

# 2022 FRIDAY NIGHT LIGHTS HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL PREVIEW



2022 Auburn, Christiansburg, Blacksburg, Eastern Montgomery and Radford High Schools

# Blue Demon 11 optimistic about upcoming season

**Marty Gordon**

*NRVsports@ourvalley.org*

Christiansburg enters head football coach Alex Wilkens's sixth season with a lot of optimism and maybe the feeling of some "unfinished" business after stalling out in last season's second round of the 3D regional playoffs.

Disappointment was all over the faces of Christiansburg players and coaches as the clock ran out on that November night on the team's 28-27 loss to Lord Botetourt. The Blue Demons finished a 10-2 season, one of the best in school history, but it just was not what they had hoped for.

Wilkens said he was obviously heartbroken for his kids, parents, and coaches "But I was incredibly proud of our resiliency, effort, and togetherness in the game. It was just not meant to be for us," he said.

The contest was delayed for over

an hour as Botetourt's team buses were stuck in traffic on Interstate 81 when three tractor-trailer accidents slowed movement. Kickoff was pushed back to 8 p.m. and finally was underway by 8:15.

Wilkens said the delay had no effect on the game. "Both teams were too mentally tough to let something like that affect how we play the game," he said.

On the field, Christiansburg jumped out to an early 7-0 lead, but Botetourt answered score for score with a 14-14 game at half-time. But the first 10 seconds out of the locker room in the third quarter changed the ball game.

Botetourt ran the opening kickoff back 91 yards for a touchdown. The visitors then used a tough defense to force two Christiansburg fumbles and an interception. The biggest might have been a stop with less than three minutes remaining as they led Christiansburg 28-27.

Wilkens rolled the dice and went for two and the win. Officials on the field ruled running back Stephan Myrthil was stopped short of the goal line.

But with time remaining, Wilkins rolled the dice a second time and executed an onside kick to perfection. In a play, he calls jail break, the kicking team bunched everyone up at the 50-yard line and tapped the ball off a Botetourt receiver.

After almost a 15-minute discussion by the officials, Christiansburg was awarded the ball. Ten seconds later, Tanner Evans tossed a long halfback pass to Travis Altizer to set up last-minute heroics at the Botetourt 3-yard line. But the Christiansburg ball carrier fumbled the ball on the next play with Botetourt recovering and running out the final 90 seconds for the win.

Botetourt advanced to the regional championship for the fifth

year in a row against Abingdon which downed Bassett.

"We play to win the game," Wilkens said, "but we were at peace with it as a team. There were so many 50/50 plays sometimes that just don't go your way and if any one of them go your way you win - and none of those went our way that night. It just wasn't meant to be for us."

Wilkens admitted the loss left a sour taste in his team's and the program's mouth.

"But it gave us confidence that we can compete as well," he said. "And even on top of that, we believe we should have won the game, and it gave us a little hunger to get back to those types of games with high stakes."

According to Wilkens, Christiansburg now has the drive to work to be better than last year and learn from their mistakes. The program lost nine starters offensively and seven defensive players from that team.

The biggest losses offensively will come from the absence of quarterback Casey Graham, running back Stephan Myrthil, tight end Tyrique Taylor, tailback Kenyon Johnson-Buchannon and H-Back Drew Lloyd.

For the season, Graham finished 106 for 169 passing with 19 touchdowns and 1,853 total yards. Myrthil rushed 121 times for 855 yards with 14 touchdowns while Johnson-Buchannon tallied 717 yards on 115 carries with 13 touchdowns.

Only two starters return to the offensive side of the ball where Junior Tanner Evans (5-7,190) recorded 80 carries for 682 yards and seven touchdowns.

"Evans will be returning as one of the best skill position kids in the area," Wilkens said. "He could line up at wide receiver, quarterback, or run."

The team received a boost with the transfer of Cam Cooper (6-0, 180), who showed promise early on last season for Pulaski including a 15-26, 262-yard effort in a 49-16 win over Jefferson Forest. Cooper eventually suffered a bro-

ken collar bone that ended his season prematurely.

His addition could allow Evans to remain in the defensive lineup where he was almost as important as he was on the offensive side of the ball last season.

But the success of the Blue Demons season could rest in the trenches where twelve players top out at over 200 pounds with four pushing the 300 pound mark.

According to Wilkens, "Ayden Conley (6-4, 321), Jackson Poole (6-2, 290), Carson Ballard (5-9, 230), Harrison Pence (5-8,230), Carter Stallard (5-8, 230) Tyler Phillips (5-8, 180) and Andrew VanDyke (6-0, 130) are all seasoned players, and they will determine how far this squad goes."

Jayron Thompson looks to transition from a situational playmaker on both sides of the ball to a consistent option, and Curtis Altizer (5-9, 222) will return off his all-state campaign last year and lead the defense alongside Thaxton Henley (5-11, 200), who is returning from an ACL injury that sidelined him for the season.

Henley was the team's leading tackler as a sophomore before the ACL injury and will have to recover quickly to help the team on the other side of the ball. Evans and Altizer will be the team leaders.

Wilkens expects this year's squad to be very competitive again.

"We have a very talented squad this year even though we lost a lot of starters from last year's 10-2 squad," the head coach said. "A lot of these players got meaningful playing time even if they weren't full-time starters, and they had great offseasons. Our junior varsity team went 9-1 last year and know what it takes to be successful. We hope that brings them confidence on the varsity stage for the program," he said.

Nothing has changed when it comes to Wilkens' and Christiansburg's schedule. They will still have to deal with River Ridge District foes Salem and Patrick Henry.

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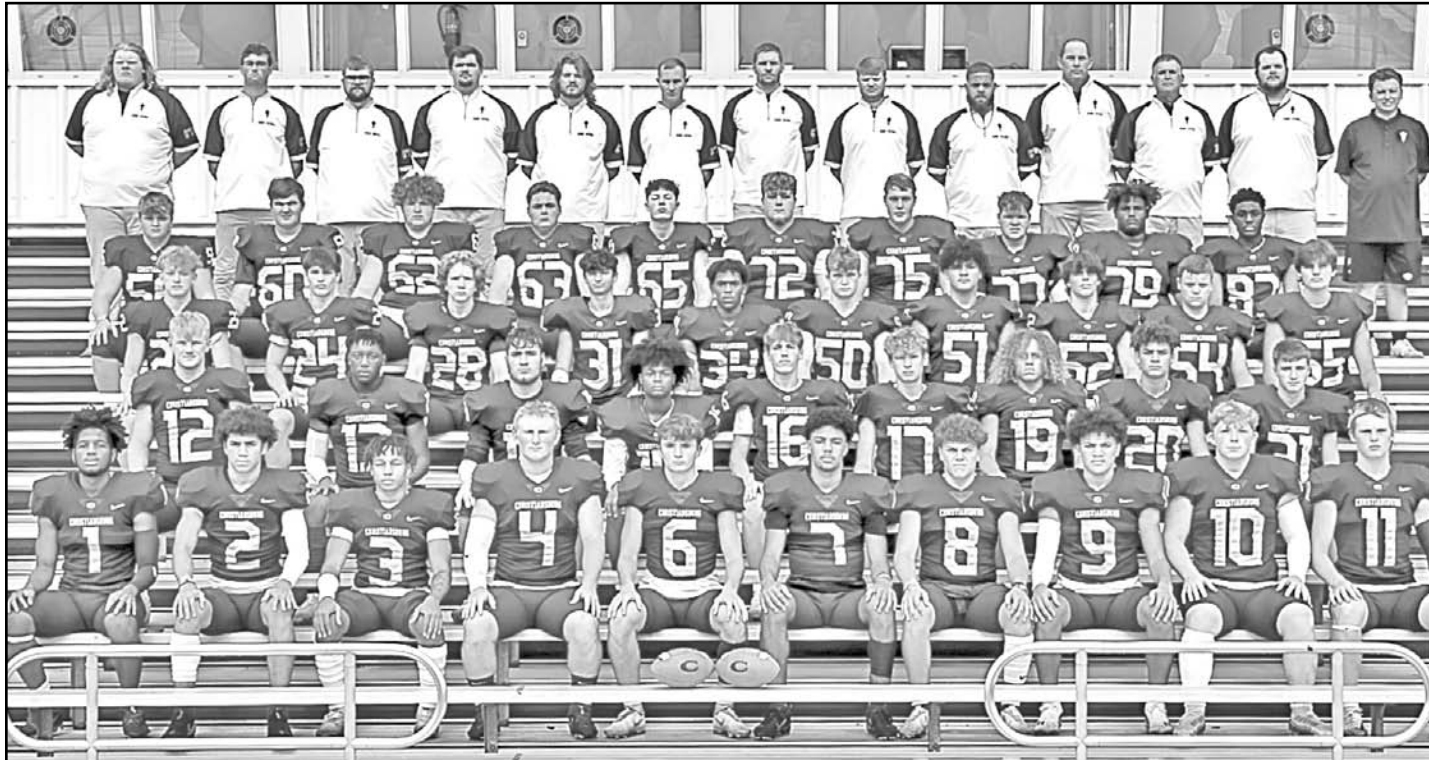


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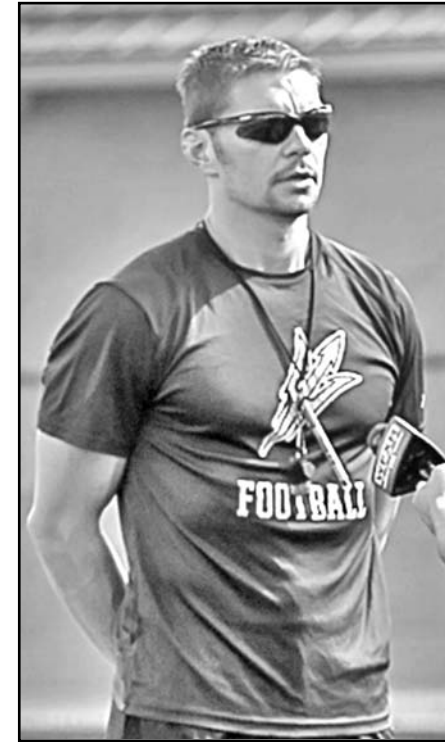


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# Christiansburg High School football



The 2022 Christiansburg High School Blue Demon varsity football team



Alex Wilkens is the Blue Demons' head football coach for 2022.



The 2022 Christiansburg High School cheerleading squad: (Front row, left to right) Keisha Harman, Kenzie Linkous, Faith Sarver, Aubrey Shanks, Lexie Smith, Gracie Tice, and Jazmyn White; (back row, left to right) Sofia Caldwell, Lilly Rentch, Madison Cox, Hailey Graves, Mary Sarver, Bella Smith and Lilia Vaughn.



The 2022 CHS football coaches are (left to right) Liam O'Reilly, Jared Moore, Matt Herron, Britton Hipple, Jared Whitten, Head Coach Alex Wilkens, Sam Inge, Seth Brown, Irvin Buchannon, Eddie Sloss, Jeff Hamley, and Maxx Philpott. Not pictured is Dave Cooper.

## 2022 Christiansburg schedule:

August 27, at Floyd  
 September 3, at Abingdon  
 September 17, William Byrd  
 September 24, Radford

October 1, at Salem  
 October 8, Blacksburg  
 October 15, at Hidden Valley  
 October 22, Patrick Henry  
 October 29, Cave Spring  
 November 5, at Pulaski

# Blacksburg starts new chapter with new coach



The Blacksburg High School football coaching staff: (Left to right) Dan Mena, Jim Monk, Wayne Surface, Trevor Compton, Head Coach Zack Leonard, Isaak Halkadis, Phillip Reese and Devante Mosley.



PHOTOS BY KYMN DAVIDSON-HAMLEY

Blacksburg High School football head coach Zack Leonard

## Marty Gordon

*NRVsports@ourvalley.org*

Blacksburg High School varsity football team is coming off its second winless season and will start 2022 with a completely new coaching staff.

In February, Zach Leonard was named the Bruins' head coach. He is no stranger to the area as he had coached the past four years at Christiansburg High School. Leonard has also had stops as an assistant in Rural Retreat and

Glenvar.

At his hiring, Blacksburg High School Athletic Director Peter Lyell said Leonard brings an abundance of football knowledge and experience to the football program. "Zack's passion for the game and impeccable moral character makes him the perfect fit for BHS," Lyell said.

Leonard most recently served as the offensive run coordinator in 2021 and defensive coordinator for four years at Christiansburg High School.

Blacksburg has tread backwards ever since the team won a state championship just five years ago.

One of the biggest starters lost from last year was Parker Epperley, who played both quarterback and linebacker. But Leonard can look to a roster with lots of underclassmen who were thrown to the wolves in that 0-10 season.

"Blacksburg has had some bad luck in terms of injuries and losing some very good football players. The exciting thing is they've had great interest in middle school foot-

ball," Leonard said.

According to the first-time head coach, the key is to keep the coaches and players interested in playing football. That means making practice fun and competitive and building great relationships with the middle school and rec league players and coaches. This, he said, will reverse the course of the recent seasons.

For the first time in years, Blacksburg will field what Leonard believes is a strong junior varsity team.

"People have really taken me into the community well. I think we are starting to get some excitement about our program," the new head coach said.

Senior quarterback Spencer Campbell (6-2, 185) returns after spending most of last season under center. Luke Poff (6-1, 185) could also see action at QB.

Receiver Ethan Walker (6-1, 164) will be a key for either of those signal callers, and Carter Ackerman (5-11, 174) will play tight end.

Addison Bass (6-1, 183) will carry the rock this season for the Bruins.

Leonard has the typical head coaching expectations while trying to rebuild the program.

"I expect us to get better and better throughout the season. We have a very competitive schedule that produces exciting football week in and week out," he said. "The key to our success will be coming together and playing team football. We have plenty of talent, but we have to develop as a team."

The Bruins had 62 individuals come out this year.

When Leonard names the teams to beat this season, he includes Salem and Patrick Henry, but he also mentioned his former school, Christiansburg.



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# Blacksburg High School football



Blacksburg High School's 2022-23 varsity football team

## 2022 Blacksburg High School football schedule:

August 27, at Giles  
 September 2, Lord Botetourt  
 September 10, Amherst  
 September 24, Salem  
 October 1, at Patrick Henry  
 October 8, at Christiansburg  
 October 15, Pulaski  
 October 22, Hidden Valley  
 October 29, at Graham  
 November 5, Cave Spring

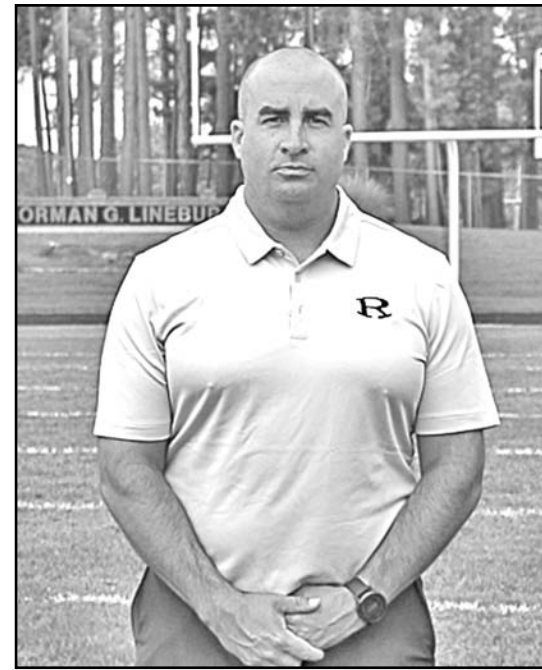


PHOTOS BY KYMN DAVIDSON-HAMLEY  
 The 2022 Blacksburg High School cheerleaders: (Front row, left to right) Lily Ford, Amelia Webster, Star Dotson, Olivia McMaster, Liz Luger, and Leah Ellison; (back row, left to right) Regan Edwards, Kenzie Francisco, Ellen Riegger, Audra Kowalik, Madison Ratcliff, and Elly Anderson.

# Crist looks to second year at Radford's helm



The Radford High School football coaching staff (left to right) Roger Hollins, Josh Smith, Head Coach Michael Crist, D.J. Baylor, Zach Landis, and Josh Woods.



PHOTOS BY KYMN DAVIDSON-HAMLEY

Radford High School football head coach Michael Crist

Radford High School and Michael Crist return six starters on both sides of the ball this fall, looking to the former Virginia High's head man's second year on the sidelines after compiling an 8-4 record last season. The team fell to Appomattox 41-12 in the second round of the 1C playoffs.

Crist returned to the area after spending the past eight at Virginia High in Bristol where he compiled a 33-49 record with five playoff appearances. At Virginia High, Crist's team qualified for the state playoffs in 2013, 2015, 2016, 2017, and 2018.

The 42-year-old coach is a 1997 graduate of Blacksburg High School who grew up in the shadows of his father, Dave, who spent 40 years coaching the Bruins.

The younger Crist served as assistant under his father before heading to Brookville, Warren County, and Amherst prior to the VHS job.

Crist replaces Matthew Saunders who stepped down last year.

Appomattox was the region's top seed last year while Radford came in at number three. In the loss, Bobcat quarterback Landon Clark was 25-of-33

passing with three touchdowns and 404 yards. He did throw two interceptions in the loss.

Parker Prioleau led the team with seven catches for 84 yards.

Gone is Tyrel Dobson, who was one of the team's top rushers. But some experience does return. Marcell Baylor (6-4, 192) played quarterback, running back, and receiver last season and was this past year's all-county/all-city offensive specialist of the year after finishing the season with 29 touchdowns and 2,095 combined yardage for the Bobcats.

Crist expects Baylor to take most of the snaps at receiver

this season.

Prioleau (5-7, 140) will also give Clark a consistent pass catcher.

Dobson might be missed more on the defensive side of the ball where he led the team from the line of scrimmage, but Crist is optimistic his defense is up to the challenge. "We should compete each and every week," he said.

The squad will boast 13 players over 200 pounds and includes 18 underclassmen while not fielding a junior varsity team this season. Radford was able to jumpstart its middle school program.

"Everyone has an important role (on this team). Our success will be dictated by our ability to utilize our athletes in multiple ways offensively and our ability to stop the run defensively," Crist said.

Radford opened the season at former New River District rival George Wythe earlier this week.

## 2022 Radford schedule:

August 27, George Wythe  
September 4, at Gate City  
September 10, at Ft. Chiswell  
September 17, Galax  
September 24, at Christiansburg  
October 1, Alleghany  
October 8, Carroll County  
October 22, Floyd  
October 29, at Glenvar  
November 5, at James River

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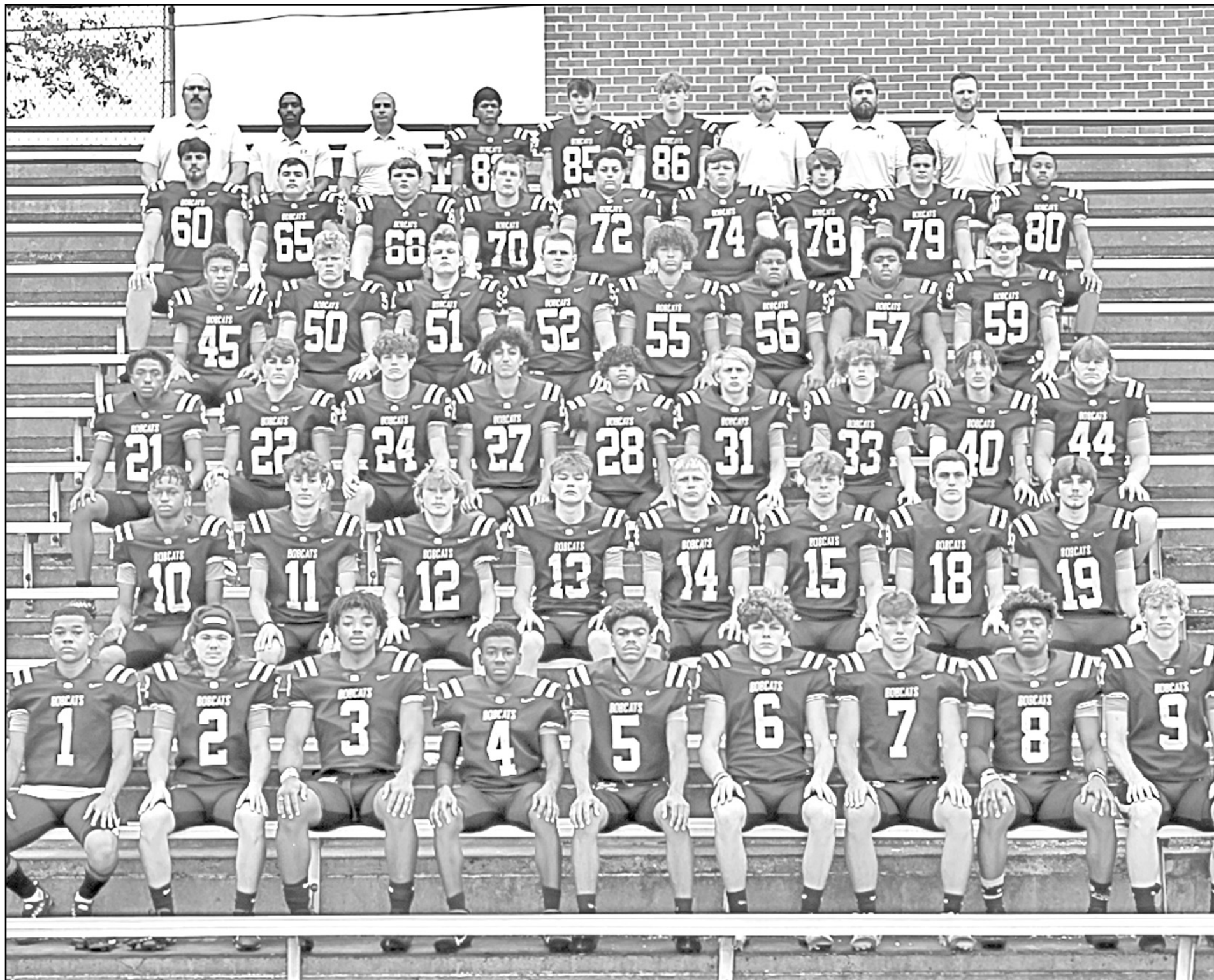
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# Radford High School football



The Radford High School varsity football team

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# Eastern Montgomery to be Pioneer favorite



The 2022 Eastern Montgomery High School coaching staff (left to right): Lee Hale, Michael Williams, head coach Jordan Stewart, John DeWeese, and Harold Osborne



PHOTOS BY KYMN DAVIDSON-HAMLEY

Eastern Montgomery head football coach Jordan Stewart

## Marty Gordon

[NRVsports@ourvalley.org](mailto:NRVsports@ourvalley.org)

Jordan Stewart leads Eastern Montgomery in his ninth year at his alma mater and is looking to add to his 5-5 regular season from last year.

The head coach has compiled a 20-60 mark at the school, but he believes the race this season for the Pioneer District could come through Shawsville and Elliston.

Most of his team's offense from last year has graduated including running backs Seth

Burleson and Eli Brown, but there are plenty of bodies as the Mustangs will dress 36 on Friday nights.

Quarterback Gage Akers (6-1, 150) returns after an interesting sophomore year when he completed 43 of 94 passes for 543 yards with seven touchdowns. He did throw nine interceptions he will have to clean up, but he added 66 rushes for 150 yards.

"Like every season, we have to compete in every football game and give ourselves a chance to win it at the end," Stewart said.

"We've got a tough schedule, and we can't have any let down in games or turn the ball over to have a chance to win."

Five returners are back on both sides of the ball.

"Gage Akers is our only returning skill player on offense, and he's going to have to help the new skill guys understand scheme and alignment," the head Mustang said. "He's going to have to run the football a little more this season and spread the ball around passing for us to be successful."

The team does boast eight

players over 200 pounds including a returning, Brandon Kingery (5-10, 235). Kingery is a four year starter and first team all-district and region along with anchoring this past year's All-County/All-City team.

"He's going to have to anchor our offensive and defensive lines and make sure everyone knows their assignments on both sides of the ball," Stewart said

Sophomore Issac Stiltner (6-0, 240) along with senior Angel Ramos-Mendoza (5-10, 190) will help on both sides of

the ball.

Sophomore Grayson Caldwell (5-9, 145) will have to grow up fast as he will be called upon to carry the ball a lot this season.

Stewart never labels his team as one to beat, but this could be the year.

"Every team we play will be tough to beat, and we have a lot of young guys in key positions. One or two mistakes on our end could cause us to lose games that we should win," Stewart said. "We can't take anyone lightly."

The schedule includes out-of-district opponents North Cross, Holston, Rural Retreat, and cross-county rival, Auburn.

Like other schools in western Virginia, COVID brought the program to a screeching halt, but Stewart said the numbers have been continuing to grow throughout COVID.

Stewart cited Narrows as the team standing in the Mustangs' way for their first district title.

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# Eastern Montgomery High School Football



Eastern Montgomery football team.

## 2022 Eastern Montgomery High School Football Schedule:

August 27, at Holston  
September 3, Rural Retreat  
September 10, North Cross  
September 17, at Auburn  
September 24, Bland  
October 8, at Craig  
October 15, Bath County  
October 22, at Narrows  
October 29, at Covington  
November 5, Parry McCluer



PHOTOS BY KYMN DAVIDSON-HAMLEY

The 2022 Eastern Montgomery cheerleaders (front row, left to right): Adriana Guzman, Hope Hylton, Savannah Craighead, co-captain Kayleigh Harrison, captain Makiah Kelly and Cymric Woolwine; (back row, left to right) Destinae Poff, Madison Hartman, Jazmyn Vest, Lacy Davis, and Riley Kochel.



Auburn head coach David Seabaugh

SUBMITTED PHOTO

# Auburn pushing for full season of football

Auburn High School had its 2021 football season shut down after four games. As many programs around western Virginia were fighting the second year of the COVID pandemic, Auburn was fighting the numbers game.

Injuries and COVID limited their roster numbers to as few as 14 players when school leaders shut down the season.

David Seabaugh had moved to Riner after spending 2020 as the quarterback coach and passing game coordinator at Kemper County High School in Dekalb, Miss.. He saw it as a great opportunity to coach in Southwest Virginia.

Auburn has only won four games in two years, and a full season of play could be just what the school needs.

Seabaugh started his coaching career right out of high school at his alma mater Litchfield High School in Illinois and then attended college at Mississippi State University where he was able to work for the football team in recruiting.

When Mississippi State had away games, he would drive back to Illinois on Friday morning to make the game that night.

While in his senior year at MSU, he also worked with the football team at Starkville High School.

He became aware of the Auburn opening and is originally from a small town of 45 people in Walshville, Ill.

Seabaugh's first goal at Auburn was to bring some excitement back around the football team, but the short season and its shutdown brought that to a halt. But the coach doesn't believe the team took steps backwards. Instead, they just have to take it one game at a time.

This past spring, he built on that excitement by having the program's first-ever signing day,

which included jersey pics that reminded onlookers of the NFL Draft.

"We are seeing a much better interest level this off season. Right now, we have a little over 30 kids signed up to play this season. I'm expecting to add more," Seabaugh said.

During the special "signing," players walked out on the stage at the high school and Seabaugh held up a jersey similar to the NFL draft. Each individual then sat at a table with the coach and Athletic Director Paul Dominy and officially signed with the school.

Seabaugh said the idea came from new assistant coach Travis Reed, who is joining the staff after serving as the head coach at Bland High School.

"The rest of the staff agreed that it was an awesome idea, so we ran with it. Adding Coach Reed to our staff has been a huge addition already. I'm very excited to have him with us this season," Seabaugh said.

"We thought the signing day was a way to build some excitement around the program," the head coach said. "I think it was a really cool event that highlighted the kids who are planning on playing football."

"I think the kids really enjoyed doing it, and the community seemed to think it was a cool idea as well. This is definitely an event that we want to continue to have and hopefully make it an even bigger event next year," he said.

His vision for the football program isn't just to have a team but to be competitive.

"I believe Auburn has the best athletes in the area at the 1A level. The proof is in the 30+ state championships (in other sports than football) the school has won in the past eight years. We have sure-fire college football

players walking in the halls that haven't been playing football. We just need to get them playing," Seabaugh said. "With the guys we had last year, plus the guys that should be playing, we believe that we can be very competitive. All we can do is keep rowing the boat and trust we are heading in the right direction."

Again on the field, Seabaugh hopes to dress as many as 30 players, which would give him depth even if the team falls into a fate similar to last year's injury woes. "It's a night-and-day difference this year when it comes to numbers," he said.

The squad includes six returning starters. The team will miss linebacker Jackson Brockman, who had 40 tackles and three sacks in the season's four games. Defensive end Logan Kouns (23 tackles, three sacks) also graduated.

But two sophomores are back: Matthew Wheeler and Austin Stump, who both showed some bright moments.

Wheeler had 51 tackles while Stump had 22 tackles.

The coach is also hopeful his offensive line can step up and have a good year. "We have the skill players to make plays. We just need time and movement for them to go to work," he said.

## Auburn schedule:

August 27, Narrows  
 September 3, at Craig  
 September 10, Floyd  
 September 17, Eastern Montgomery  
 October 1, at Ft. Chiswell  
 October 8, Grayson County  
 October 15, at Bland  
 October 22, at Galax  
 October 29 at Giles  
 November 5, George Wythe

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# Auburn High School football



The Auburn High School varsity football team

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## Regarding Sportsmanship, It's Time for Wake-up Call in High School Sports

From time to time, everyone needs a wake-up call to get back on course, to regain focus and to "get with the program." That time is at hand in high school sports as it relates to unsportsmanlike conduct.

In the 103-year history of the NFHS and organized sports in the United States, good sportsmanship has been one of the most important outcomes of these programs. When appropriate behavior occurs, competitive play is more enjoyable for everyone.

And for some individuals recently, the games have not been enjoyable. In the past few months, following are some of the unfortunate incidents that have occurred at the high school level:

The mayor of a city was ejected from his daughter's high school basketball game after threatening a referee.

A volleyball official was followed off the court by a coach who was shouting obscenities.

A referee was assaulted and knocked unconscious during a basketball tournament.

A student from the opposing school in the stands shouted racist comments at a high school basketball player on the court.

At another game in another state, inappropriate chants were made against the opposing team's players on the court.

While it was at a lower level, continued poor parent behavior in the stands led a Central New

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## Sportsmanship

from page 11

York youth basketball league to end the season early.

Unfortunately, the list could go on and on. When hearing accounts like these and many others that regularly occur, the primary reason for the current officials' shortage becomes painfully obvious – unacceptable behavior on the part of coaches, parents and other spectators.

While all of these displays of unacceptable behavior must stop, the recent occurrences of students and other spectators using hurtful, demeaning and hateful language at individuals on the opposing team is heartbreaking.

High school sports and other activities exist to lift people up, not demean or tear people down. The goal is to treat everyone equally and treat each other with respect. Any speech or harassment that is insulting, demeaning or hurtful will not be tolerated.

High schools must establish a culture that values the worth of every single person – both players on the school's team and players on the opposing team. There must be a no-tolerance policy regarding behavior that shows disrespect for another individual.

Likewise, the accounts of violent attacks against officials are incomprehensible and must be stopped. As Dana Pappas, NFHS director of officiating services, said, “Do you really think that these individuals who are volunteers are going to take a half-day off of work, get paid less than they're probably making at their real job to go and be unfair in a game? It doesn't make sense. They are there to give back. They are there to be community servants.”

NFHS playing rules are written to encourage sportsmanship. Participation in these programs should promote respect, integrity and sportsmanship. However, for these ideals to occur, everyone involved must do their part.

Because of a concern that unsporting behavior in education-based athletics has increased the past year, the NFHS has made sportsmanship the No. 1 Point of Emphasis in all sports for the 2022-23 season.

And if there was ever a doubt, the recent unfortunate events at the college level should make it crystal clear that the person most responsible for setting the tone at high school athletic contests is the coach(es).

If coaches act in a sportsmanlike manner, their behavior sets the tone for players, spectators and others. If coaches, however,

are constantly complaining about the decision of contest officials, spectators are more likely to do the same.

There must be a collaborative, working relationship between contest officials and game administration to promote good sportsmanship and safely conduct the contest. Everyone has their roles to play in creating a positive, sportsmanlike atmosphere at contests.

Officials should focus on the actions of players, coaches and other bench/sideline personnel. A positive, open line of communication between officials and coaches ultimately results in a better contest for everyone involved.

Contest officials, however, should never engage with spectators who are exhibiting unsporting behavior. Once the contest begins, school administration is responsible for dealing with unruly spectators. A proactive approach by school administration includes monitoring the behavior of spectators and intervening as needed.

If spectators are using demeaning or profane language at officials – or at others in the stands – those individuals must be removed from the contest by school administration.

Rather than spectators like the ones described above, more fans are needed at high school sporting events. Fans support the officials, the players and the coaches, unlike the fanatics who tear down and do harm to the participants, the school and the community.

Good sports win with humility, lose with grace and do both with dignity. It takes the efforts of everyone every day to ensure that sportsmanship remains one of the top priorities in education-based activity programs.

*--Dr. Karissa Niehoff, National Federation of High School Associations*



PHOTO BY SARAH ELIZABETH