

A supplement
to the
Chatsworth Times

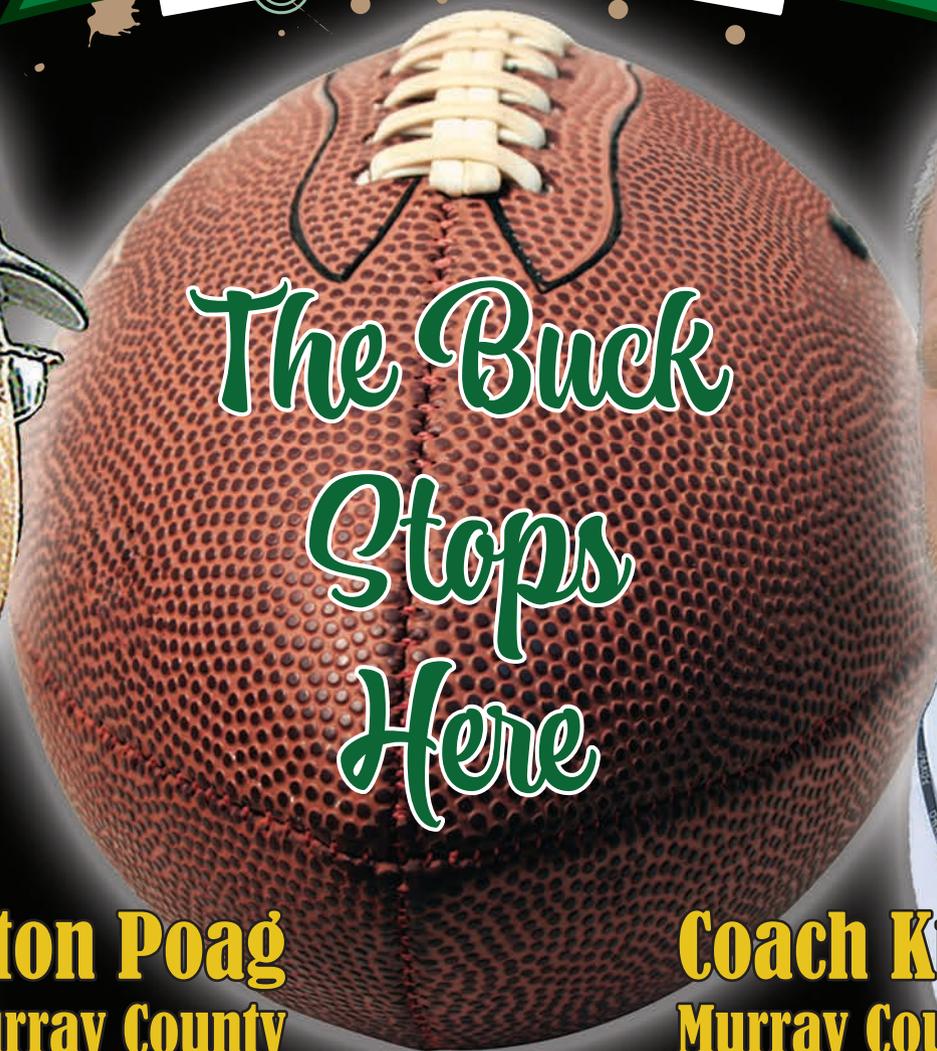
FOOTBALL

PREVIEW

2022



Coach Preston Poag
North Murray County



*The Buck
Stops
Here*



Coach Kurt Napier
Murray County

Prep football in 2022 has a new look

Last year, I waited patiently for weeks for a call from the Georgia High School Association. I assumed the muckety mucks at the GHSA would want to get my opinion on realignment. But that call did not come. GHSA officials went on without my input and reshaped the competitive map of high school athletics in the state.

Murray and North Murray were moved from Region 6-AAA to 7-AA. The new region has two fewer teams, dropping from nine to seven. Gone from the region schedule are Ringgold, Lakeview-Fort Oglethorpe, Adairsville, Sonoraville, LaFayette and Coahulla Creek.

Back for more is powerhouse Rockmart.

Newcomers are Haralson County, Fannin County, Gordon Central and Model.

Personally, I like the old lineup more. It was easier on travel and featured teams I had grown familiar with.

Local head coaches Preston Poag and Kurt Napier might disagree. The switch to a 7-team region will give them more flexibility. For instance, instead of having to play an eight-game region schedule with two non-region games, North Murray was able to schedule four non-region games.

The Mountaineers will open the season with a



Jimmy
Espy

high profile game at Dalton High, the alma mater of Mountaineer coach Preston Poag. Another good non-region matchup is with Northwest Whitfield. Those two have played two excellent games the last two years. Rounding out the non-region schedule for North Murray are Ridgeland and Pickens County.

Murray County, a rebuilding program, should also benefit from the additional non-region games. The Indians will play Coahulla Creek, Lakeview-Fort Oglethorpe, Gilmer County and Chattooga County.

THE NEW AND THE NOT SO OLD

We put coaches Poag and Napier on the front of this tab because these two men offer an interesting dichotomy.

Poag is in his prime as a head coach. He's had a successful 10-year run at two schools (Christian Heritage and North Murray) and is at the helm of an established program.

Napier, on the other hand, is in his first year as a varsity head coach. He's been the top guy at the middle school level and an assistant coach on varsity

teams, but he'll take that big first step on Friday against Coahulla Creek.

A lot of folks are pulling for Napier to get the program turned around. High School football in Northwest Georgia is just better when Murray County is competitive and winning some ball games.

MUCH APPRECIATION

The Chatsworth Times and its readers have benefited greatly from the presence of multiple talented photographers in our area. If you read our sports page, you've probably enjoyed the excellent photographic work of Scott Kuhn, Bradd Parker, Marion McAbee and Doug Smith. All four of these men are very good at what they do and a pleasure to work with. If you ever need a photo work done, don't hesitate to get in touch with any of them.

I'd also like to thank sports editor Erik Green who contributed a lot to this special section.

And thanks to our loyal advertisers and to everyone who put down 50 cents to buy a copy of the paper.

Now, let's go watch some football!

Jimmy Espy is editor and general manager of The Chatsworth Times.

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Talented N. Murray sets sights on playoffs

By Jimmy Espy
EDITOR

The North Murray Mountaineers will be looking for their seventh straight playoff appearance in 2022, their first season in Region 7-AA.

The new region alignment includes three teams that won their region titles last year, Rockmart, Haralson County and Fannin County. North Murray finished fourth in Region 6-AAA. Also in the region are Model, Gordon Central and Murray County.

Let's take a look at the Mountaineers.

QUARTERBACK

Poag has a terrific weapon in Seth Griffin, the 6-3, 195-pound senior who is established as one of the best passers in Georgia High School football. In the 2021 regular season, Griffin threw for more than 2,600 yards with 31 touchdown passes. (See feature

article on Griffin elsewhere in this special section.)

If one terrific quarterback isn't enough, Poag likes what he sees in backup Skyler Williams, another rangy (6-1) athlete who can throw and run.

"He's got a strong arm," Poag said.

Poag plans to use Williams at quarterback in special situations.

"We'll have some packages for him," the coach said.

RECEIVERS

Williams will be asked to do a lot besides backing up Griffin. He developed nicely as an outside receiver last season when injuries to teammates forced him into the starting lineup. At 6-1, with good speed, he presents a physical challenge to most cornerbacks.

Williams and Judson Petty will get plenty of opportunities at receiver in the Neers' prolific passing attack.



Judson Petty

But the top weapon, based on his superb 2021 season, should be Jady Rice. Rice caught 62 passes for 1,124 yards in the regular season including some spectacular plays.

Williams, Petty and Rice could

be an overpowering trio at wide receiver but will be asked to play elsewhere as well. So, that will open up playing time for other receivers. Liam Rogers should see time in the slot and

at H-Back. Quarterback Griffin said Rogers probably has "the best hands on the team" and is an excellent route runner. Walker James, who starts at cornerback, will also help out at receiver. Poag said a talented freshman, Hudson Hulett, could make an impact as well.

The Neers don't throw a lot to the tight end, but sophomore Aiden Ellis is a player to watch at that position, according to his head coach.

RUNNING BACK

Williams has college-level potential at receiver but will also be asked to join the committee of players expected to contribute at running back.

The same holds true for versatile Petty, an athletic junior with football smarts who will play running back and receiver, as well as on defense.

SEE **MOUNTAINEERS**, PAGE 4



Liam Rogers closes in for a tackle against Ringgold last season.

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MOUNTAINEERS: Veteran team looking to make a big impact in new region

FROM PAGE 3

The other players expected to run the ball include Tyler Henry and Logan Gray. Gray and Petty are better inside runners while Henry excels outside the tackles, according to Poag.

“I like the people we have at running back,” said Poag. “What we are trying to do will decide who’s in at running back.”

OFFENSIVE LINE

Poag likes his mix of size and experience up front.

With a likely starting group that includes Ashton Johnson (center, 240 pounds) Austin Newton (guard, 310 pounds), Carter Sanford (guard, 260 pounds) Carson Gibson (tackle, 215 pounds) and Ryan Maton (tackle, 250 pounds). Sophomore Shawn Hutto will challenge for playing time.

Poag described Newton as the leader of the group.

The linemen are big but also need to be mobile to protect Griffin in the



Skyler Williams

Mountaineers pass-heavy offense.

KICKER-PUNTER

“Automatic” Owen Hannah who handled all the kicking duties for the Neers for the last two years graduated. He’ll be missed but Poag believes



John Craig

Jafet Cuenca will capably step in the punter and kicker roles.

“Jafet has got a really good leg,” Poag said.

DEFENSE

It is assumed that the Mountaineers will score a lot of points. The last two years, it has also been a safe assumption they will give up more than their fair share against good teams. Poag wants to see an improved defense in 2022.

In their three region losses last season, North Murray gave up 37 points per game.

“We need to get better on defense this year and I think we will,” Poag said. “We have been working really hard on defense.”

New defensive coordinator Chevis Brooks has some veteran players to work with.

DEFENSIVE LINE

Heath Adams, Austin Newton and Sean Hutto will get premium snaps on the interior defensive line.

“We’ll rotate a lot of players on the line,” Poag said.

At end, senior Carson Gibson (6-2, 215) gives the Neers a veteran presence. Poag is very pleased with the development of John Craig (6-3, 220).

“John has become one of our leaders,” Poag said. “He’s a got a great motor and has come a long way.”

Nate Rivera is the key backup.



Carson Gibson

LINEBACKERS

The team’s base defense is a 4-2-5, which requires linebackers that can move and tackle well. Filling that role for the Mountaineers will be veterans Logan Gray (5-11, 180) and Liam Rogers (6-1, 175), who both had productive 2021 seasons. Aiden Ellis also figures big at linebacker as does Judson Petty, who will split time at linebacker and safety. That’s a strong group, but North Murray coaches will be looking to younger players provide depth.

DEFENSIVE BACKS

The Mountaineer secondary features some excellent playmakers. Petty can cover and tackle. Williams has the physical skills to stand out at safety. Rice and James both have experience on the corner with Cuenca backing up both positions.

OVERALL

Poag is happy with what he’s seen so far from his team.

“We have had a really good spring,” he said. “Attendance has been great and the team’s attitude has been very good. We’ve gotten stronger.”

The Mountaineers will get a good early test. They open on Friday with Dalton High, Poag’s alma mater, and follow with non-league games against Pickens County, Ridgeland and Northwest Whitfield.

The region opener is Sept. 23 at home against Haralson County.

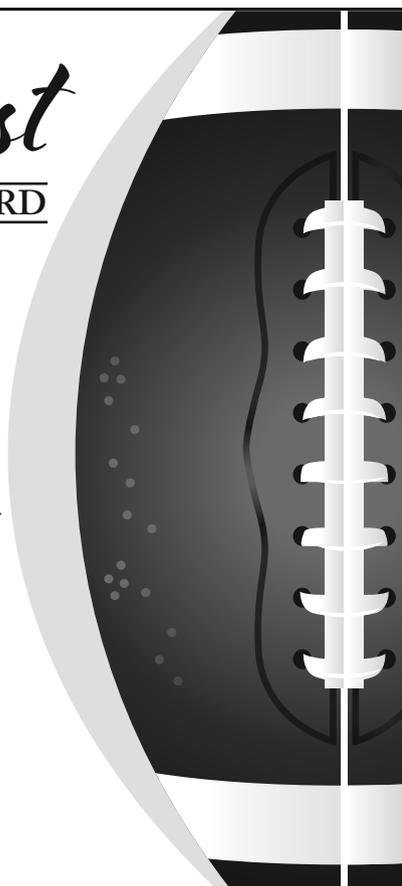
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For a Great Season!!



New look Indians working to build back better

By Erik Green
SPORTS EDITOR

The Murray Indians enter a new region with a new coach and new quarterback.

There also seems to be new optimism as Year One of the Kurt Napier era begins at Murray. Time will tell how it all shakes out, but Murray fans are ready to see winning football again and many believe Napier is the right man for the job.

Here's a closer look at the Murray team as they head into Region 7-AA this season:

OFFENSE

"My roots, and everybody knows this, goes back to the I-formation and power run game," Napier said about his team's offensive attack this year. "We're expanding on that a little bit. We are definitely getting into the shotgun a little more. A smash mouth run game will be our staple. We'll rely heavily on our offensive line and trying to develop up front. I feel like any good high school team has to stop the run and be able to run the ball. So every year we will start there."

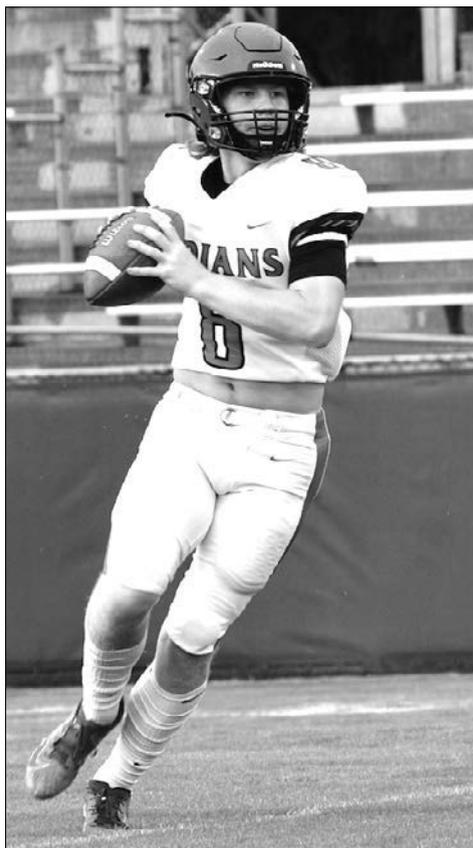
Napier said the team will mix in play action passes and screens to balance out the running attack.

"We have receivers out there that can make plays," Napier said. "It should be exciting to watch."

QUARTERBACK

Junior Judah Woodall takes center-stage as Murray's new signal caller. Woodall saw some time under center last year, but will be a first time starter for the Indians in 2022. Woodall is a tall, rangy athlete with solid speed and scrambling ability, which Napier said is his best attribute.

"We have three guys that have been repping the most," Napier said. "So Judah has definitely set himself apart as our starter. He has been taking reps at the first string position. He is really leading the guys. All three of them, though, have a long way to go in terms of their development. I'll be working specifically with that group. We met about once a week through the offseason, trying to throw and



Judah Woodall

talking about fundamentals. That's the most important position. It gets the most spotlight. Leadership is expected there. A lot will fall on Judah's shoulders."

His backups include Trent Childers and Hayden Betterton.

"They're competing to be the backup and earn more JV time," Napier said. "If anything happens to Judah they can step in and do a good job. They have good throwing ability and accuracy."

RUNNING BACKS

Several players have been taking reps at running back and Napier feels good about the guys lining up back there. Chase Jarvis and Kristopher McGinnis will split time at taiblack. Aaron Flood will join Garrett Paterson at fullback. Entertaining and gregarious senior Noah Densmore re-

turns and could be a difference maker at running back and defensive back.

WIDE RECEIVER

Senior Christopher ("Topher") Hernandez is the leader of the receiving corps, Napier said, and should be one of Woodall's favorite targets.

"He stepped up and took charge of that group," Napier said of Hernandez. "He has good hands and good running ability. He is able to get open."

A.J. Johnson will be another go-to threat for the Indians, Napier said.

"He's an effort guy that does whatever you ask him to do," Napier said.

Joe Carrell, Danny Ramirez, and others will be looked to to step up this year as well, he said.

TIGHT END

"We use tight ends and fullbacks in our offense, so those additional blockers can create additional seams and that sort of thing," Napier said. "The type of kid we have at Murray fits that

mold, the kind of hard-nosed, hard worker, tough, been in the weight room."

Luke Sims has been getting the most starter reps at tight end, according to Napier.

"He's a leaner guy, but is quick and moves well," Napier said. "He's a senior. It helps to have the older guys in there."

Aden Hollar, Aizik Taylor, and Landon Souther have all taken reps at tight end in the offseason, according to Napier.

OFFENSIVE LINE

"O-line has to be our biggest area of improvement," Napier said. "It should be a staple of what we do."

Senior Eli Hopes anchors an offensive line and he will most likely be joined in the starting lineup by Caleb Jones, Levi Coots, Brayden Thomason

SEE INDIANS, PAGE 6

CHEER

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CHEER

INDIANS: New head coach, staff working hard to install a winning culture

FROM PAGE 5

and Elijah Kruse. Those providing depth include: Tyrell Cochran, Memphis Dentmon, Will Corn.

“They’re bigger guys, stronger guys,” Napier said. “They are learning, slowly but surely, our scheme and how they block defenses and doing their jobs.”

Defensive Game Plan:

Napier’s defense will be a base 4-3 but will mix in other looks as well, he said. Chris Thomas is the team’s new defensive coordinator.

“He is a really good teacher of the game,” Napier said. “He definitely has been successful in his past as defensive coordinator. He will bring a lot of value and wisdom to our defense that will show up on Friday nights. He works with the linebackers and seeing him working in practice teaching them fundamentals and seeing their development has been great.”

The Indians gave up a lot of big plays last year which led to some lopsided outcomes in the opposition’s favor. As such, Napier has put a premium on tackling this year. It has been a focus since the first day of practice.

“The biggest thing, going all the way back to spring, is we have a tackling circuit that we do daily,” Napier said. “Even if we’re in shorts, we’re tackling bags. We’re working on technique and coach Thomas, it’s been a huge priority to him. Me, as a head



PHOTO BY JIMMY ESPY

Chase Jarvis (32) should get a lot of carries in the Indians ground game in 2022.

coach, I have allotted time for it.”

DEFENSIVE LINE

Like many high school teams, some of the same faces from the offensive line flip to defensive line as well.

“We’ll have a lot of guys on our team that play both ways,” Napier said.

Contributors will include Hope, Avery Stewart, Souther, Jones, Blaine Tarvin, Cochran, Coots, Thomason, and Kruse.

“We definitely have a two deep line-up that can all play and are worthy of getting on the field,” Napier said. “They’re strong boys who can hold their own to set up linebackers to make plays.”

LINEBACKERS

Aaron Flood is the rock of the linebacking corps and should be one

of the top players in the region at the position. Flood will be the middle, or “Mike” linebacker. Patterson will be the weak side or “Will” linebacker and Hollar will be the “Sam” or strong side linebacker, Napier said.

“We have had a variety of other guys repping with the twos,” Napier said. “Joseph Carrell, even our quarterback Judah, has been playing some linebacker. Aizik Taylor has been playing some linebacker and Edwar-do Rodriguez is a senior who hasn’t really played before but will give us meaningful reps. It’s a good group. They have been flying around making plays.”

SECONDARY

Josh Zeigler returns as the defensive backs coach and he will lead a group that will be missing leader Taylor Carrell from last year’s team. The

Indians will, most of the time, run a four DB arrangement, Napier said. Densmore will be joined in the secondary by Hernandez, Michael Dean, Danny Ramirez, and Eli Bowers.

“All of them are competing to get on the field,” Napier said. “In the safety position, we have good athletes competing to get on the field. Chase Jarvis is returning and Kristopher McGinnis. Really, those guys will be playing running back and flipping over to safety. Several others like Kyle Genitempo, A.J. Johnson are good safeties as well. Trae Davenport has been repping out there.”

SPECIALISTS

Kicker Joseph Jones returns for the Indians and will handle kickoffs, extra points and field goals.

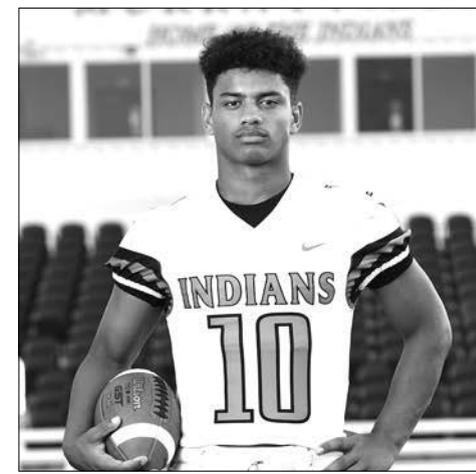
“He’s been a reliable kicker,” Napier said. “He came into last season brand new and coach Ben Crump worked with him and developed him and by the end of the year he was kicking decent length field goals and was pretty consistent on his extra points. We have seen him develop.

Flood will be the long snapper and Davenport the holder. Woodall and Hollar will likely split time at punter.

The Indians open the season Friday at former region rival Coahuilla Creek. Former Murray head coach Chad Brewer is now an assistant at Coahuilla. The game starts at 7:30 p.m.



Levi Coots



Aaron Flood

Hope dedicated to Murray County's success

By Erik Green
SPORTS EDITOR

Centers are probably the least noticed players on the football field, unless they screw up -- a bad snap or stepping on the quarterback's foot. But sharper eyes take note when a center excels. That's the kind of center Murray County's Eli Hope is.

"I think, with the new staff coming in and just seeing the work we're putting in, has motivated and encouraged Eli to take the next step as a player," said Murray coach Kurt Napier. "His work ethic and leadership are important. He has been coming consistently to our workout program in the offseason. He has been a vocal leader, somebody you know is in the room. He's kind of pushing and encouraging guys around him. He's a guy, I think, that is putting in the extra work, going to these camps and trying to get seen by colleges. He is a two-way player, our starting center



Eli Hope

and playing on the defensive line, trying to create havoc there."

Come to think of it, creating havoc is one of Hope's personal goals this year.

"To just absolutely demolish the

opponent," said Hope, who is listed at 6-foot-2 and 280-pounds. "Getting a couple of sacks on defense and trying my hardest not to let anybody pass through me when I'm on offense. Those are my personal goals at least."

Hope began playing flag football at age four and worked his way up through the ranks, he said. He's pretty much always played center, he said, with the exception of last year when he manned a guard position. Centers are, especially in high school, generally the smartest and have the best awareness of all the linemen. They need to be quick to help contribute to double teams and physical enough to go one-on-one with the occasional nose tackle in a 3-4 scheme. They have to be able to lead the offensive line on and off the field, set the huddle, and provide vocal cues pre-snap to help adjust protections against certain defensive fronts. Then, of course, they have to get the ball to the quarterback on good, repeatable, snaps in

all weather and field conditions.

"A center has to be football smart," Napier said. "I think Eli fits that mold. He understands the game. I rarely have to tell him who he is supposed to block. Offensive line is one of the most intellectual positions. I don't think people realize that. He has to identify whether it's an even or odd front. He has to communicate with the guys around him. If the guard is unsure who to block, he's talking. He is a big, strong boy, decent height, who works hard in the weight room. The tools he has for the offensive line will help us. He's quick off the ball as a defensive lineman, too. His speed has increased in the last six months."

Wrestling has played a major part in Hope's athletic development. In fact, come winter, Hope will certainly be one of the top heavyweights in Class AA. Some expect that he will

SEE HOPE, PAGE 9

**The Davenport family
wishes the best of luck
to the Murray County**

**Indians And
North Murray
Mountaineers
on a successful
season.**

**Sheriff Jimmy
Davenport
and Family**



**To our own Senior Indian, may
it be your best year yet. We love
you and are so blessed to your
parents, and siblings.
Dad, Mom, Kaeden and Addie**

Griffin preparing for a stellar senior season

By Jimmy Espy
EDITOR

It's not always easy to follow in the footsteps of a local legend, but Seth Griffin has navigated that course with style.

Griffin, the 17-year-old senior North Murray quarterback took over two seasons ago from current Georgia Bulldog star Ladd McConkey. The Mountaineers high octane offense has barely skipped beat. While McConkey's running prowess is unparalleled at North Murray, Griffin has proven to be an even better passer. The result -- a high scoring offense that eats yards in big chunks.

"I haven't felt any extra pressure following Ladd," Griffin said. "I am three years younger than my brother Luke and he was the local legend before Ladd."

Luke Griffin is an offensive lineman at the University of Missouri.

"Ladd has been a great role model for me," Griffin said. "I saw how hard he worked and how much he studied. I learned from Ladd that it takes more than ability to be a good quarterback."

Griffin got his first varsity start at quarterback as a freshman when McConkey was hurt in the season opener. He finished that game, then started the next week against Model.



Arm strength is just one of Seth Griffin's attributes.

"It started rough," he recalled. "I wasn't playing well but I settled down and finished with almost 300 yards and we won."

Since taking over as starter two years ago, Griffin has been one of the top quarterbacks in North-

west Georgia. He threw for more than 2,600 yard and 30 touchdowns last year. At 6-3, 195, he's also a good runner -- unafraid to take or deliver a blow.

"Seth can do a little bit of everything," said Neers Coach Preston Poag. "He's bigger and faster this season. I'll be running him a little more."

But it is in the passing game where Griffin truly excels.

"People know he can throw the long ball but Seth can also make the touch throws," Poag added. "He can throw the ball all over the field."

Griffin takes pride in that part of his game.

"There's not a throw I can't make," Griffin said. "I have a very strong arm but I can dink and dunk, too."

At what does he need to get better?

"Sometimes I throw off my back foot," Griffin said. "When I do that I use too much of my arm and not enough of my hips. I have to get my hips in the throw. That will save my arm and it creates more power on my throws."

Griffin has been fortunate to have had several excellent receivers to work with in the past. Names like Cade Petty, D'Ante Tidwell and Michael McDade stand out. It will be more of the same at

SEE **GRIFFIN**, PAGE 9

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GRIFFIN: Preparing for his senior year

FROM PAGE 8

receiver this season.

Jadyn Rice is back after a sensational 2021 season in which he produced 1,189 yards and 15 touchdowns in 11 games. Judson Petty had 32 catches.

"Judson is versatile," said Griffin. "He's fast and elusive and a good blocker. Jadyn is the play maker. Skyler Williams is big and has great hands. Liam Rogers is kind of unknown but he may have the best hands on the team and runs really crisp routes."

One thing you won't see much of this year -- if things go according to Poag's plans -- is Griffin on the field as a defender.

Griffin is a good safety and actually started at that position before he started at QB. But he likes the idea of not playing much defense.

"In my heart, I am a quarterback," Griffin said. "I'd rather not play on both sides of the ball because I like having the time to focus. It's hard to play quarterback and then immediately turn around and play defense. There are a lot of times when I want to be on the sidelines talking to my teammates or a coach and trying to figure out what we might have done

HOPE: At the center of the action

FROM PAGE 7

compete for a state title.

"Eli will be a key factor in our success as a team," said Murray County wrestling coach Drake Enloe. "I'm excited to see how well he will do this year. If he keeps working hard like he has been this off season, he will be standing tall on the podium at the end of the year. He is a great young man and I want nothing but the best for him. I think a different spark has come out of Eli here recently to push even harder than he has in the past and it shows."

That spark is related to his desire to play football at the next level. It's something he has dreamed about for years and now he can almost reach

wrong."

The move to Region 7-AA is a positive one, Griffin believes. He looks forward to playing new teams like Fannin County and Gordon Central as well as more familiar foes like Rockmart, Haralson County and Murray County.

"I try not to worry about the other teams too much. I just focus on my team," Griffin said.

And what's next after this season? Is college football on the itinerary.

"That's the goal," he said. "I am going to keep pursuing the dream."

Griffin is already on the radar of multiple college football programs. His physical attributes -- size, arm strength, speed -- are sure to catch the eye of college coaches.

"I have two D-2 offers now but I am going to wait and see what happens," he said. They (colleges) want you to send film of your first three games so we'll do that. I'm focused on having a good season. If I do, I think things will work out for the best."

The pressure is there, but one thing always helps.

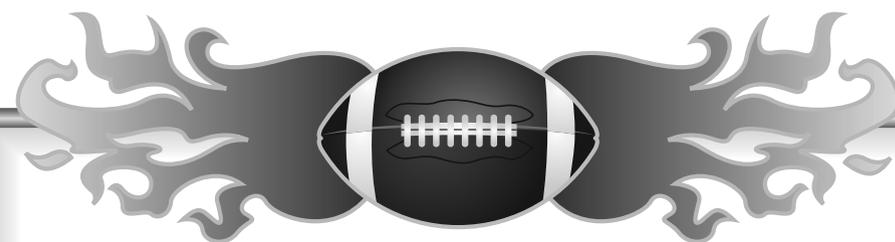
"I talk to Luke almost every day," he said. "My brother and I are very close, no matter how far apart we are."

out and touch it, which is why he has come back every year despite Murray's struggles.

"You just never know when it may end," Hope said. "I just really wanted to get the most out of it. That's what's driving me."

No matter the outcome of Murray's games this season, it's a safe bet that Hope will be giving his all in his last year in green.

"He is a great asset to our team," Napier said. "I am thankful we have him on both sides of the ball. His experience, knowing he has been through the fires for three or four years, will help us. He has played the snaps. He has been in the big moments."



*Our staff wishes the
Indians and Mountaineers
a great season!*

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Napier takes on enormous challenge

New Indians coach grew up with the game

By Erik Green
SPORTS EDITOR

It's true what you've heard about Kurt Napier. He's the son of former Murray head coach, Bill Napier, who is maybe the most revered coach in the county's history. Yes, his brother is Billy Napier, the head coach at Florida. Yes, his brother Matt has resurrected LaGrange High's program. Yes, there are high expectations and wide shadows and big footsteps. But in his first year as the new Murray football coach Kurt Napier is simply aiming to bring some respectability back to a once solid program.

"Confidence is a huge part of having success," Napier said. "For our guys, we have tried to bring in a staff of coaches who, first, care about them and are trying to build relationships with them and letting them know that they care about them as people first. It's pretty clear when we get on the board with them and the stuff we're installing and having success at FCA (Fellowship of Christian Athletes) team camp against top level teams, them having a little success, even in practice, it builds on itself. Getting stronger and putting in the time in the weight room going back to January (has helped). They're starting to feel like they have the tools."

BIG JOB AHEAD

It would be a daunting task for anyone to turn around a program in such disrepair. The Indians haven't had a winning season since 2005, their final year in Class AAAA. Since then, Murray has gone 5-5 once and is 31-210 overall and 16-84 in region games. Fortunately, for Napier, he is comfortable in his own skin and legitimately humbled to be leading the team for which he was once a water boy.

"There definitely was a lot of prayer and thought, just trying to seek wisdom from people in my life about (taking the job)," he said. "Was this something that was the right choice and the right thing to do? Once the time came and I interviewed, it just felt right. I love Murray County, my hometown. I have lived here my whole life essentially. I love this place and want it to be successful."

BORN TO COACH?

Napier, quite literally, grew up on the sidelines at Murray. As the water boy, he snuck into team huddles, he said, to listen to what the coaches were



PHOTO BY JIMMY ESPY

Coach Kurt Napier talks with quarterback Judah Woodall during the Green and White scrimmage. Napier is starting his first season as head coach of his alma mater.

saying. He watched his older brothers star on the gridiron and eventually his time came. Napier played quarterback under his dad at Murray. He initially went on to play quarterback at Truman State University in Missouri before transferring to Tusculum University in Tennessee where he played quarterback, tight end and receiver. His first semester in college, Napier majored in architecture. It was not what he had in mind and coaching had always been enticing to him, he said. So he finished an education degree and got on at Thomas County Central, a program with quite a storied past.

One of the hardest things about coaching football is being able to see things unfold ahead of time like a chess player. There are so many different positions operating in concert with one another. On every play, someone is moving here to block, there to catch a pass, and so on. You have to be able to predict your opponent's next move while being able to see your own move unfolding.

Napier realized as a young coach at Thomas County Central that there were still certain things he didn't know. That's when he amplified his focus and got serious about learning the game.

"Most of my playing days, when I was a quarterback, I knew my job and typically what the running backs did," he said. "I went off to college and I think I began to understand better what the receivers did, the routes and all. I'll say, pleading humility here, I went to coach my first year at Thomas County Central, coaching receivers, and really didn't know what the offensive line's responsibility was on the average play."

He eventually landed at Callaway High School where his brother Matt was defensive coordinator. They spent long hours together talking football.

"You might be embarrassed to ask certain questions but, since it's your brother, you ask," he said. "We would just get on the board and he would teach

NAPIER: Laying a new foundation at MCHS

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me blocking schemes against certain fronts and a variety of plays. That's one of my biggest strengths now is understanding what the linemen do and adapting to defensive fronts and schemes."

Now, at age 37, Napier feels like he has a well-rounded understanding of all phases of the game, especially after a stint as a defensive coordinator at Murray and head coach at Gladden.

"Whenever I became head coach at Gladden Middle School, I was suddenly in charge of special teams; I had to have a defense while still running the offense," he said. "That was a huge growing opportunity for me as a coach. I was thrown into it and you had to figure it out. I created my own defense there and offense as well. I sort of made some decisions on how to run special teams. Those years at Gladden were huge in my development and understanding all three phases of the game."

Napier has assembled a wealth of new coaches, including veteran offensive line

coach Jake Thigpen and new defensive coordinator and linebackers coach Chris Thomas. He also brought in recent Murray graduate Lincoln Puryear to coach tight ends and retained some hard working young coaches like defensive backs coach Josh Zeigler and special teams coach Ben Crump.

It was important to him to bring a staff together that would invest in the players as people first and help rebuild their confidence. So far so good, according to team leader, center Eli Hope.

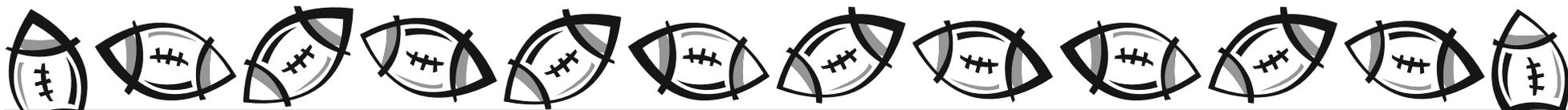
"So far, I think it has been a big improvement," Hope said. "The atmosphere of everything has changed. We're working a lot harder and I think we'll have a good season this year. He has changed the atmosphere and they are interacting with us more. We have a strength and conditioning coach, which we really needed. Last year we didn't work out at all and now, everyday before practice, we workout. That has helped us improve a lot."

The foundation has been set and now the proving ground awaits. Napier knows what's ahead of him, but he has never been more prepared.



PHOTO BY BRADD PARKER

Kurt and Tiffany Napier with daughters Reghan and Milly.



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Poag finds a home with Mountaineers

By Jimmy Espy
EDITOR

North Murray Coach Preston Poag exudes confidence on the sidelines during games, at practice and on the telephone talking about his football team's chances on Friday -- no matter who the opponent.

It's a confidence built on past performance. The short history of North Murray football can be divided into two eras -- Pre Poag and after After Poag.

Before the head coach arrived in 2016, the Mountaineers best season was 5-5 in 2012. Since Poag's arrival, the team has averaged seven wins a season and qualified for the state playoffs every year.

It's a record of which to be proud. But it's not the thing with which Poag finds the most satisfaction.

"I am a very competitive person -- competition gets my juices flowing -- but the thing I like the most is watching these kids grow," Poag said. "Coaching is my passion and I love the competition, but the kids are the best part of it. That's why I coach."

Poag played high school football and baseball for some excellent Dalton High School teams in the mid 1980s. He graduated in 1986 and was recruited to play for Coach Dick Sheridan's North Carolina State Wolfpack. Poag continued to play both football (quarterback and punter) and baseball (pitcher) at N.C. State. After graduation, he began pursuing a career as a college football coach. He took an assistance coaching job at Virginia Military Institute (VMI).

But then his coaching career took a detour.

Poag returned to Dalton and took a job with Shaw Industries.

"I had a really good job with Shaw but I missed coaching so I became a community coach," Poag said.

He took over his first high school team in 2012 at Christian Heritage in Dalton, just as that program was starting to play against public schools. Poag stayed at Christian Heritage for four years, posting a 24-20 record.

Then he was hired at North Murray by Principal Maria Bradley.

Poag's first season at North Murray ended with an 8-4 record and the Neers' first playoff appearance in school history.

The wins have kept coming.

Poag is 45-23 overall at North Murray. The team, hopes to extend its consecutive playoff streak to seven this season. The program has enjoyed team success and has consistently sent players into the college ranks. Among the recent college signees: Ladd McConkey (Georgia), Luke Griffin (Missouri), Landon Burrell (Middle Tennessee State) and



FILE PHOTO

This season will be Preston Poag's seventh as head coach at North Murray.

Cade Petty (University of Tennessee) and Michael McDade (Gardner-Webb).

Poag credits a lot of his success to three coaches who had a personal and professional impact on him.

One of those is no stranger to area football fans -- longtime Dalton High School coach Bill Chappell, a member of the Georgia Coaches Hall of Fame.

"Coach Chappell, for sure, Poag said. "From him I learned to be hard nosed on the field, to work hard

and something that was very important -- nobody is bigger than the team."

"I watched Coach Dick Sheridan at N.C. State and saw how detail-oriented he was," Poag said. "Also, Coach Sheridan demanded accountability. I saw how he handled discipline."

The third great mentor didn't coach football.

"My baseball coach in college was Ray Tanner," Poag said. "The thing about him was the relationships he had with his players. He was very hard nosed on the field but he let his players know he loved them off the field. That's what I try to do."

"I have learned a lot, both good and bad, from a lot of people," Poag said. "I'm still learning Xs and Os' from different people. I try to grow every year and get better."

When asked to look back over his first six seasons at North Murray and identify highlights, Poag answered quickly.

"Beating Calhoun at their place," he said.

In 2019, a strong NM team traveled to Calhoun and manhandled the Yellow Jackets, 31-7. It was the first win ever over one of Georgia high school football's perennial powerhouses. It was also a key win in an 11-game victory streak that carried the Neers deep into the state playoffs.

That 2019 team was exceptional. The players took on the persona of their coach -- confident, tough and unwilling to back down an inch.

Another memorable win came in Poag's first season as coach at North Murray. In the final regular season game of the year, North Murray beat Adairsville 28-21 to clinch the team's first state playoff appearance.

Asked if he has given any thoughts to retirement, Poag laughed.

"I'm only 55 and I've got a lot left in me," he said. "As long as I have the fire and the energy I'll keep coaching. I really like the competition. But I also like making a difference with the players. I want them to be better football players, but I also want them to grow up to be better fathers, better at their jobs and to have better lives."

A lot of rumors have circulated in recent years that Poag was soon to coach his last game at North Murray. But he says differently.

"Dr. Bradley has taken care of me and made it very hard for me to leave," said Poag, who teaches PE and health. "We have had some special seasons here."

"I don't want to be anywhere else but North Murray," Poag said. "People know North Murray now. We have worked our tails off to make them know who we are."

So, it's back to work -- fine tuning what should be another terrific offense and looking for ways to improve the defense.



PHOTO BY BRADD PARKER

Murray County cheerleaders



FILE PHOTO

Rivalry matchup

North Murray and Murray County will resume their rivalry on Sept. 30 when the Mountaineers come to Chatsworth to play the Indians. Game time is 7:30 p.m.

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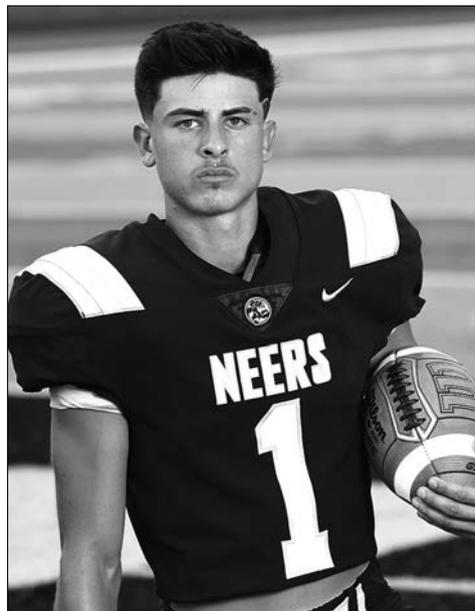
PHOTO BY DOUG SMITH

North Murray cheerleaders

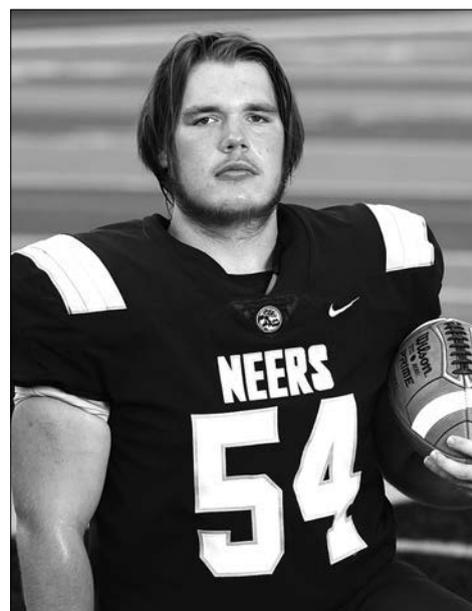
North Murray Players to watch



Logan Gray



Jafet Cuenca



Carter Sanford



Ryan Maton

Murray County Players to watch



Trae Davenport



Aden Hollar



Garrett Patterson



Joseph Jones

Murray County Indians 2022 schedule

August 19	@ Coahulla Creek
August 26	LFO
September 2	@ Gilmer
September 16	Chattooga
September 23	@ Model
September 30	North Murray
October 14	Rockmart
October 21	Fannin County
October 28	@ Haralson
November 4	@ Gordon Cenrtral

North Murray Mountaineers 2022 schedule

August 19	@ Dalton
August 26	Pickens
September 2	@ Ridgeland
September 9	Northwest Whitfield
September 23	Haralson
September 30	@ Murray County
October 7	Gordon Central
October 12	@ Fannin County
October 21	@ Model
November 4	Rockmart

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