

# 2023 PIGSKIN PREVIEW



Inside:

- PREVIEWS, BREAKDOWNS, ROSTERS AND SCHEDULES OF INTERLACHEN, PALATKA, CRESCENT CITY
- TEAM PHOTOS OF ALL SCHOOLS
- FEATURE STORIES ON THE PRESEASON HEAT, CRESCENT CITY'S SPRING CAMP TOUR
- COLLEGE FOOTBALL PREVIEWS

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## Feature Story

# County teams try their best to beat heat

Coaches claim practices have been a challenge

BY MARK BLUMENTHAL  
Palatka Daily News  
mblumenthal@palatkadailynews.com

Let's state the obvious first: Florida can get very, very hot in the summer.

But very few coaches can remember a hotter summer than the one they and everyone else is going through this year.

"There were days when it didn't look like we were going to get out to practice because it was so hot outside," said Interlachen assistant coach Ron Whitehurst, also the school's longtime athletic director.

The first two weeks of the preseason proved to be challenging to all three county schools as air temperatures hovered around 100 degrees and heat indexes soared past 115 degrees in the hottest part of the afternoon.

During the second week of preseason, Palatka coach Patrick Turner said he had a tough time getting his team to practice outside because of the heat and the threat of lightning in the area. In that week, Turner had his players outside the entire time just once.

"This is my 19th year coaching and 11th as a head coach and I don't remember a summer hotter than this," Turner said. "But



MARK BLUMENTHAL / Palatka Daily News

A wet bulb held by Palatka Junior-Senior High athletic director and assistant football coach Bobby Humphries shows the temperature at 82 degrees for practice on Aug. 7.

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*All front cover photos  
by Mark Blumenthal*

**Main photo:** A "Delaney Tough" sticker embraces the back of a Crescent City helmet as Raiders players will wear the sticker in honor of late head coach Sean Delaney, who passed away last April from cancer, during the season.

**Upper left:** Interlachen head coach Erik Gibson goes through drills with some of his junior high players in the first week of practice.

**Middle left:** Crescent City assistant coach Keenan Henry, who took 13 Raiders to various recruitment camps this summer, shows how to defend the ball to Raiders senior Lentavious Keenon.

**Lower left:** Palatka football players take a water station break during practice as temperatures soared to near 100 degrees in the first two weeks of practice.

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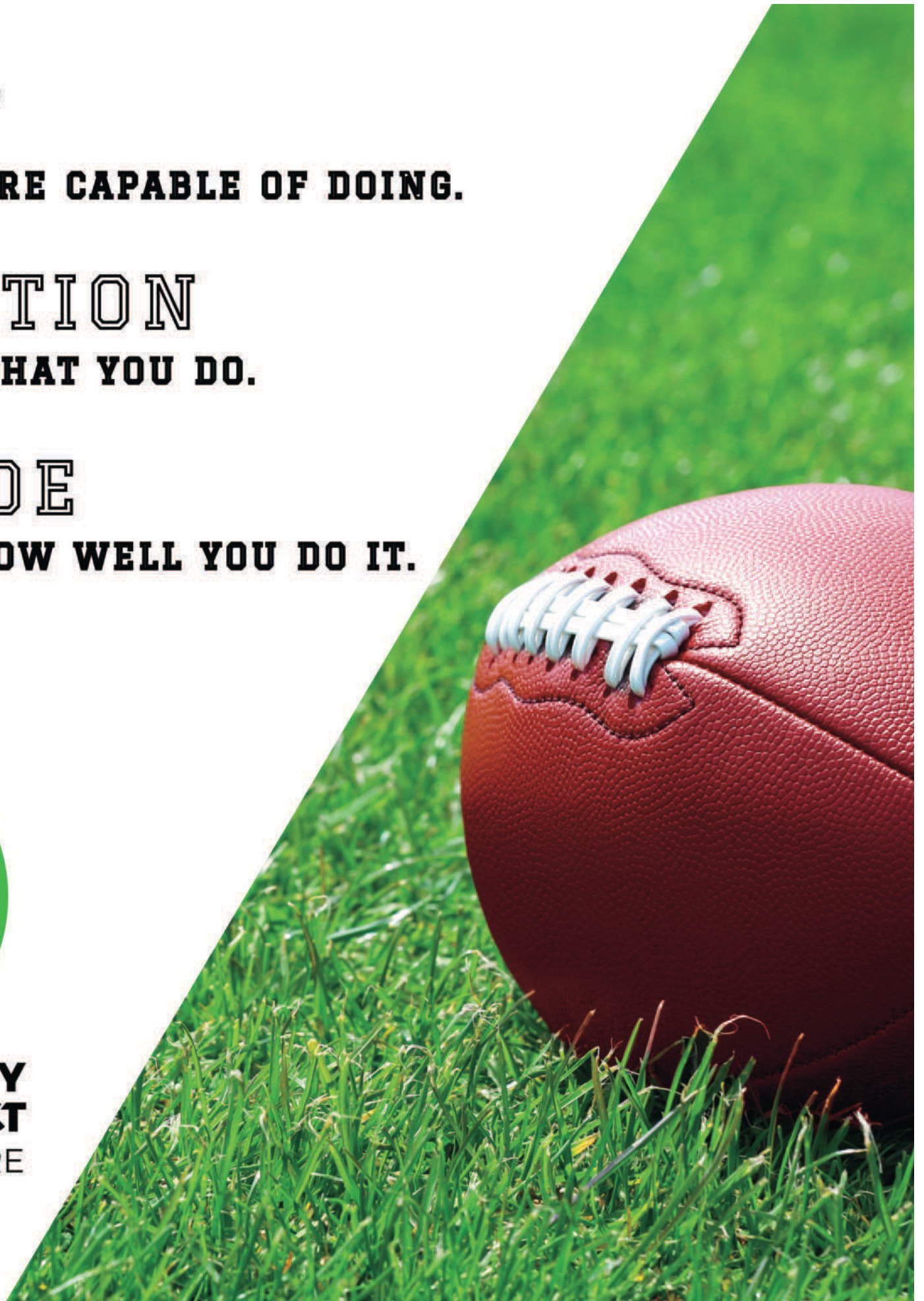
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## Interlachen

# Where exactly do Rams go after memorable unbeaten year?

Team forges ahead after 19 players graduate

BY MARK BLUMENTHAL  
Palatka Daily News  
mblumenthal@palatkadailynews.com

Unicorns would have been proud of the football season Interlachen Junior-Senior High put forward last fall. The Rams had the most successful season they ever had, going 10-0 and winning the Sunshine State Athletic League Atlantic Division football tournament championship, throwing shutouts in the final three games of the season and staying injury free throughout.

So what's the encore look like? According to third-year coach Erik Gibson, expect another successful campaign.

But don't expect everything to fall into place the way it did in 2022.

"Last year was everything I hoped would happen," Gibson said. "For that to happen, we didn't have injuries. It turned out to be everything I hoped for. With this year's team, we have the capabilities to be really good. I don't know if we can go undefeated again, but obviously we have scheduled some harder opponents, and that should give us more of a challenge. Union County (the season opener) is going to be a challenge. (Jacksonville) Providence (the following week) is going to be a challenge. We're looking at quite a few challenges this year."

But unlike the past, this Rams team is running headlong into those challenges. In last week's preseason game at Jacksonville Wolfson, the Rams fell behind 14-0 in the opening quarter. Then they dialed it up to another level and scored



MARK BLUMENTHAL / Palatka Daily News

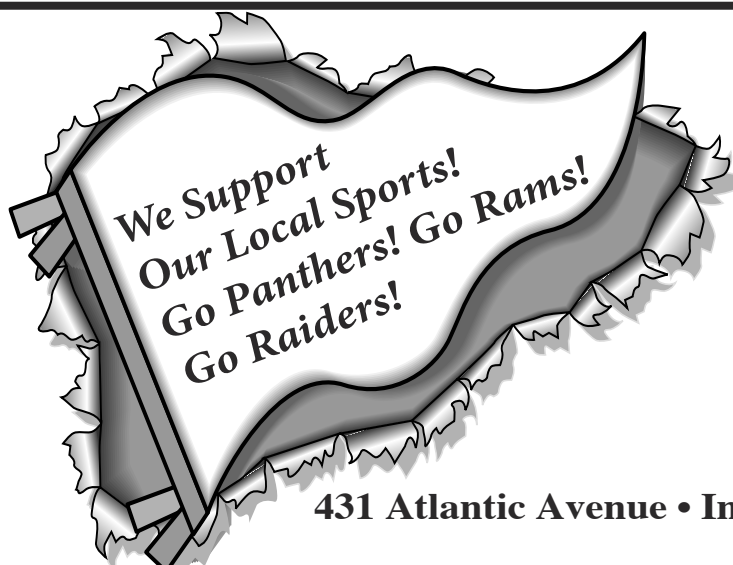
Interlachen backup quarterback Garrett Ridley gets the play call from both head coach Erik Gibson (left) and offensive coordinator Jonathan Goodwin during practice last week.

32 unanswered points to win the preseason matchup, 32-14.

"We got down 14-0 and nobody caved and (assistant) coach Ron Whitehurst said, 'Back in the day, if that was Interlachen,

we would have been done,'" Gibson said. "But our kids believe

See **RAMS**, Page 22



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# Interlachen Position Breakdown

## BASE OFFENSE: MULTIPLE

**Quarterbacks:** Jack Pavlik (starter), Garrett Ridley (backup).

Pavlik put up over 1,000 yards passing and 15 touchdowns as a sophomore, while Reggie Allen Jr. did the brunt of the running, helping the Rams to an unbeaten 10-0 season that saw them win the Sunshine State Athletic League Atlantic Division title. Expect more of the passing game as Pavlik has gotten comfortable behind his experienced center. Ridley is a freshman on junior varsity who might see some playing time later on.

**Running backs:** Dante Astin (starter), Raszir Phillips (starter), Eric Williams (backup), Tyler Shaw (backup), Azarius Green (backup).

Coach Erik Gibson is looking to Astin and Phillips to be the speedrunners, while Williams is the bruising back. If they can match the work that Rickey Astin (Astin's brother) and Kendrick Chaney did a year ago, Gibson will have no worries here.

**Wide receivers:** Kaleb McKinnon (starter), Kemontae Nixon (starter), Dylan Ceyler (backup), Taveon McNair (backup), Landon McCollum (backup).

McKinnon and Nixon bring athleticism to the table. Nixon is 6-foot-4 and McKinnon is 6-3 and could be as equally hard to cover as was Der'Tavius Mack and Justin Herring last season. Gibson said his receiving corps might be better this year.

**Linemen (starters):** Anthony Ennis (left tackle), Zack Link (left guard), Hayden George (center), Tristan Smith (right guard), Simon Rodriguez (right tackle), Jaquevis Nixon (tight end). Backups: Trevon Robinson (left tackle), Alexander Davis (left guard), Tucker Gilbert (center), Johnny Mabry (right guard), Jaiden Williams (right tackle), Miles Hoffman (tight end), McCollum (tight end).

With the exception of one player, the line returns to help support Pavlik and the passing game and open holes for the newcomers at running back. Gibson said he feels more comfortable running various schemes with the line and showing off its versatility.

## DEFENSE: 3-4 OR 3-3 STACK

**Linemen (starters):** Gilbert (end), Randall Moseley (nose guard), Gary Keen Jr. (end). **Backups:** Williams (end), George (end), Mabry (end), Ennis (end), Everett Rayhorn (nose guard), Rodriguez (nose guard).

Keen and Moseley are continual motors on the line, according to Gibson, who say they go "at 140 miles a minute, every minute." It's an area in continual work, but with enough players shuttling in and out, Gibson is confident this group will grow throughout the season.

**Linebackers:** Andy Eddins (inside starter), Logan Lyons (inside starter), Corey Surratt (outside starter), Hoffman (outside starter), Jaden Ray (outside backup), Aidan McPhaddon (outside backup), Soulmontee Phillips (outside backup), Jaquevis Nixon (inside backup), Louis Servin (inside backup).

Gibson has high hopes for this group of linebackers, who are filling in the shoes of standouts Jonathan Servin, Mack, Herring and Terryon Mitchell. This group of Rams will be working hard to improve during the season, and Lyons, a sophomore, is looked upon in the same way as Mack did in hitting players.

**Secondary:** Kemontae Nixon (safety starter), McKinnon (safety starter), Astin (cornerback starter), Sabian McClendon (cornerback backup), Darrion McClendon (cornerback backup), Ceylers (cornerback backup), Dakota Leach (backup safety), Alex Galloway (backup safety).

Another part of the success of last year's team was in the secondary. But Gibson said he believes this group is going to be better, pointing to the size of the players who are receivers that will also play in the defensive backfield.

**Special teams:** Shane Beard (kicker/punter), McCollum (punter), Gilbert (long snapper), Ridley (holder), Astin (returns), Phelps (returns).

Kicking the ball was an issue a year ago and many times after touchdowns, Gibson would go for the 2-point conversion. Gibson is aware that special teams could make a difference in a few games, whether it's a kick or whether it's a return.

# At A Glance

**Head coach:** Erik Gibson (Valdosta State, 1999), third year.

**Last year's record:** 10-0, Sunshine State Athletic League Atlantic Division Tournament champions.



Gibson

**Career record:** 13-6.

**Assistant coaches:** Jordan Smalenski (defensive coordinator/inside linebackers); Reginald Allen Jr. (outside linebackers); Ron Whitehurst (defensive line); Tad DeLoach (defensive line); Joe Lipsey (defensive backs); Jonathan Goodwin (offensive coordinator/quarterbacks/running backs); Deaunte Holloway (offensive coordinator/wide receivers); Ed Parcher (offensive line); Kim Troiano (offensive line/equipment); Bob Clark (junior high coach); Dalton Ford (junior high assistant); Brandon Teel (junior high assistant); Gerald Swayze (tight ends/head JV coach).

**Tickets:** \$9, \$7 for JV. For the entire season's home games, it's \$50. For an all sports pass the entire year, it's \$100 for adults, \$60 for students.

**All-time football record:** 194-356-2.

## LAST YEAR'S SCHEDULE (10-0)

Interlachen 38, Lake Weir 14  
Interlachen 14, Providence 8  
Interlachen 22, Crescent City 6  
Interlachen 14, Fernandina Beach 12, OT  
Interlachen 26, Keystone Heights 12  
Interlachen 44, Pierson Taylor 0  
Interlachen 26, Bell 19  
Interlachen 46, Halifax  
**Sunshine State Atlantic Division playoffs**  
Interlachen 16, Stanton 0  
Interlachen 16, Paxon 0  
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# Interlachen Schedule

## Aug. 26 at Union County

**Last year:** 8-3.

**Series:** Union County leads 23-9 and won last meeting, 49-14, in 2020.

**Directions:** Take CR-215 nearly 7 1/2 miles to SR-100, then turn left and go north for 35 1/2 miles. In Lake Butler, turn left onto SR-121/SE 6th Street for one mile, then turn left onto Lake Ave one-10th of a mile. School is on right, football stadium is on the other side of school.

## Sept. 1 at Jacksonville Providence

**Last year:** 5-5.

**Series:** Providence leads 2-1, but Interlachen won last meeting, 14-8, in 2022.

**Directions:** Take CR-215 north for almost 13 1/2 miles until reaching CR-215C. Turn right and go another 5 1/4 miles until reaching Blanding Boulevard. Turn right onto SR-21/Blanding Boulevard and travel 27 miles until reaching I-295. Get on I-295 going south and go 18 3/4 miles until reaching Exit 53 (Butler Boulevard/SR-202). Veer right and travel three miles until reaching the Hodges Boulevard exit. At the traffic light after exiting, make a left turn onto Hodges Boulevard and travel just over 3 1/4 miles until seeing the school on the right side. The football field is in the back.

## Sept. 8 Crescent City

**Last year:** 4-7

**Series:** Crescent City leads 25-8-1, but Interlachen won last meeting, 22-6, in 2022.

## Sept. 15 at Fernandina Beach

**Last year:** 4-6.

**Series:** Fernandina Beach leads 4-3, but Interlachen won last meeting, 14-12, in 2022.

**Directions:** Take CR-215 north for almost 13 1/2 miles until reaching CR-215C. Turn right and go another 5 1/4 miles until reaching Blanding Boulevard. Turn right onto SR-21/Blanding Boulevard and travel 27 miles until reaching I-295. Get on I-295 going north for 20 miles until getting on at I-95 near Yulee. Travel 11 miles north to Exit 273, then veer off heading east on SR-200/A1A for 12 1/4 miles, turn right in Fernandina Beach at SR-108/Sadler Road. Go just over half a mile, then turn left onto Citrona Drive. Go over a mile and a half and then turn left after passing the high school. Pull into the parking lot. The football field is next to the parking lot.

## Sept. 22 at Keystone Heights

**Last year:** 2-8.

**Series:** Keystone Heights leads 34-19, but Interlachen won last meeting, 26-12, in 2022.

**Directions:** Head west on SR-100 for 25 3/4 miles to SR-21. Turn left, then make the first right onto Nightingale Street in Keystone Heights. Go past the four-way stop sign and Nightingale Street turns into Orchid Avenue. Go another four-10ths of a mile. The parking lot and stadium are on the right.

## Oct. 6 Pierson Taylor

**Last year:** 1-9.

**Series:** Pierson Taylor leads 12-9, Interlachen won last meeting 44-0 in 2022.

## Oct. 13 Bell

**Last year:** 5-5.

**Series:** Interlachen leads 3-0 and won last meeting, 26-19, in 2022.

## Oct. 20 Mount Dora Christian

**Last year:** 7-4.

**Series:** First meeting.

## INTERLACHEN ROSTER

NO.	Year	Position
2 Kaleb McKinnon	So.	WR-S
3 Garrett Ridley	Fr.	QB-DB
4 Taveon McNair	Jr.	WR-DB
5 Jaquevis Nixon	Jr.	TE-ILB
6 Raszir Pheips	So.	ATH
8 Dante Astin	Jr.	ATH
11 Miles Hoffman	Jr.	OLB-TE
13 Eli Spell	So.	DB
14 Kemontae Nixon	Jr.	WR-FS
15 Jack Pavlik	Jr.	QB
16 Dylan Ceyler	Jr.	WR-DB
17 Sabian McClendon	Jr.	DB
19 Darian McClendon	Fr.	DB
20 Soulmontee Phillips	So.	OLB
21 Eric Williams	Fr.	RB-ILB
22 Tyler Shaw	So.	OLB-RB
23 Azarius Green	Fr.	FB-LB
25 Aidan McPhadden	Sr.	OLB
26 John O'Neill	Jr.	LB
27 Louis Servin	So.	ILB
28 Alex Galloway	Sr.	DB
30 Shane Beard	Jr.	PK-P
33 Dakota Leach	So.	LB
34 Corey Surratt	So.	LB
35 Angel Diaz	Sr.	LB
40 Gary Keen Jr.	Jr.	LB
42 Logan Lyons	So.	LB
43 Everett Rayhorn	Jr.	DL
47 Jaden Ray	Jr.	LB
50 Randall Moseley	Jr.	NG
51 Tristan Smith	Jr.	OL
54 Logan Cook	Sr.	OL
55 Johnny Mabry	Jr.	OL-DL
56 Hayden George	Jr.	OL
58 Andy Eddins	So.	LB
60 Jaiden Williams	Fr.	OL-DL
61 Tucker Gilbert	Sr.	OL-DL
62 Trevon Robinson	So.	OL-DL
63 Simon Rodriguez	Fr.	OL-DL
64 Zack Link	Sr.	OL
66 Alexander Davis	Jr.	OL-DL
76 Anthony Ennis	Jr.	OT
80 Landon McCollum	Sr.	WR-TE

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# Interlachen



MARK BLUMENTHAL / Palatka Daily News

Interlachen Junior-Senior High School's football team will be trying to follow up a memorable 2022 season that saw the Rams go unbeaten and win a divisional tournament championship.

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# Palatka



Palatka Junior-Senior High senior wide receiver Devin Walker concentrates to make a catch in front of a Panthers defender who slipped on the play during the first day of practice on July 31.

MARK BLUMENTHAL / Palatka Daily News

## Younger Panthers must pick up where playoff team left off

BY MARK BLUMENTHAL

Palatka Daily News

mblumenthal@palatkadailynews.com

**F**rom his first year to the second running the program, Palatka Junior-Senior High School football coach Patrick Turner figured to see some progress and growth.

He never imagined the substantial jump the program made last season.

“Well, one thing is you have to stay healthy and we did that,” Turner said of last year’s team. “And you had to continue to develop each day, each practice, each game. That’s hard to show up every single day with the mentality that I’m going to get better than I was last time.”

The Panthers had their greatest season since the legendary Jim McCool’s final year in 2003 as they went 7-4 and qualified for the Florida High School Athletic Association playoffs for the first time since 2014 (in 2020 when the one-win Panthers made the playoffs, but every team that played the full COVID-19 season made the postseason).

Palatka also got off to a 7-0 start, the best

start since ... yup, 2003.

Now comes the challenging part: Trying to sustain that positive momentum. A big amount of the success from a year ago came from the seniors, led by Chavaris Dumas, who has taken his talents to Western Kentucky University.

But Turner is optimistic in the fact this is the third year he’s had the younger players with the program and they understand the system they are playing in.

“We may not have a Chavaris Dumas, but I feel like everyone else has raised their level of play,” said Turner, who also mentioned how having the same assistant coaching staff from last year to this year helps in the process. “So overall, the average defensive player is better than last year. I feel pretty confident about them.”

And Turner is confident in sophomore signal-caller Tommy Offord, who saw time behind the graduated Jamarrie McKinnon and put some significant statistics up.

“Tommy accounted for about 450 yards of

See **PANTHERS**, Page 22



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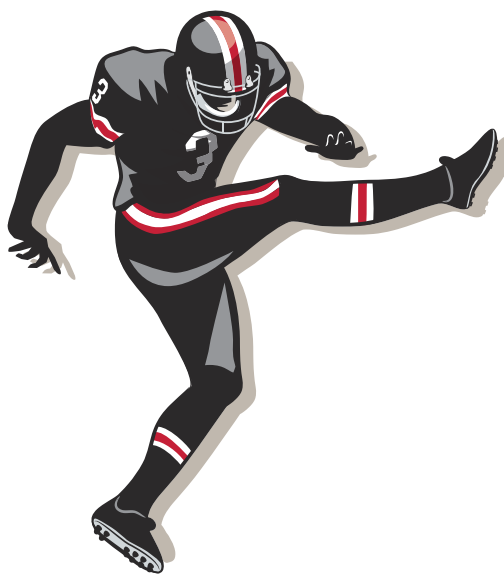






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# Palatka Schedule

## Aug. 25 Umatilla

**Last year:** 5-5.

**Series:** Palatka lead 1-0, won 49-0 in 2022.

## Sept. 1 at Port Orange Atlantic

**Last year:** 4-6.

**Series:** Palatka leads series 5-0, won last meeting, 34-7, in 2022.

**Directions:** Take US-17/SR-100 into San Mateo, then veer left onto SR-100 for 23 3/4 miles. Turn left onto US-1 and proceed south for 11.3 miles. Get onto I-95 heading south and travel 13 miles to Exit 260A (SR-400/South Daytona). At SR-400, make a left turn and go nearly half a mile to Williamson Boulevard. Make a right turn and go nearly two miles to Madeline Avenue. Make a left turn, go a mile and a quarter until getting to Clyde Morris Boulevard. Go half a mile to Reed Canal Road. Make a right turn and go another half a mile. That's followed by making a right, left and then another right into the parking lot. The field is in the back.

## Sept 8 at Santa Fe

**Last year:** 1-9.

**Series:** Palatka leads series 4-0, and won last meeting, 33-19, in 2022.

**Directions:** Take SR-100 for 19 1/4 miles west, then turn left onto SR-26 for 16 3/4 miles, which rolls into SR-222/NE 39th Avenue for seven miles. In Gainesville, turn right onto NW 6th Street for a mile, then continue onto US-441 for 13 3/4 miles until reaching Alachua. Turn right onto NW 173rd St., then make a

right turn into the parking lot. The stadium is next to the lot.

## Sept. 15 Belleview

**Last year:** 5-5.

**Series:** Tied 4-4, Palatka won the last game, 47-7, in 2018.

## Sept 29 at Toco Creek

**Last year:** 6-4.

**Series:** Palatka leads 1-0, and won last meeting, 26-21, in 2022.

**Directions:** Take US-17/SR-100 into East Palatka, then turn left onto SR-207 and travel 19 1/2 miles to I-95. At I-95, make a left turn and travel 12 miles to Exit 323 (International Golf Parkway). At the exit, make a left turn onto International Golf Parkway/9-Mile Road for nearly two miles. Turn right at the high school and go to parking lot. The field is in the back.

## Oct 6 at Brooksville Central

**Last year:** 5-5.

**Series:** First meeting.

**Directions:** Take SR-20 west to Hawthorne. At US-301, make a left turn and go south until reaching NW 77th Street. Make a right turn and take it to SR-326. Follow SR-326 until reaching I-75. Turn onto the jughandle and travel 55 1/2 miles to Exit 301 (SR-50/US-98 exit). At the exit, veer right toward Brooksville for 8 3/4 miles. Turn left onto SR-50 (Cortez Boulevard) and go another 3 1/4 miles. Make a left turn onto Sheriff Mylander Way. Go four-tenths of a mile, then make a right onto Mobley Road and go less than a quarter of a mile. Turn left onto SR-50 and go 3 1/2 miles. Turn right onto Sunshine Grove Road and travel two miles. Make a left onto Ken

Austin Parkway for a quarter of a mile and a left into the school parking lot. The field is in the back and on the side of the school.

## Oct. 13 Keystone Heights

**Last year:** 2-8.

**Series:** Palatka leads 1-0, winning 48-30 in 2022.

## Oct. 20 Fernandina Beach

**Last year:** 4-6.

**Series:** Tied 1-1, Fernandina Beach won last meeting, 27-15, in 2022.

## Oct. 27 at Bradford

**Last year:** 12-1.

**Series:** Palatka leads series 13-10, but Bradford won last meeting 35-14 in 2022.

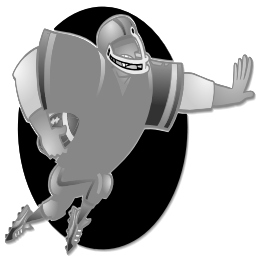
**Directions:** Take SR-100 for 39 miles into Starke, then turn right onto US-301/North Temple Avenue. Go half a mile until turning left onto Washington Street. Parking is on both sides of the road and the field is located next to the left side parking lot.

## Nov. 3 at St. Augustine

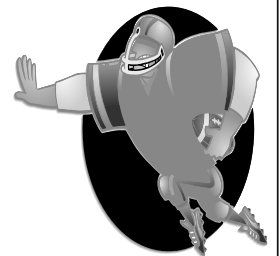
**Last year:** 7-4.

**Series:** St. Augustine leads series 57-44-3 and won last meeting, 42-10, in 2022.

**Directions:** Travel on US-17/SR-100 into East Palatka, then turn left onto SR-207 and go 19 1/2 miles until reaching I-95. At I-95, turn left and go seven miles to the next exit, Exit 318 (SR-16). At the exit, make a right turn and go 4 1/4 miles until reaching Varella Avenue. Turn left and go just over half a mile past the high school to the parking lot. The field is next to the lot.



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# Palatka



Kristy Thomas / Special to the Daily News

In Patrick Turner’s second season as Palatka Junior-Senior High School head football coach, the team went from a 1-8 season to a 7-4 year in which the Panthers opened the season 7-0 and eventually made the state tournament in Region 2-2S.



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## Crescent City

# Raiders trying to leave positive outcome for Delaney's legacy

Four months after late coach's passing, team looks to make playoffs fourth consecutive year

By COREY DAVIS  
Palatka Daily News  
cdavis@palatkadailynews.com

**N**early four months later, the death of head coach Sean Delaney still hits home and quite fresh for the Crescent City Junior-Senior High football program, the community and school.

While all three try to move on, the best thing the Raiders can do is to continue to honor Delaney's legacy and tradition by continuing his "All In" mission. Interim coach Robert Ripley has spent the last four months trying to pick up the pieces and continue the mission.

"Sean preached loving each other and to be 'All In,' a motto he came up with and the school adopted after he got sick," Ripley said. "He changed the school culture and had a huge impact on our culture. Sean embraced it all."

Now Ripley is trying to continue to build what Delaney started and keep it going.

"Coach (assistant Tim) Ross and I talked today about several things including how Sean was handling things and the footprints he laid down. We have to continue to do what's best for the kids," Ripley said.

Three straight playoff appearances by the Raiders has essentially changed the culture, too, as it's now become a playoffs-or-bust mentality.

"My goal is to build a competitive atmosphere here," Ripley explained. "I don't care if you're playing Tiddlywinks, we expect to win. I want to play Bradford and have no excuses and go out and compete. You want to play the best teams, period."

A rigid schedule which features playoff teams Orlando First Academy, Hilliard, Interlachen and Newberry should have the Raiders fully prepared for another playoff run.

Despite a late-season collapse to Lake Weir, the Raiders won the District 8-2S title after finishing in a three-way tie with Lake Weir and Port Orange Atlantic.

While Lake Weir dropped out of the district and moved into the Sunshine State Athletic Association Atlantic Division with Interlachen, the district will now feature just three teams as the Raiders play alongside Pierson Taylor and Atlantic.

"Depends on who you ask," Ripley said when asked about what the most important game is. "For Coach Ross and most of the staff like alumni Keenon and Troy Henry, it's all about beating Taylor. However, if you win both games against Taylor and Atlantic, you win the district title and make the playoffs again."

"I expect to compete for a district title again and host a playoff game," Ripley said, "and to not have to go to Bradford in the first round (a 48-0 wipeout by the Tornadoes in the first round of last year's Region 2-2S tournament)."

For that to happen, the Raiders' young and inexperienced offensive line must do a better job protecting second-year starting quarterback Eric Jenkins Jr.

With a bevy of inexperienced tailbacks behind him, Ripley will have to rely on his most experienced group: His receivers, especially Lentavious Keenon, Brandon Padgett and Cameron Wright.



MARK BLUMENTHAL / Palatka Daily News

Crescent City quarterback Eric Jenkins Jr. hands off to running back Jarvus Session during the first week of practice.

See RAIDERS, Page 20

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# Crescent City Position Breakdown

## BASE OFFENSE: SPREAD

**Quarterbacks:** Eric Jenkins Jr., Freddie Major, Andre Martin.

While it's clear as day who the starter is with the return of Jenkins, the three-year starter was absent in the spring giving both Major and Martin the majority of reps.

**Running backs:** Jamar Walker, Jarcus Session, Jarvis Fuller, Ja'Maris Fuller, Nyeem Moore, Gino Silva.

This unit appears at least on paper to be the deepest position on the team with several guys who can tote the ball at any time. Fuller got the bulk of the carries in the preseason game, but it's anybody's guess who gets the bulk of the carries the entire season.

"While they all will get carries and reps in either practice or games, as they mature and get into games we will run the ball really well," Ripley said. "I would rather have too many guys in that position than not enough."

**Receivers:** Lentavious Keenon, Brandon Padgett, Andrew Roosa, Cameron Wright, Jahmaad Strong, David Newbold

Between Keenon and Padgett, the Raiders have a solid 1-2 combination at receiver that can easily stretch the field.

"Definitely our strongest unit on the team by far," Ripley stated. "Keenon is one of the best players I have ever coached in my 20 years. He is clearly our best player. Padgett is going to be like former University of Florida player Kadarius Toney as he does everything for us. Roosa, Wright and Strong will also be in the mix as well."

**Linemen:** Jacob Westberry, Esiquel Castro, Jeremiah Odum, Tyler Frazier, Adien Fitzgerald, Jayden Murphy, Tito Arriola, Jake Robinson

Jenkins nearly spent part of the entire preseason game running for his life after the line struggled to hold their

blocks. As the season progresses the line hopes to build chemistry and work together.

"Our line is definitely a work in progress," Ripley added. "It's really up in the air each position as of right now really. One thing that is clear: We will live and die with this group."

## BASE DEFENSE: 5-2 (SLANT 50)

**Linemen:** Ja'Maris Fuller, Michael Hernandez, Murphy, Odum, Westberry, Walker

Fuller and Westberry are the team leaders while the rest of the unit gets accustomed to getting a lot of playing time.

**Linebackers:** Zay Robinson, Josiah Washington, Major, Strong, Session.

This unit played significantly well in the preseason opener, shutting down the Wildwood running game while putting pressure on the quarterback.

"One of our best groups that is excelling and getting better and better," Ripley said.

**Secondary:** Eric Jenkins Jr., Tyrone Jenkins, Brandon Padgett, JT Thomas, Tyler Padgett, Keenon, Wright, Roosa, Martin.

There may not be a better unit on the team than the secondary position. The foursome of Jenkins, Padgett, Keenon and Wright is very athletic and will only get better with time.

**Special teams:** Newbold (kicker-punter), Guerrero (long snapper), Brandon Padgett (returns), Wright (returns).

Newbold has shown the last two years he is reliable at kicker and receiver. Now he just has to believe it and he will achieve it. With Wright and Padgett back returning kicks, it's a matter of time before either brings a kick for a score.

# At A Glance

**Interim head coach/defensive coordinator:** Robert Ripley (Upper Iowa, 2003), first year (fifth year overall).

**Career record:** 25-17.

**Last year's record:** 4-7, District 8-2S champions.

**Assistant coaches:** Keenan Henry (secondary/special teams); Troy Henry (offensive coordinator/quarterbacks); Brian Roney (defensive line); Wes Thompson (linebackers); Travis Delaney (offensive line/middle school assistant); Tim

Ross (running backs); James Scott (wide receivers); Mickey Gilyard (quarterbacks/middle school head coach).

**Tickets:** \$8 for varsity; \$6 for middle school; \$120 for all-sports season pass.

**All-time football record:** 362-376-13.

## LAST YEAR'S SCHEDULE (4-7)

Chiefland 47, Crescent City 7  
Crescent City 27, Umatilla 13  
Interlachen 22, Crescent City 6  
Hilliard 30, Crescent City 14  
Crescent City 38, Keystone Heights 18  
Crescent City 48, Pierson Taylor 7  
Crescent City 35, Port Orange Atlantic 28  
Beachside 55, Crescent City 41  
Lake Weir 30, Crescent City 28  
Titusville 35, Crescent City 15  
**FHSAA Region 2-2S Playoffs**  
Bradford 48, Crescent City 0



Ripley

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# Crescent City Schedule

## Aug. 25 at Orlando First Academy

**Last year:** 8-3

**Series:** Series tied 3-3, but First Academy won last meeting, 38-34, in 2014.

**Directions:** Take US-17 south into Orange City, then veer off onto SR-472. Travel three miles to I-4. Make a left turn and travel 35 miles to Exit 79 (John Young Parkway). At the exit, make a left turn onto SR-423 for a quarter of a mile. Then turn left into the Academy complex and wind your way to the parking lot and into the Payne Stewart Athletic Complex. The field is next to the parking lot.

## Sept. 1 Umatilla

**Last year:** 5-5

**Series:** Crescent City leads 16-13, and won last meeting, 27-13, in 2022.

## Sept. 8 at Interlachen

**Last year:** 10-0

**Series:** Crescent City leads 25-8-1, Interlachen won last meeting 22-6 in 2022.

**Directions:** Take US-17 north to Palatka, then turn right onto SR-20 and follow it 15 miles into Interlachen. Turn right onto CR-215. The parking lot is next to the school and Feltner Field at Baker-Thompson Stadium is in the back of the school.

## Sept. 22 Hilliard

**Last year:** 8-3.

**Series:** Tied 3-3, but Hilliard won last meeting, 30-14, in 2022.

## Sept. 29 at Pierson Taylor

**Last year:** 1-9.

**Series:** Crescent City leads the series, 37-19, and won last meeting, 48-7, in 2022.

**Directions:** Drive south on US-17 to Pierson. Turn left at the light on Washington Avenue and go just over a quarter of a mile. The school is on the left side and the field is in the back.

## Oct. 6 at Keystone Heights

**Last year:** 2-8.

**Series:** Keystone Heights leads the series, 20-16, but Crescent City won last meeting, 38-18, in 2022.

**Directions:** Take US-17 into Palatka, then veer left onto SR-100, going 25 3/4 miles west into Keystone Heights. Turn left onto SR-21, then make the first right onto Nightingale Street in Keystone Heights. Go past the four-way stop sign and Nightingale Street turns into Orchid Avenue. Go another four-10ths of a mile. The parking lot and stadium are on the right..

## Oct. 13 at Port Orange Atlantic

**Last year:** 4-6

**Series:** Atlantic leads the series, 2-1, but Crescent City won last meeting, 35-28, in 2022.

**Directions:** Take US-17 South for 21 1/2 miles. Then make a left turn onto SR-40. Take that road for almost 20 miles. Turn right onto I-95 and go 7 1/4 miles to Exit 260A (SR-400/South Daytona). At SR-400, make a left turn and go nearly half a mile to Williamson Boulevard. Make a right turn and go nearly two miles to Madeline Avenue. Make a left turn, go a mile and a quarter until getting to Clyde Morris Boulevard. Go half a mile to Reed Canal Road. Make a right turn and go another half a mile. That's followed by making a right, left and then another right into the parking lot. The field is in the back.

## Oct. 20 Beachside

**Last year:** 6-4.

**Series:** Beachside won first meeting, 55-41, in 2022.

## Oct. 27 Newberry

**Last year:** 6-4.

**Series:** Crescent City leads 4-3, having won the last two meetings including a 42-8 victory in 2018.

## Nov. 3 Ridgeview

**Last year:** 1-9

**Series:** First meeting.



MARK BLUMENTHAL / Palatka Daily News

Crescent City Junior-Senior offensive coordinator Troy Henry goes over a play call with a pair of Raider players in practice.



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# Crescent City



COREY DAVIS / Palatka Daily News

Crescent City won the District 8-2S title last year and tries to repeat that and automatically earn a postseason berth, the fourth straight year the Raiders would make the postseason and the fifth time in the last six years.



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## Feature Story

# Henry giving Raiders players the chance to play at next level

Assistant took 13 players over summer to camps

By COREY DAVIS  
Palatka Daily News  
cdavis@palatkadailynews.com

After seeing himself and others not getting much-needed recruiting opportunities, former Crescent City Junior-Senior High School tailback Keenan Henry did something about it.

Henry, who graduated in 2008 and is now an assistant coach for the Raiders, started a college recruiting tour to help players get more recognition and open doors for possible recruitment.

"I didn't have this opportunity when I was in high school," Henry said. "I went to one or two camps on my own thanks to my parents. A lot of these kids would never have the opportunity to see a college program before."

Henry took 13 players all over the south on a four-month college recruiting tour. They were senior athlete Lentavious Keenon, junior athlete Freddie Major, sophomore receiver-defensive back Andrew Roosa, senior receiver-defensive back Josiah Washington, sophomore linebacker Jahmad Strong, senior receiver-defensive back Brandon Padgett, junior quarterback Eric Jenkins Jr., senior tailback-linebacker Jarvis Fuller, junior tailback-lineman Jamaras Fuller senior linebacker JarCUS Sessions, sophomore quarterback Andre Martin, sophomore tailback-linebacker Zay Robinson and sophomore tailback Jamar Walker.

Throughout the four-month period from April-July, Henry



MARK BLUMENTHAL / Palatka Daily News

Crescent City assistant coach Keenan Henry runs a drill with Raiders players Tyler Padgett (10) and Cameron Wright during the first week of practice.

took them to UCF, USE, Florida, FSU, Webber International, Southeastern University, Mercer, Valdosta State and Wingate University in North Carolina.

"Several of those we attended camps and 7-on-7 competitions, including USE, UCF, UF, Mercer, Valdosta State and a mega-camp at FSU," Henry stated. "At Florida, it was a great camp. We learned a lot as it was a great teaching camp along with one-on-one drills, while at FSU there were over 100 college coaches from Division I to Division II schools that attended. We also attended a Historically Black College University mega-camp at St. Leo."

The whole purpose of the trip was for the players to get on the

radar of colleges and hopefully have college coaches take notice of them.

"Any kid trying to play at the next level that is a good kid and is in the NCAA Clearinghouse, I told them I am taking you to get recruited," Henry said. "I told them to jump in the van and let's ride."

With camps and tours only for freshmen through seniors, Henry was only able to take those 13 players for that reason to help get noticed.

"When I started coaching at Crescent City, I asked our head coach, Sean Delaney, what can I do to help our kids get recruited," Henry said. "He was big in recruiting and constantly emailing coaches to set up camp invites. He told me whatever I needed he would fund it."

While the majority of coaches had no clue where Crescent City was, there was one particular school who went all out for the kids.

"A lot of college coaches would always ask 'Where is Crescent City?' But when you say the 'home of Pooh Bear Williams,' they knew," Henry said.

"When we visited FSU, coach Odel Hagans shared stories with the kids about Pooh Bear and always talked highly about him. He showed them the trophies and pictures on the wall of Williams playing against Florida."

And like Williams, who was often overlooked, Henry is trying to not let the same thing happen again.

"Pooh Bear wasn't recruited really until college coaches started paying attention to him a lot more," he said. "They would come to watch his opponents play and come watch certain players and Pooh Bear would stand out more."

See CAMPS, Page 20



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# Raiders

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 14

Keenon and Padgett are a solid 1-2 combination and full of speed much like recent graduated playmakers Ray Davis and Sheldon Patrick.

Defensively, the Raiders are set at secondary and linebackers, while a young defensive line grows and gets better each game.

Players like Jacob Westberry, Josiah Washington, Jamar Walker and Jarcus Session, a transfer from Interlachen, will be counted on heavily on defense.

For Ripley, the season comes down to just three things for the Raiders to be successful and playoff bound again.

“The most important thing is we have to stay healthy,” Ripley said. “We

don’t have the depth so we have to be smart and cautious. If we have a big lead, take guys out to rest people and not overuse them.

“The second most important thing is to block and tackle really well. For us to have a shot, we have to gang-tackle a lot. We have a very excitable bunch, but we lack physicality. And the last thing is we have to win the turnover battle. Our defense kept us in the game against Wildwood (the preseason opener last Friday) because our offense turned the ball over too many times. We can’t have that.”

If the Raiders can win all three of those intangibles they will be making their fourth straight playoff appearance, something that has never happened before, and more importantly, continuing Delaney’s legacy and mission.

## CRESCENT CITY ROSTER

NO.	Year	Position	NO.	Year	Position
2	Eric Jenkins Jr.	Jr. QB-DB	27	Nyeem Moore	Jr. RB-LB
3	Tyrone Jenkins	Sr. WR-DB	32	Jose Guevara	Sr. WR-DB
4	Lentavious Keenon	Sr. WR-DB	34	Jahmaad Strong	So. TE-LB
5	Brandon Padgett	Sr. RB-DB	42	Preston Washington	So. TE-LB
6	Zay Robinson	So. RB-LB	43	Jonathan Thomas	Fr. WR-OLB
7	Jarcus Session	Sr. RB-LB	44	Jamar Walker	So. RB-DL
8	Jarvis Fuller	Sr. OL-OLB	52	Jayden Murphy	Jr. OL-DL
9	Arzavian Williams	Jr. WR-DB	53	Trayton Green	So. OL-DL
10	Tyler Padgett	So. WR-DB	54	Tyler Frazier	So. OL-DL
11	Freddie Major	Jr. QB	55	Jariah Fuller	Fr. TE-DL
13	Andre Martin	So. QB-DB	56	Darwin Vazquez	Jr. DL
14	Josiah Washington	Sr. TE-LB	58	Wilber Guerrero	Jr. OL
15	David Newbold	Sr. WR-K-DB	66	Jacob Westberry	Sr. OL-DL
18	Andrew Roosa	So. WR-DB	72	Michael Hernandez	Jr. OL-DL
19	Cameron Wright	Sr. WR-OLB	73	Esiquiel Castro	Sr. OL-DL
20	Marcus Pates	Fr. QB-LB	76	Jake Robinson	Jr. OL-DL
21	Eloy Cortez	Sr. DB	78	Aiden Fitzgerald	Jr. OL-DL
23	Ja’Maris Fuller	Jr. OLB	84	Desmond Anderson	Sr. OL-DL
25	Hector Cortez	Sr. WR-DB	99	Jeremiah Odom	So. OL-DL

# Camps

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 19

Which is what Henry was trying to teach his players during the tour: Do whatever it takes to stand out.

“It was very beneficial for them and a lot of networking was involved,” Henry said. “I told them before the camps, ‘Set up your Twitter account and add your film to it.’ I gave out a business card to college coaches with a scan code that would give them a lot of information. With this new technology you can’t just sit there and wait. You have to go out there and get it. One college coach told me he gets 1,000 films a day on potential recruits. It’s much better for

me to see them in person at camps. After the camps, the kids tagged the coaches on Twitter and I posted video to our Facebook page and our Twitter account. Go network and talk to the coaches and ask them, ‘Did you like me in this drill?’”

Of course a four-month trip over wasn’t free and did cost something, but with great community support, the trip was paid for.

“We did a lot of fundraising and with the community’s support and the support of the school, we raised a lot of it,” Henry said. “Jackie Walker helped provide us with large vans that could hold at least 12 people and full tanks of gas to get us going.”

They also acquired other expenses on the trip including food, but strangers would pay for their meals sometimes.

“My dad took us to Wing House in Tallahassee after the FSU camp and paid for everybody to eat,” Henry said. “Random people

would come up to me and tell me the kids were very respectful and offered to pay.”

While Henry was the main person involved, he could not do it all alone.

“Our entire coaching staff chipped in and helped and was very supportive,” Henry said. “When one person couldn’t go, another one would step up and fill in like my cousin, Troy Henry, Robert Ripley to UCF and Tim Ross to Florida. We had to rotate guys, but it was pretty much a hands-on approach.”

And while a couple of the players earned college offers over the summer, Henry would like nothing more than to have the entire senior class walk away with scholarships and opportunities.

“I am proud of the kids. This junior and senior class is the most qualified we have had since I have been there,” Henry said.



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# Heat

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2

I don't think we're behind at all in our preparation. With the continuity of our coaching staff and the maturity of the players, we're in a position where we can start sharpening up the mental part of the game. Compared to our practices outdoors, there's not much of a drop-off, and that speaks volumes to the maturity of our players to work on the mental side of things."

For both Whitehurst and Interlachen head coach Erik Gibson, they consider themselves lucky in not missing a practice due to the heat.

"The first practice we had (in the second week) was shortened to 35 minutes by lightning, but the rest of the week, we were lucky that we didn't have to go inside because of the heat," Gibson said.

And assisting in making that decision for Gibson, Turner and Crescent City Junior-Senior High interim coach Robert Ripley is an instrument known as a wet bulb, an electronic device that checks for four major components in having outdoor activity or not.

"It measures four things: Air temperature, relative humidity, sun angle and wind," said Whitehurst, who has possessed a wet bulb since 2019. "The wet bulb temperature is not the the regular temperature."

There are guidelines for how practices are run through the results of the wet bulb: On a registered 89 degrees, coaches have to watch their players carefully and try to protect them from any harm. Between 90-92 degrees on the bulb, coaches have to give the players four 5-minute breaks within an hour and that hour is all the players will have to practice outdoors. And at over 92 degrees, everything has to be moved indoors to practice.

Whitehurst said the hottest temperature he recorded on the wet bulb was 89 degrees on Aug. 8.

"We did everything the right way," Whitehurst said. "We watched what was going on in practices and we didn't take any



MARK BLUMENTHAL / Palatka Daily News

Interlachen players gather around water coolers during a break in practice the first week of preseason.

chances with the kids."

There was a time in which temperatures did get hot and coaches did not really think twice about two-a-day practices in the hot August sun. Then came Aug. 1, 2001. That was the day of the tragic death of Minnesota Vikings offensive lineman Korey Stringer in training camp as temperatures soared toward 99 degrees as camp ended. Stringer died of organ failure due to heat stroke, his body temperature getting as high 108 degrees.

"I was an assistant here at Interlachen at the time and it came as a complete shock when we heard about (Stringer's) death," Whitehurst said. "It was in Minnesota. If someone dies from heat stroke in Minnesota, a person can die from heat stroke anywhere."

In July 2017, tragedy struck Florida when Zachary Martin, a student-athlete at Fort Myers Riverdale High, died after running sprints in oppressive heat. Three years after his death, the

Florida House passed the Zachary Martin act, House Bill 7011, which "protects the well-being of students participating in extracurricular activities from exerted heat stroke by revising provisions related to automated external defibrillators (AED) on school grounds, training related to cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) and AEDs, Florida High School Athletic Association (FHSA) student athlete safety policies and specified medical evaluations."

All three highs schools have silver tubs with ice ready to cool down a body in severe cases of overheating, but none of the schools athletic directors – Palatka's Bobby Humphries, Whitehurst and Crescent City's Tim Ross – said they have not had to use it.

The third week of practice saw a cooling down from the previous two weeks of practice. At the Aug. 14 practice at Palatka, Humphries measured 82 degrees on his wet bulb. And it was 81 degrees on Whitehurst's device at Interlachen practice two days later.

"It was the coolest weather we had here at practice since the spring," Turner said. "That Monday we had a film session for the first 45 minutes. When we finally came out to practice, there was cloud cover and a breeze was blowing through. And we beat the storm that was coming our way."

Whitehurst said you can practice in hotter conditions every day, but that still will not get anyone ready for the opening game of the season.

"The thing is I don't think you can get game-shape ready until you get to the game," said Whitehurst, who has had two different stints as Interlachen football coach in 2008-09 and on an interim basis in 2020. "All we try to do is keep the kids hydrated. We check each one of them after practice to see if they present any signs of dehydration, but we did not see that. As long as they're still sweating, you're in good shape."

And as temperatures continue to soar higher and higher with each summer, coaches and athletic directors are on the lookout for football players who struggle in the heat.

"This is probably the hottest summer I've ever been a part of," Gibson said. "Back when I played, we had hot days once in a while, but this summer was the absolute worst."



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Rams

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4

in what they’re doing and they believe they can win. That helps out, too. That’s part of building a winning culture, and that they don’t quit when they fall behind 14-0.”

There is no doubt the Rams’ biggest challenge is replacing a talented senior class of 19 players that included county football player of the year Reggie Allen and *Daily News* Senior Male Athlete of the Year Der’Tavius Mack.

In other words, it’s no secret how young the Rams became in one year. But again, according to Gibson, that’s part of the challenge his players look toward going into the season.

“I was impressed with our young kids (last Friday),” Gibson said. “Our younger kids stepped up and never shied away from anything. They got better as the (first) quarter went on.”

With Allen moving on to Western Kentucky University, the full-time quarterback position belongs to all-county standout Jack Pavlik, a junior who threw for 1,080 yards on 66-of-134 passing and 15 touchdowns and seven interceptions. His preseason opener against Wolfson opened eyes – he threw for 238

yards and three touchdowns. And with a returning group of offensive linemen with the exception of one graduated player, Gibson sees big things with the offense, once again trying to establish a balance of passing and running the ball.

“I think we have a chance to be more dynamic on offense than we did last year,” Gibson said.

Defensively, the question marks pop up. There are major positions to be filled, especially at linebacker where the quartet of Jonathan Servin, Mack, Terryon Mitchell and Justin Herring established that side of the ball and helped lead the team to a division tournament championship.

For the Rams, it’s all about what started last year and hopes to continue on.

A winning tradition.

“We’re building a team, building a family,” Gibson said. “We’re building a camaraderie you need to be a good team and help each other out once you get there.”

As for a realistic goal, Gibson kept it simple. “Realistically, I think we can go 6-2 in the regular season,” Gibson said. “Overall, I can see us competing for a chance to go to the playoffs again.

“Nobody expects us to do the same thing we did last year,” Gibson said. “But, hey, I’m all about if it can happen again.”

Panthers

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 8

total offense and seven touchdowns,” Turner said. “They were all rushing (TDs), but still as a freshman last year, you scored seven touchdowns as a freshman, that’s pretty good.”

Now, though, comes the opportunity to help balance Offord’s game behind center and be able to pass the ball more this season. “He’s got to develop a little bit,” Turner said. “We’re close and we know we’ve got to work on some things.”

Offord will have a number of targets to throw to, including returnees Cartaveon Valentine and Trenton Williams. Other potential targets are Keymari Hall, Tony Turner, George Taylor, Devin Walker and Barrett Clark.

Behind Offord, Justin Fells, a sophomore, has stepped up to be the full-time running back.

Defensively, though, the Panthers could be at their best. In the 14-7 preseason victory over Mount Dora, the Panthers collected four sacks in the first half, including two by Kason Bradford, a junior who helps to anchor the front line along with returning senior Elysha Campbell II.

In the defensive backfield, senior safety Ar’Terrian Godfrey, who scored in the win over Mount Dora on his only offensive touch of the game, a 15-yard run, had an interception and will help direct the backfield with two other veterans, senior Ishmael Foster and junior Robert Walker.

Turner said he would love to see the same start last year’s Panthers got off to again, but added he’s a realist. And if these Panthers don’t get to seven wins, he understands.

He’s simply looking for more growth from this team.

“If this team does not win seven games, it’s not a failure because the majority of this team is young,” Turner said. “Say we win six games or even five. I still think we’re headed in the right direction to surpass that next season. But I still think we can win seven games even with an overall younger team.”

PALATKA ROSTER

NO.		Year	Position
2	Ar’Terrian Godfrey	Sr.	RB-S
4	LaKwain Wright	Sr.	CB
6	Justin Fells	So.	RB-LB
7	Cartaveon Valentine	Sr.	LB
8	Ishmael Foster	Sr.	S
9	Majiyah Brown	Sr.	TE-LB
10	Tommy Offord	So.	QB
11	Keymari Hall	Jr.	WR
14	Tony Turner	Jr.	WR
16	Jacob Gaskin	So.	LB
17	Colton Palmer	Jr.	TE-LB
18	George Taylor	So.	WR
19	Trenton Williams	Sr.	TE-WR
20	Amarayan Maxwell	Jr.	CB
23	Robert Walker	Jr.	S
25	Tarus Session	Sr.	LB
26	T.J. Valentine	Sr.	LB
27	Devin Walker	Sr.	WR
28	Cajiyah Brown	Sr.	LB
29	Darius Williams	Jr.	LB
30	Jimmie Williams	Jr.	S
33	Elysha Campbell II	Jr.	LB
35	Michael Lindsey	Jr.	LB
40	Barrett Clark	Jr.	TE-FB
42	Gage White	Jr.	K
50	Allen Blocker	So.	C
52	Kason Brdford	Jr.	DE
53	Joseph atkins	Sr.	OT
54	Tyler Richardson	Jr.	LB
56	Chris Cheatham	Jr.	OL
60	Cody Adkisson	Sr.	OL
62	Blake Sullivan	Jr.	OL
65	Ben Clark	Jr.	DL
66	Darrell Purifoy	Sr.	DL
68	Jaquez Poole	Sr.	OL
70	James Dougherty	Sr.	OL
72	Evan Cordell	So.	OL
75	Roy Smith	Sr.	DL
76	C.J. Thomas	Sr.	DL
77	Javen Palmer	Jr.	OL
78	Zae Curry	Jr.	OL
85	Steve Harris	Sr.	WR
90	Curtis Whitfield	Sr.	DL
91	Antorien Smart	Jr.	DL



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## COLLEGE FOOTBALL

# 30-year-old Armstrong tasked with fixing Gators' defense

BY MARK LONG  
Associated Press

GAINESVILLE – As the music gets louder, so does Austin Armstrong. Florida's new defensive coordinator starts screaming, bouncing around and slamming into players just before 11-on-11 drills.

"Get your hardhats ready," Armstrong shouts. "This is a construction zone!"

And part of a massive rebuild in Gainesville.

The Gators (6-7) set several defensive records last season – none of them good. They allowed the most points (375) and the most rushing touchdowns (29) in school history and surrendered more yards than ever on the ground (175.2 per game).

They gave up 30 or more points in six games and ranked last

in the Southeastern Conference in third-down defense, allowing opponents to convert more than 49% of the time. It was the worst third-down defense in the program's 100-plus seasons.

Talent, depth, scheme, coaching? Maybe a combination of everything.

Second-year coach Billy Napier tasked the 30-year-old Armstrong with cleaning it up. Napier plucked the energetic, visor-wearing assistant from Alabama's staff in February to replace Patrick Toney, who bolted for the NFL less than two weeks before spring practice.

While Napier's offense – with Wisconsin transfer Graham Mertz at quarterback – will get much of the attention this season, the defense seemingly has more room for growth. And Armstrong will be calling the shots when the Gators begin Aug. 31 at No. 14 Utah.

"He's a good one," Napier said.

So good that Napier recommended him to Georgia coach Kirby Smart for a quality control job. Armstrong spent the 2019 season with the Bulldogs before Napier brought him back to coach linebackers at Louisiana. The following year, Southern Miss made Armstrong the youngest defensive coordinator in the country.

Now, at age 30, Armstrong is the youngest in the SEC. Although he hasn't tweaked Florida's scheme very much, he has changed the approach and the intensity.

"A lot of energy," Gators defensive tackle Tyreek Sapp said. "You don't want a low-energy DC. You need somebody that can be that every day because you're not going to be like that every day, but you have a little firecracker as a DC. He's always ready to pop."

# Seminoles with chance to get early grip in College Playoff chase

BY MARK LONG  
Associated Press

Florida State probably won't have to wait until December to learn its fate regarding the College Football Playoff.

The eighth-ranked Seminoles, entering their most anticipated campaign in nearly a decade, should have a solid handle on their outlook after the first month of the season.

Coach Mike Norvell's team opens against No. 5

LSU in Orlando on Sept. 3, a prime-time showcase featuring two championship contenders, and then plays at ninth-ranked Clemson three weeks later. Beat both Tigers and FSU would be in position to return to the CFP for the first time since 2014.

The Seminoles, however, are expected to be underdogs in each game. LSU opened as 2 1/2-point favorites, according to FanDuel Sportsbook. And Clemson, meanwhile, has won seven consecutive meetings between the Atlantic Coast Conference heavyweights.

"I'm not looking for the easiest path to get to where we need to go," Norvell said.

No one should be surprised to see Norvell and the 'Noles celebrating an ACC title in four months and punching their ticket to the CFP. After all, this team returns 15 starters – nearly 90% of its playmakers from last season – including several stars.

Quarterback Jordan Travis, All-ACC edge rusher Jared Verse, receiver Johnny Wilson and defensive lineman Fabian Lovett stuck around for a chance to end their college careers with a champi-

onship, maybe two.

"I'm glad all those boys decided to come back," linebacker Kalen DeLoach said. "They felt like what we had here, we need to leave our legacy, we need to leave our mark. They felt like we weren't done yet."

Adding more to Norvell's team, he landed Michigan State standout receiver Keon Coleman, Virginia shutdown cornerback Fentrell Cypress, versatile South Carolina tight end Jaheim Bell and Western Michigan defensive lineman Braden Fiske in the transfer portal.



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