



Thursday, November 13, 2014

More playoff football previews inside...

Surviving they cycle...

In 2011, at the University of Southern Mississippi, no one would have ever imagined some of the athletic programs would take a turn for the worse within a short three-year span. From witnessing bad coaches, watching successful coaches leave for better programs to adding and removing other athletic personnel, Southern Miss is not the same as it once was.

Let's be honest, after watching the Golden Eagles win a record-breaking 12 games in football in 2011, I did not think the team would go winless the following year and win only one game in 2013. This never crossed my mind — that it would be the end to a dominant football program; one that produced 18 straight winning seasons, countless Conference USA championships and major support from alumni, students and faculty.

WILTON'S WORD



By Wilton JACKSON

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One must take into consideration players like Austin Davis moved on to the NFL and the loss of many upperclassmen. Not to mention, then-head coach Larry Fedora left after a stellar season for a head coach position at the University of North Carolina. But now, three years and two coaches later, the program sits in a predicament that many, including myself, are worried about.

Many thought former head coach Ellis Johnson was to blame in the team for not winning games; now with head coach Todd Monken showing glimpses of moving the team in the right direction. But when will the team come back and restore its dominance as a major powerhouse in C-USA?

In three years, the Golden Eagles have won a total of four games with three of the wins coming this season. Thus, one can say, this season has been better than the previous two. However, with only two games left, Southern Miss will definitely not find itself competing for a bowl game and could only finish 5-7 at best if they defeat both Texas at San Antonio and Alabama-Birmingham.

It is, however, the nature of college sports to go through a cycle of talented players, and when they leave due to graduation or the NFL, things can become rocky for a few years.

I know my fellow students have not lost faith. Many have told me they believe that the program will survive this down cycle, and that it's evident when you watch the football team play that there is improvement.

Honestly, I will forever be a Golden Eagle and remain true to my university by showing overwhelming support of school spirit, but I would like to see the team finish strong and prepare for next year.

In the meantime, as the football team

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CLASS 6A FIRST ROUND
Hancock
at Oak Grove

CHAMP

By Josh Mlot
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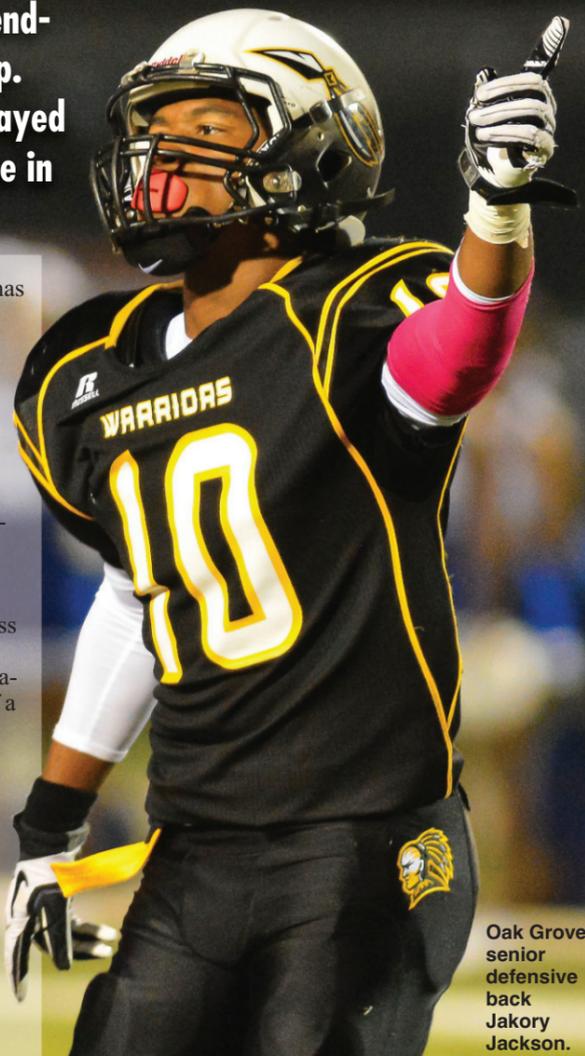
VS. UPSTART

Oak Grove is defending a championship. Hancock hasn't played a postseason game in 24 years.

HATTIESBURG — It has been there all season, but with the start of the playoffs, consider the target firmly planted on Oak Grove's back as the Warriors attempt to defend their state championship.

That starts Friday as Oak Grove (9-1 overall, 6-1 Region 3-6A) hosts upstart Hancock (7-4, 4-3 Region 4-6A) in the first round of the MHSAA Class 6A playoffs. The Hawks haven't been to the postseason since 1991, the last of a string of four consecutive seasons in which the program made the playoffs — the only four times in the last quarter century, dating back to when the school was Hancock North Central. (Fascinating note: HNC never made the playoffs with Brett Favre pulling

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Oak Grove senior defensive back Jakory Jackson.

CLASS 6A FIRST ROUND
Petal
at Ocean Springs

District champion Greyhounds await Petal in first round

OCEAN SPRINGS — Petal football has been in playoff mode for a few weeks. Now that the playoffs are actually here, the Panthers hope it breathes some new energy into a side that must go on the road and face a district champion.

"I think really and truly now that we're in the playoffs I've seen a difference in the kids," Petal head coach Marcus Boyles said. "They've come out and had a good practice (Monday) and had kids flying around the football."

Practice is one thing, but hitting the road to take on Ocean Springs (10-1 overall, 6-1 Region 4-6A) in the opening round of the MHSAA Class 6A postseason is another. Petal (7-4, 4-3 Region 3-6A) may match up well, though, as it has shown an ability to score some points against good defenses — of which the Greyhounds boast another — while the Panthers weakness may be coming up with enough defensive stops against really good attacks.

Ocean Springs' offense has been good enough, but is not elite, averaging 23.5 points per game. It features some balance but leans on its ground game, with senior running back Andrew Warren hitting 1,000 yards and 13 touchdowns in a split-back scheme that features a lot of inside and outside veer.

Senior quarterback Drew Windham throws the ball to receivers Austin Williams and Marcus Buckley.

"They do a lot of different things, but it's really about running the football," Boyles said. "At the end of the night,

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CLASS 6A FIRST ROUND
Hattiesburg
at Brandon

Hattiesburg's playoff prize: Trip to South's No. 1 team, Brandon

BRANDON — For a long while, it looked like the Hattiesburg football team might win a district title. Then, all of a sudden, the Tigers were backing in off three straight losses. But now the postseason is here, and there's no time to dwell on disappointments.

The Tigers (5-6 overall, 4-3 Region 4-6A) want to be hyper-focused as they prepare for a date with perhaps the South's best team, Brandon (10-1, 7-0 Region 3-6A), on the road in the opening round of the MHSAA Class 6A playoffs Friday night.

"I don't need a flashlight focus, I need a laser focus," Hattiesburg head coach Tony Vance said. "That's the term we've thrown around. I think it starts with that. It's more about us doing what we're supposed to do and doing the little things right than who we're playing."

The Bulldogs have been balanced

— and excellent — in every facet of the game, scoring 34.3 points per game and allowing just 15.5 en route to a district title, but the Tigers refuse to be intimidated.

"I look at them and don't think they're any better than Petal or Oak Grove," Vance said. "We had a chance against both those teams, so I like our chances against these guys."

Brandon was the state runner-up in 2012, and have not lost in the first round of the playoffs since 2006. Its offense is led by senior quarterback Gardner Minshew, a four-year starter and 2,500-yard passer who is as poised as any thrower in the state.

"Without a doubt, he'll be the best passer we've seen all year," Vance said. "He's not going to hurt you with his legs, but I don't know if there's anyone who throws it better than he



HATTIESBURG'S TY HARRIS holds on to the football in this Oct. 10 file photo. The Tigers open up the MHSAA Class 6A playoffs Friday on the road against top seed Brandon.

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