamble said having a high understanding of the game mentally is something he focuses on more than anything. "I like to say that offen-

sive line requires the second-most mental load behind the quarterback," he said. "You have to know what to do with your assignment but also have to think about what the other positions are doing also. If you miss a block, the play can be over before it gets going. It's huge to be able to have a high football IQ and sometimes it can be what it

takes to completely change a game." But in touting the dual-sledgehammers around media night, Gamble showed that his strength is something that is also present. "Behind IQ, strength is everything on the line," he said. "We've been lifting every day and trying to get stronger. That's all you can

do is show up and put the work in. I've seen a huge difference from last season to this season already in my lifting so I try to be a good example for others who are going hard in the gym and trying to get stronger." Gamble says he has improved his max squat from 245 pounds to 440 pounds. "The progress is motivating to me," Gamble said. "Being able to see the growth and seeing the work pay off is great. Plus I have two more years ahead of me after this season, so why not keep trying to grow and get better? We are going to go out and give our maximum effort and try to learn and get better and better every play."

Snyder said he has to remind himself sometimes that Jack is a sophomore and not one of his seniors. "I see him lineup against a fellow sophomore and it doesn't look like two sophomores," Snyder said. "He has great feet, he has room to grow in his game and his body, which is great for being a sophomore, and he's a natural leader out there for us. When something goes wrong he will slow the team down for a second in practice and make sure everyone understands what's going on before trying again. He has the offense down and is able to fix something he sees that needs fixed. He is going to be big for us going forward."



William Wotring/The Dominion Post

University's Jack Byrer (7) carries the ball during a game last season. Byrer, a junior, is competing to be the Hawks' starting quarterback.



William Wotring/The Dominion Post

University's Kaleil Lewis (80) makes a catch during a game against Preston last season. Lewis made 15 receptions for 332 yards and three touchdowns in 2023.



William Wotring/The Dominion Post

University's Brock Kehler (41) carries the ball during a game last season. Kehler, an impact defender, led the Hawks with 95 tackles last season.



William Wotring/The Dominion Post

University's Marcos Kniska (27) bears down on the quarterback during a game against Parkersburg South last season. Kniska had a team-high five sacks in 2023.

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Clay-Battelle enters a new era with 1st-year head coach Aaron LaPoe

BY MICHAEL GRIFFITH
Sports@DominionPost.com

BLACKSVILLE — The Clay-Battelle Cee-Bees enter their 2024 campaign under a new direction as first-year head coach Aaron LaPoe takes over for Ryan Wilson after a 29-year stint.

The Cee-Bees are coming off a 3-6 season that saw them drop their first three games by a combined nine

points before splitting the remainder of the schedule, including a 40-7 victory over Tygarts Valley on the road.

Although the C-B football program has seen some talented players depart over the past few years like Carson Shriver and Zac Hall, LaPoe and his players are excited for the 2024 season and entering the campaign with confidence.

“We feel good coming

into the season; summer workouts have gone well, and I think we’ve got some good preparation done. The kids all showed up, and participation was great,” LaPoe said. “We have some team goals that we’ve written down, including getting into the playoffs. Coming out and winning our first game against Hundred after losing to them last season is a big one for us early on.”

Putting in a new offense certainly comes with its challenges, and LaPoe said players did well in using the time they had over the summer to learn and adapt.

“We went to a few seven-on-sevens and hosted UHS and MHS here for an evening, which helped us get comfortable pretty quickly,” he said. “They are

SEE ERA, D-7



Benjamin Powell/The Dominion Post
Clay-Battelle takes the field prior to a game against Beallsville (Oh.) last season.

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Senior running back/linebacker Maverick Gum is the Cee-Bees’ Swiss Army Knife

BY MICHAEL GRIFFITH
Sports@DominionPost.com

BLACKSVILLE — If you researched the term “jack-of-all-trades” you may see a picture or highlight of Maverick Gum in your findings.

The Clay-Battelle senior captain has grown into a do-it-all player for his team, beginning last season and continuing into 2024. Gum will serve as the team’s leading running back and the defensive captain at linebacker.

“I think we have a lot going for us this season,” Gum said. “The team has looked good in practice so far and made a lot of progress in the time we’ve had with a new head coach. The playbook is fun, and I think we will have a chance to make some noise.”

As the team captain and leading voice on both sides of the ball, Gum understands his responsibility and embraces the challenge that comes with it.

“I know how crucial it is to be someone that knows how things are supposed to go for us to be successful,” he said. “Everybody on this team has a job, from the players on the field to the guys on the sidelines, and it takes all of us doing our job the right way. I know many of these guys look up to me in the field, and I try to lead by example and work hard every day. Hopefully, these guys do too.”

Aaron LaPoe, the first-year head coach at C-B, is the program’s all-time leading rusher. He said Gum reminds him of himself when playing for the Cee-Bees.

“He’s just a tough, hard-nosed player,” LaPoe said. “He sort of reminds me of myself. He’s tall and tough to bring down. I wasn’t the



Benjamin Powell/The Dominion Post

Clay-Battelle’s Maverick Gum (44) makes a tackle during a game against Magnolia last season. Gum, a senior, led the Cee-Bees with 93 totals tackles in 2023 while also rushing for 367 yards and seven touchdowns.

“HE SORT OF REMINDS ME OF MYSELF. HE’S TALL AND TOUGH TO BRING DOWN.”

C-B head coach Aaron Lapoe on senior running back Maverick Gum

fastest player when I ran the ball and Maverick may not beat you with speed but opposing defenses won’t enjoy tackling him over and over that’s for sure.”

Along with his duties on offense, Gum is also the focal point of the defense as a linebacker. He totaled 93

tackles last season and is out to improve on that number in 2024.

“I’d say that one of my personal goals is getting over that total,” he said. “93 was my record last year, and there’s a career tackle list that I also have my sights on.”

LaPoe knows how important it is having a player like Gum on the roster as a first-time head coach at any program.

“As a first-year head coach, having a player like Maverick on the team is a blessing,” LaPoe said. “He shows up, works hard, and helps be the extension of the coaches on the field. You never see him with his head down because he has such a positive attitude.”

Clay-Battelle Schedule

AUG. 30 vs. Hundred, 7 p.m.
SEPT. 6 vs. Madonna, 7 p.m.
SEPT. 13 at Valley, 7 p.m.
SEPT. 20 at Trinity Christian, 7 p.m.
SEPT. 27 vs. Tygarts Valley, 7 p.m.
OCT. 4 vs. Hancock (Md.), 7 p.m.
OCT. 11 at Meadow Bridge, 7 p.m.
OCT. 18 vs. Cameron, 7 p.m.
OCT. 25 at Beallsville (Oh.), 7 p.m.
NOV. 1 OPEN
NOV. 8 at Magnolia, 7 p.m.



Alex Danser



Maverick Gum



Cameron Lloyd



Karson Moore



Josiah Morgan



Landon Savage



Bryan Vega



Brody Willard

ERA

FROM PAGE D-6

truly learning how to practice in the way that is required to achieve the goals that we have written down, and it isn’t easy, so we need everyone to come out and be prepared to learn and execute. Their bodies are going through a lot but their brains are going through just as much.”

LaPoe said one of his early achievements is the coaching staff he has around him.

“I have some guys on our staff that are really good coaches and good with the kids,” he said. “It’s nice seeing other coaches taking extra time during a water break to talk to one of the kids if they see something they need to be coached on or they can improve on. That’s a great feeling knowing people are behind you that you trust.”

Two returning players that received all-state honorable mentions in 2023 for C-B are Braden Ponceroff and Maverick Gum.

Ponceroff played at wideout for the Cee-Bees last season and is a multi-sport athlete for Clay-Battelle.

“Braden is incredibly talented and athletic and one of the smartest athletes I know,” LaPoe said. “He is only a junior and we expect



Benjamin Powell/The Dominion Post

Aaron Lapoe is entering his first season as the head coach of Clay-Battelle football

him to have the ball in his hands plenty for us.”

Gum will see a majority of the carries for the Cee-Bees out of the backfield and will be one to fight for yards.

“Maverick is a hard-nosed running back that is incredibly strong,” LaPoe said. “He’s a senior and knows what it will take to help this team. We expect him to confidently carry the ball for us and fight for everything he gets.”

LaPoe said other players like Josiah Morgan, Tyson Price and Landon Savage will also be called upon to make an impact for the team.

The Cee-Bees will open

the 2024 season with a home contest against the Hundred Hornets on Aug. 30, followed by another home game with Madonna visiting.

Two road games at Valley and against rival Trinity Christian await in weeks three and four before Tygarts Valley and Hancock visit Blacks ville.

C-B then hit the road to visit Meadow Bridge before hosting Cameron for its final home game on Oct. 18.

Two road games at Beallsville (Ohio) and Magnolia round out the regular season for LaPoe and his squad.



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Football returns to Trinity Christian



Benjamin Powell/The Dominion Post

Football is back at Trinity Christian School this fall after a year off. The Warriors were forced to cancel their 2023 season due to low participation numbers. Now, with a 16-man roster, Trinity Christian and first-year head coach Jason White plan to play a complete 10-game schedule.

Warriors enter the fall with a 16-man roster

BY CODY NESPOR
CNespor@DominionPost.com

MORGANTOWN — For most high school football teams, a season’s success is defined by how many games are won. Some teams will only be satisfied by making the playoffs and a few of the very best will be disappointed by anything less than a state championship.

For Trinity Christian, however, just getting to play football this year makes the 2024 season a success.

“Getting to play football is a success,” first-year head coach Jason White said. “At the end of the day, these kids go to school here, they want to wear the Trinity uniform. We were all very passionate about it.”

The Warriors are returning to the gridiron this fall after not being able to field a team last season due to low numbers.

White was hired last summer after being an assistant at University High and thought they would have enough kids to play, but when only 12 players signed up the day before practice was set to start, he had to cancel the season.

“We tried to get a few more kids out, we tried it until the 11th hour,” White explained, “and then it got to the day before the first practice and we had 12 kids and that’s unsafe. We decided to pull the plug then because it just was not happening.”

By not holding a single practice, Trinity’s players had the chance to play at other schools last fall, which a handful did.

“That’s why we did that, we wanted to do right by the boys no matter what,” White said. “That’s my mantra, I want to do right by the kids, even as hard as it is for us not to have football. I wanted the kids that weren’t going to play here,



Benjamin Powell/The Dominion Post

The Trinity Christian football team celebrates after scoring a touchdown during the 2022 season.

to get to play elsewhere.”

White, who was also named Trinity’s athletic director this summer, didn’t sit on his hands after canceling football last fall. He got right to work recruiting players to make sure the Warriors could field a team for 2024.

“The first day of school, we started recruiting kids,” he said. “We have a group of kids here who really want to play, some of them got the opportunity to play elsewhere, but some of them didn’t.”

The efforts paid off as the Warriors enter 2024 with a 16-man roster, a full 10-game schedule and loads of enthusiasm to bring high school football back to the top of the hill in Sabraton.

“I think not having a program last year, not being able to have football, really made these guys hungry,” White said. “They’ve bought in, they’ve recruited, they lead in the

classroom, they lead on the field and I’m really proud of them.”

Surprisingly, Trinity isn’t going to have a young roster this season. Of the 16 players, five each are seniors and juniors, four are sophomores and only one is a freshman.

A pair of juniors who played for the Warriors as freshmen in 2022 but didn’t get to play last year are Parker Hopkins and Donovan Hurley.

Hopkins, who also plays soccer, basketball and baseball at Trinity, will play linebacker on defense and nearly every skill position of offense.

“I’ll line up in the slot, line up at running back the next play and maybe the next series line up at quarterback,” Hopkins explained.

“I have trust in our guys that they’re going to do their job and help me and help everyone else to

have a successful season.”

Hurley will anchor the offensive and defensive lines. He chose not to go somewhere else and play last season, but didn’t waste anytime preparing for this year.

“For me, I looked at lifting so I could get stronger for next year,” Hurley said. “I went out and lifted, that was the first thing I did.”

Senior lineman Landan Goodwin chose to play at Preston High last year, making the trip to Kingwood after school for every practice and game.

“He’s a leader for us on and off the field,” White said. “He’s been big about rallying kids to make sure they’re in the weight room. He’s our voice separate from (the coaches).”

At quarterback, the team will have senior Noah Toler.

“He’s a pure leader,” White said. “He just wants

Trinity Christian Schedule

- AUG. 30** at Federal Hocking (Oh.), 7 p.m.
- SEPT. 6** at Berkeley Springs, 7 p.m.
- SEPT. 13** vs. Madonna, 7 p.m.
- SEPT. 20** vs. Clay-Battelle, 7 p.m.
- SEPT. 27** at Conotton Valley (Oh.), 7 p.m.
- OCT. 4** OPEN
- OCT. 11** at Richwood, 7 p.m.
- OCT. 18** vs. Oak Glen, 7 p.m.
- OCT. 25** at Tygarts Valley, 7 p.m.
- NOV. 1** vs. Hundred, 7 p.m.
- NOV. 8** at Valley, 7 p.m.



Benjamin Powell/The Dominion Post

Jason White was hired as the Trinity Christian football coach in 2023, but this will be his first season as the Warriors’ head coach. He is also entering his first year at Trinity Christian’s athletic director.

to do what’s best for us and help with whatever he can. He’s just another kid that knows we should have football here, wants the Friday night lights back and he’s ready to do it.”

Trinity starts with two games on the road, at Federal Hocking (Oh.) on Aug. 30 and Berkely Springs on Sept. 6. The first home game at Trinity Christian since 2022 will be on Sept. 13 at 7 p.m. against Madonna. “I think it’s going to be

huge for our school to have football back,” White said. “I’m excited to flip on the lights that night and get the whole town out. Everybody’s excited about getting football back up on this hill.”

White, who will call plays on defense, is assisted by offensive coordinator Nick Porta, special teams coordinator Dakota Best and assistant coaches Wes Hopkins, Garrett Crumb-liss and Andrew Archer.

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Jonathon Sheffstall



Noah Toler

Just getting to play is the Warriors’ 1st big win

BY CODY NESPOR
CNespor@DominionPost.com

MORGANTOWN — You can almost literally feel it when football is in the air. When August rolls around, the humidity goes down and temperatures start to drop, you know football season is just around the corner.

Last year, instead of excitement for the coming season, the transition into fall only brought disappointment for the Trinity Christian Warriors, whose 2023 season was canceled due to low participation.

“It was devastating,” junior Parker Hopkins recalled. “We had a lot of football-first athletes last year who were debating on taking a year and not playing or going to play somewhere else.”

A few players went to other schools to play football last fall but for the most part, football was absent from the halls of Trinity Christian School.

“It was pretty rough,” junior Donovan Hurley said. “I didn’t know what I was going to spend my free time with.”



Benjamin Powell/The Dominion Post

Trinity Christian’s Parker Hopkins (7) battles a pair of Hundred defenders for a ball during a game in 2022. Hopkins, now a junior, is going to do a little bit of everything for the Warriors in 2024.

The Warriors didn’t spend the last year feeling sorry for themselves. Instead, they got to recruiting, convincing anyone who would listen to go out for the team in 2024.

“Everybody was upset but we all looked on the bright side that we were going to have a team next year,” Hopkins said. “Everybody started lifting, getting faster, stronger and preparing for this season.”

Mission accomplished, as the Warriors are back on the gridiron this summer with a 16-man roster and a full 10-game schedule.

“I’m super excited to put

the uniform back on,” Hurley said. “It’s been something I’ve been missing. Last year I went and saw other people play and I was like ‘man, I can’t wait for football to come back.’”

The success of the team’s recruiting efforts is right there on the roster. The Warriors aren’t fielding a team this season because a bunch of players are coming up from the middle school program. In fact, there’s only one freshman on the team this season. There are 10 total juniors and seniors and four sophomores.

“Me and the kids got after it (last year),” first-year coach Jason White said. “A lot of these guys are guys that we recruited last year.”

Trinity’s first game will be on the road at Federal Hocking in Stewart, Oh. on Aug. 30 To say the team is excited would be an understatement.

“Everybody is pumped for our first game,” Hopkins said. “We have a scrimmage coming up that everybody has been talking about.”

“I’m baseball first, but

there’s nothing more thrilling than running out onto the football field on Friday night and seeing everybody in the stands.”

Trinity plays its first two games of the season on the road, visiting Berkeley Springs on Sept. 6. The wait for the first home game against Madonna on Sept. 13 might just be excruciating.

“I think the atmosphere is going to be really good,” White said. “I get a little emotional thinking about it. I think it’s going to be huge for our school to have football back. I’m excited to flip on the lights that night and get the whole town out. Everybody’s excited about getting football back up on this hill.”

It’s hard to restart a program after any sort of break, even just one year, so the Warriors aren’t setting any lofty goals for the season. In a lot of ways, just getting to take the field will be the team’s biggest win this season.

“We may be small in numbers,” White said, “but we’ve got big hearts and we want to have football here at Trinity.”

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