

Sports

Warriors ready to tackle big goals

Leadership from veteran senior class, expansion of coaching staff fuel culture change

BY ABBY HOOVEN

Last year, the Eminence football program made tremendous strides on and off the field.

The start of a culture change and a larger coaching staff paid dividends for the Warriors, resulting in a winning season that included five straight victories to open the year.

After a full offseason of training, Eminence continues to build on the culture changes from 2023 with the hopes of competing for a district title this fall.

“Last year was just trying to get them to understand what we wanted and understand what we meant by culture change, and I think we did start to see things,” said head coach Ryan Jones. “Having the offseason in the weight room really was a big part of it and seeing the guys working together.”

As part of the changes, Eminence has also implemented monthly leadership meetings.

“We’ve really been working on and trying to teach them how to lead and what it truly means to be a leader and to understand if you’re going to lead, you’re not always going to be everybody’s best friend. Sometimes you’re going to have to have some hard conversations, but I think they’re starting to understand that,” Jones said. “I think it’s a long process but we’re headed in the right direction.”

Jones has an experienced senior class that will take on more leadership this fall. Many players have been with the program for several years, going from a winless 2022 season to a winning season in 2023 and hopefully greater success in 2024.

“Those older guys, we had a conversation the other day reminding them about the 0-11 season, and I told them, I said it was rough and it’s something I hope I don’t ever have to go through again. But you’ve got to use this as motivation and remember how it felt to go through that and how far you’ve come,” said Jones.

While Jones noted his team will take things one game at a time, the goal is to be in a position to win the district and host a first round playoff game.

“At the end of the year, we want to be there, have a shot at the district championship,” said Jones.

A key piece of Eminence’s success this season will be senior quarterback Blaze Berry. As a junior, he led the state with over 3500 yards passing and 40 touchdowns.

“The levels and expectations for the season are high and we’re ready to go out and tackle them and meet those expectations,” said Berry.

The Warrior offense also had to adjust to the loss of Austin Bright and Dalton Gambrel, the team’s top two receivers, to graduation. Both players accounted for 21 touchdown receptions and nearly 2000 yards receiving.

“Losing Dalton and Austin definitely are big shoes to fill, but we found the guys this summer to fill those shoes and are ready to roll for the season and not miss a beat at all,” said Berry.

Jones added it will be a group effort to fill the roles, with a couple returning players moving positions to meet the need.

“We’ve moved Trey Starks from an inside receiver to an outside receiver. Cooper Holland, he’s a year older and has been spending most of his time in receiver so far this year,”



Abby Hooven

Standout quarterback Blaze Berry will anchor the Eminence football offense again this fall. He throw for more than 3,500 yards during his junior season in 2023.



Abby Hooven

Landon Smither will be a key contributor for the Warriors in his senior season. He rushed for 1050 yards last fall.

said Jones. “Tavion Chambers has come a long way this off-season. He’s just a sophomore, but he’s made some huge gains.”

Avery Holland will be another receiver to gain some repetitions this fall. After playing on the line for most of his career, he transitioned into a receiver role last season and ended with 523 yards receiving and six touchdowns.

Holland focused on his strength and conditioning during the offseason and said he’s lost about 50 pounds while preparing for this year’s schedule.

“I’m ready for the season, coming into the season confident, quicker, stronger but faster, better than ever for my senior year,” Holland said.

Holland hopes to step into a similar role as Gambrel held last fall, with his eyes on achieving 1000 yards receiving.

“I’m not the same player as I used to be,” said Holland. “I’m going to look a lot different out on that field.”

Eminence’s offense also brings back Landon Smither and Jarren Beverly. Both players are expected to be big contributors in their senior seasons.

“Those two have grown up together, so for them, they know it’s kind of their last time together,” said Jones.

Smither was the main running back option as a junior, ending with 1050 yards rushing and seven touchdowns. He also had 480 yards receiving and earned 37 tackles and 8.5 tackles for losses on the defensive end.

“I’m trying to aim for 1000 and 1000 with receiving and rushing, but at the same time, do whatever we’ve got to do and make history,” said Smither.

Beverly missed a handful of games last season due to injury but returned to finish the year with 143 yards rushing and 163 yards receiving.

“I’m just excited. Football is a really good sport because everybody comes together and works hard, and team effort, it really matters,” said Beverly.

Defensively, the Warriors graduated Montay Moorman, who ended the 2023 season with 41 tackles, 13.5 tackles for loss, 6.5 sacks and four forced fumbles.

“Montay was kind of our big play guy on defense last year. He came up with a lot of big

2024 WARRIOR FOOTBALL ROSTER

Seniors

Blaze Berry
Jarren Beverly
Brayden Cole
Michael Higgins
Avery Holland
William Kemp
Harrison Kessinger
Adrian Martinez
Nick Mitchell
Abraham Munoz
Eric Reza
Melvin Reza
Landon Smither
Kevin Stivers

Juniors

Kyle Baker
Kenien Foree
Kendrick Cassity
Ronnie Heitzman
Charlie Prenn
Matthew Roby
Kyllier Runion
Isaiah Sharp
Trey Starks
Raihin Steed
Sophomores
Ethan Armstrong
Stephen Barksdale
Michael Bland
Tavion Chambers
Taylor Green
Trey Heath
Cooper Holland
Elijah Montgomery
Isaac Patterson
Dakota Phillips
Landon Rutledge
Freshmen
Zarrik Jones
David Ortega
Maurice Roberts

EMINENCE FOOTBALL SCHEDULE

Aug. 24 vs. Bellevue 8 p.m.
Aug. 30 @ Owen County 7:30 p.m.
Sept. 6 vs. Caverna 7:30 p.m.
Sept. 13 vs. Pineville 7:30 p.m.
Sept. 20 @ Trimble County 7:30 p.m.
Sept. 27 vs. Washington County 7:30 p.m.
Oct. 11 vs. Frankfort 7:30 p.m.
Oct. 18 @ Berea 7:30 p.m.
Oct. 25 vs. Sayre 7:30 p.m.
Nov. 1 @ Gallatin County 7:30 p.m.

put the foundation for our new generation, so we have to keep building up and let everybody else take over,” said Martinez.

Jones also hopes to see Matthew Roby and Melvin Reza build on their success from last season defensively. Roby had a team-high 22 tackles for loss and four forced fumbles and Reza was a consistent force as well.

“I’ve seen throughout practice, everyone’s focused. They’ve brought the intensity up more, more aggressive than last year,” said Reza. “I think we’ve got a pretty good, strong team.”

Overall, Jones said his defense is ahead of where they were a year ago with the new system. Going into the season, he is still looking for someone to be the key playmaker and disruptor for opponents as Moorman did last fall.

“Montay’s getting double teamed and things like that, a lot of times, which opens up the game, so it’s kind of somebody’s going to have to step up and just be the guy that the other team has to game plan around,” said Jones.

Across the board, Eminence has matured and improved since last November and is ready to face the challenges ahead.

“I feel like guys are more ready to rally together and I’ve seen a lot of leaders step up, besides myself, that have really got guys motivated and ready for the season,” said Berry.

The Warriors will open the season on Aug. 24 at home against Bellevue at 8 p.m.

“We’ve got, in my opinion, the best team that Eminence has had in the past 20 years, and we’re ready to do a special thing with a special group of guys and we’ve got God behind our backs ready to support us all the way,” said Berry.

plays at a lot of key times,” said Jones.

Jones sees a few players stepping up on the defensive end this year, though, including senior Adrian Martinez.

“Adrian’s had a really good off season. He’s put on probably 20, 25 pounds and still moving like he was last year. He’s back at middle linebacker,” said Jones.

Martinez missed some time last season due to injury as well, but completed the year with 21 tackles and five tackles for loss.

“I was brand new to this linebacker stuff, but now I’m coming into it, so I feel like I’m good with it,” said Martinez.

He added that this senior class is helping further the culture change progress made by last year’s seniors and will continue to lead well to set the program up for success in the coming years.

“Coach Hadden talks about how last year’s seniors, they