

Wednesday, April 4, 2018

CORKY KELL CLASSIC

By Graham David

Friday, Aug. 17 at Georgia State Stadium

5:30 p.m. Buford vs. Tucker

BUFORD SPRING PREVIEW

It's no secret that the Buford Wolves either win it all or come oh-so-close. The program has won seven state titles since 2007, four consecutive from 2007 to 2010. For each season they failed to claim the state title in the past decade, they were surpassed in the playoffs by the future champs. The

2017 season featured a Wolves team that had the talent to go the distance, with a tremendous 38-point average per game on offense with five shutouts from the defense. But their journey to a 12th overall state title came to a halt in the semifinals of the Class AAAAA playoffs when they faced off against a juggernaut Rome team, falling 45-7 to the soon-to-be champs. Now heading into their second season under head coach John Ford, the Wolves are aiming to take their success one step further yet again.

Last year's Wolves were led by a strong senior class, including running back/free safety Anthony Grant, running back Christian Turner and wide receiver/strong safety Matt Walton, who all signed to play college ball.

"We had a great group of seniors," said Ford. They loved football and they loved each other. We want to see that mentality again with this group of young guys that we have coming in. The loss of Grant and Walton will leave quite a big void in our team's offense."

Grant, a Florida State signee, starred on both sides of the field. During his senior campaign, he logged a team-high 966 rushing yards and 20 touchdowns on 125 carries. Along with his heavy production on offense, he led Buford with 96 tackles, three sacks and an interception while on defense. Turner played a key role in Ford's debut at Buford, rushing for 128 yards on 11 carries to help fuel the Wolves' 48-17 win over Hillgrove in the 2017 Corky Kell Classic.

While these talents may be hard to replace, early signs from other young players have Ford thinking there's no need to worry.

"Derrick Daniel is someone we were expecting to have a big season," said Ford. "Clayton Nelson is another player who we expect to really step up and have a big role."

Nelson has flashed in previous seasons, catching a laser pass from back-up quarterback Will Westmoreland to continue the Wolves' booming 56-0 victory over Cedar Shoals last season. Westmoreland connected with the shifty receiver yet again during the first round of the 2017 playoffs for a 33-yard touchdown to secure a 54-23 win. Clayton's 6-foot, 195-pound frame gives him plenty of size to take the next steps Ford expects of him.

Even with Daniel expected to take on more responsibilities in the run game, the Wolves will rely on their No. 1 option out of the backfield. Derrian Brown is expected to handle the majority of the work. He rushed for 799 yards on 85 carries and scored 11 touchdowns during his junior year, his best game coming against



Buford QB Aaron McLaughlin at last year's Corky Kell Classic. Credit: Jason Getz/AJC

Paulding County in the first round of the 2017 postseason. Brown rushed for a whopping 150 yards on seven carries and took the ball to the house four times. Brown will look to keep up more of the same as the Wolves' top running back his senior season.

Leading the Wolves offense will be returning sophomore quarterback Aaron McLaughlin. The second-year varsity starter has already received the attention of all of the major programs, including Auburn, Michigan, Ole Miss and USC. Standing at 6-5, McLaughlin can see the field and get excellent reads on his receivers and their coverage. His performance during last year's Corky Kell gave him a chance to show off his skills, as he threw for 144 yards and two touchdowns in his first high school start. The dominance of the Buford run game took much of the pressure off the young quarterback. But even though the Wolves' ground game should be strong again, McLaughlin is ready to take the Buford passing game to the next level.

"He'll be doing a lot to prepare for this season," said Ford. "It's all about reps and just getting out there. We want to grow in the passing game. We want to play faster ball."

The Wolves defense was shaken up after the loss of multiple seniors.

"Defensively, there's a whole mess of young kids back there," said Ford.

While many defensive starting roles won't be solidified until preseason practice, there is one player who is sure to be a key player right out of the gates. Rising junior Jalen Huff made the move to transfer to Buford after two seasons with Athens Academy. The first-team all-state selection posted a strong sophomore season with six interceptions and 24 tackles, fueling Athens Academy's march to its first state-championship appearance. He'll be tasked with stepping right into the Buford defense and taking charge of the young unit.

After losing 24-7 in their first Corky Kell appearance against Roswell in 2016 - back when Ford led the powerhouse Hornets program - Buford came back from an early deficit to handle Hillgrove 48-17 last season. Now heading into the school's third Corky Kell, Ford has nothing but appreciation and respect for his opening-day opponent, Tucker.

"We have great respect for their program," said Ford. "We'll have to be the best versions of ourselves to come out ahead of that one."

BUFORD'S 2018 SCHEDULE

8/17 Tucker (Georgia State)

8/24 Jonesboro

8/31 Deerfield Beach

9/14 Newton

9/21 at Archer

9/28 Johnson-Gainesville

10/5 at Cedar Shoals

10/12 at Loganville

10/26 Walnut Grove

11/2 Clarke Central

TUCKER SPRING PREVIEW

Head coach Bryan Lamar and the Tucker Tigers advanced to the Class AAAAAA semifinals during last year's postseason but their bid for the program's third state title ended with a 14-3 loss to Coffee. This year, the Tigers are looking to take that extra step into the finals, but they'll be doing it with some unfamiliar faces after the large senior class of 2017 departs. But Lamar, now in his seventh season at Tucker, has several good reasons to believe that this upcoming season has big potential.

"We were disappointed, we want to win championships," Lamar said. "It's just part of life. Work as hard as you can and get in the best position

possible. You've got to have some things go your way when you're in a championship. You've got to have something go your way. The ball didn't go our way that night. We lost to a really good football team, but it's part of it. It's time to turn the page and get back to that position. The more opportunities you have, the more chance for success."

The Tigers find themselves with the tough task of filling some big shoes left by the senior class of 2017. Dylan Wonnum held down the offensive line alongside Terrell Paxton and created holes for a talented offense. Wonnum will play at South Carolina, and his absence will leave a void.

"Offensively we've got to find two tackles," said Lamar. "If we get that we'll be in great shape. Our center is back, he's a three-year starter, Dominique Boyd, a really talented kid, and the other [positions] I have no idea. We have a ton of guys we'll be looking at in spring, but Dominique is someone we'll look at to have a good year."

Boyd, a 6-foot-4 rising senior, suffered a break in his foot last year, forcing him out for half the season, but his return to the field has Lamar excited.

A heavy loss for the Tigers is Dekalb County all-time leading receiver Josh Vann. This wide receiver's abilities on the field were unmatched, as he put up 1,022 receiving yards and 15 touchdowns in his senior season. While his talents will be missed, his absence has opened the door for junior Isaiah Dunson. Dunson was second on the team last year with 215 yards receiving and a pair of touchdowns. While his production didn't come close to Vann's last season, the two-year letterman has been with the team since his freshman year and has the experience needed to perform as a heavy-usage receiver.

When it came time to move the chains, the Tigers had no issue handing the ball over to their big-time running back Taurean Taylor.

"Taylor is the most productive running back I've ever seen," said Lamar. "He was region offensive player of the year as a junior, and that caliber of running back will be greatly missed."

His senior campaign featured unrivaled production, as he rushed for 1,236 yards and found the end zone 15 times. Expected to take control of the backfield will be the hard-running duo of rising seniors David Davis and Tyler Hughey. Davis was dominant beside Taylor in the backfield, rushing for 716 yards and scoring nine touchdowns on limited carries. Hughey saw fewer snaps, but Lamar seems to like what he sees from this small sample size.

"Hughey is a back that did a really good job for us towards the end of the season," said Lamar. "He had a huge kickoff return against Allatoona to start the game. We're expecting him to have a huge role at running back."

Defensively, the Tigers find themselves in a similar situation as the offense. The team lost five linebackers who all went on to play college ball and altogether lost 13 starting-caliber players according to Lamar. Antonio Showers' senior campaign produced almost unreal results. His 18 sacks last season led all of Dekalb County, outpacing runner-up Terrence Randle from McNair by five. There is no question that he will be missed on the field, but a solution may lie with one of the team's youngest talents. Rising sophomore defensive end Dawson Rivers has Lamar feeling confident about the rebound potential for his defense.

"Dawson Rivers is going to be a freak of nature," he said. "We're expecting him to have a really good year."

Back from missing the whole 2017 season due to an ACL tear, rising senior Bruce Mattox is back and ready to strengthen the team's secondary.

Quarterback Travon Ford will be looking to go out with a bang in his senior campaign. His offseason progression has helped develop his talents further. Last season with Vann as his primary receiver, Ford threw for 1,616 yards and 19 touchdowns. His fourth-quarter performance in the 2017 playoffs against Allatoona in the second round helped secure the 20-12 win to advance to the semifinals. While the loss of Vann means Ford will have to spread the ball around, his passing and running ability will provide him with plenty of offensive opportunity.

The Tucker Tigers may be in a bit of a rebuilding phase, but Lamar said they have a strong foundation.

"Our sophomore class is really good," he said. "Our senior class has some good players. We don't have a lot of Power 5 guys, but they're all solid players. This year, it's more of a re-deal, but at the same time were trying to figure out a way to get into an opportunity to be competitive on a state level."

"The teams we've had before like this have won. Both teams that won titles lost in the semifinals the year before and then lost everyone. Then they come back and win the whole thing the next season. We're going to figure out how to get better every day in order to get back and be one of those teams."



Tucker before last season's Corky Kell game against Kell. Credit: Tucker HS

TUCKER'S 2018 SCHEDULE

8/17 Buford (Georgia State)

8/24 at Grayson

8/31 at Forest Park

9/14 Mundy's Mill

9/21 at Drew

9/28 Lovejoy

10/5 Morrow

10/19 M. L. King

10/25 at Mt. Zion-Jonesboro

11/2 at Stephenson