2023 OSCEOLA COUNTY HIGH SCHOOL SEASON PREVIEW



PHOTO/KEN JACKSON



A FRIDAY NIGHT TRADITION RETURNS

By Ken Jackson Editor

HOTOS/KATIE WILLIAMS

They've been playing football among our high schools since long before any of us were here. They'll probably be playing it after we're gone, as well.

Starting the end of August, students, families, fans and other interested onlookers have gathered at the school football field on Friday nights to watch and document, these days in new ways the action.

Locally, the passage of time will be marked in a special way on Sept. 29, when St. Cloud High travels to Kissimmee to meet a familiar foe, Osceola, for the 100th time in the school's history. Expect a large, nostalgic crowd. But, like anything else, there are changes. The county features two new head football coaches — Nick Lippert goes from defensive coordinator to the "head honcho" at Harmony, while former high school and college running back standout Dee Hart takes over a Liberty program that didn't return former coach Antony Smith. Liberty also gets a new athletic director in Chad Springer as well. Tohopekaliga benefited from former Harmony Coach Don Simon stepping down from that to become the Tigers' AD. And, 2023 marks the second year of a big change in the FHSAA's playoff format. Schools were separated by "Metro" (in the eight largest counties in Florida) and "Suburban" (the rest of the state, including Osceola). The changes took perennial power Osceola in a different division than Orange and Seminole county powers Apopka, Seminole, West Orange, Dr. Phillips and Edgewater - the Kowboys will still play in the same bracket as state powers from Lakeland, Sarasota, Gainesville and southwest Florida. With that said, it's still the same game four downs to move 10 yards, get to the end zone and you score six points, and we do it each week for four quarters.

A BAKER'S DOZEN OF 2023 OSCEOLA COUNTY GAMES:

Aug. 25: Eustis at Harmony Head Coach Nick Lippert era officially begins.

Sept. 1: Osceola at Seminole

The second of a number of meetings with the state's best; rematch of 2020 state title game.

Sept. 8: Hardee at Poinciana Eagles' only September home game; how good are they? Sept. 15: Lakeland at Osceola

The next in a line of great games they play, first since '22 state semifinal. Sept. 15: Tohopekaliga at St. Cloud Becoming guite the neighborhood rivalry — and a district game to boot.

Sept. 15: Tohopekaliga at St. Cloud Becoming quite the neighborhood rivalry — and a district game to boot. Sept. 21: Liberty at Celebration County teams meet on a Thursday.

After 100 years, why change a good thing?

Sept. 29: St. Cloud at Osceola
Meeting No. 100 of state's 5th-longest rivalry.
Oct. 6: Gateway at St. Cloud
This rivalry's been competitive over the years.
Oct. 12: Gulf Breeze at Tohopekaliga
Another Thursday special.
Oct. 20: Tohopekaliga at Harmony
Can Tigers close the gap on established Longhorns?
Oct. 27: Osceola at Tohopekaliga
Kowboys could be looking for another district championship.
Nov. 3: Harmony at St. Cloud
Soldier City Classic may be played on SCHS' new turf.
Nov. 10: Liberty at Poinciana
Can Eagles make it two in a row in the Battle of the Boulevard?





By J. Daniel Pearson

The few times the Storm's posted a winning season, it usually resulted in the head coach moving on – leaving the program to start over. It's a tendency that Palmer wants to change.

"There's no question that this program needs consistency and that is what I want to build here," the second year coach said. "That needs to start with stability with the coaches. We have a lot of work to do here but we have a lot of potential too."

Palmer squad of 45 players consists of 36 freshman and sophomores. "This year's team is one that we will build on for the future. We are going to have to play a lot of super young kids this season, and it will be a learning experience for a lot of them. On the bright side, when these kids are junior and seniors in a few years, they will be battle tested and be ready to go."

Konopka returns as Celebrations' team captain and unquestioned leader on both sides of the ball. While it appears sophomore Landen Yaw has won the starting quarterback job, look for Parker Halsey to be on the field somewhere. Freshman Phillipe Costa and sophomore Sean Nuzzi will most likely be the Storm playmakers on offense.

Justin Berry will be a two-way starter on the offensive and defensive lines, as will Michael Couch. Palmer noted that

Head Coach: Jeremy Palmer

2022 Record: 1-9 Returning Standouts: Gavin Konopka (C-DE),

Michael Couch (TE/DE) Ready To Shine: Landon Yaw (QB)

Top Newcomer: Justin Berry (TE/DT), Phillipe Costa (Fr.-RB)

Don't Miss Home Games: Ridge Community (Aug. 25), St. Cloud (Oct. 27)

> the Storm would be extremely young in the secondary, where they most likely see four freshman or sophomore starters.

> With tough district games against Osceola, Tohopekaliga, and St. Cloud, as well as challenging non-district games with Titusville and Harmony, wins may be hard to come by. Still, a favorable early season schedule may yield a few positive results.

"This year will be about building a base for the future," Palmer noted. "There are some games on our schedule where I believe we can be competitive but the most important thing for us is to try to improve every practice and every game — that's how we will define success."

Football 2023			
Date	Opponent	Time	
Aug. 25	Ridge Com.	7:30 p.m.	
Sep. 1	@Harmony	7:00 p.m.	
Sep. 8	@Titusville	7:00 p.m.	
Sep. 15	Space Coast	7:30 p.m.	
Sep. 21	Liberty (Th)*	7:30 p.m.	
Sep. 29	@Tohopekaliga	7:00 p.m.	
Oct. 6	BYE WEEK		
Oct. 13	@Osceola*	7:00 p.m.	
Oct. 20	@Fglr Palm Coast	7:00 p.m.	
Oct. 27	St. Cloud*	7:00 p.m.	
Nov. 3	Lake Region	7:30 p.m.	



By J. Daniel Pearson

The dean of Osceola County football coaches, Roberts begins beginning his 23rd season at Gateway - his 15th as head coach –under an enormous cloud. The campus has been under reconstruction for more than a year, his football parking lot is still full of dirt piles and bulldozers. He has had to find a makeshift practice field on more than one occasion, often having to set up a portable weight room. He was told to be on the safe side that he should schedule road games for the first half of the season to avoid construction issues. The end result is that Gateway will play its least seven of its first eight on the road and could possibly not have a home game at all in 2023.

No team has had more devastating injuries of late — the team went through four quarterbacks last year. Add in multiple discipline issues, transfers and a lack of community support, and Gateway football has fallen on some hard times.

"Man it's been a rough couple of years but this one is really starting off hard. We may not get a home game this year so I'm not sure how we are even going to pay our bills," Roberts noted. "We'll survive somehow but the situation is far from ideal."

On the field, Roberts says he has about 40 players in uniform - almost all of them freshman, sophomores and first year players. Juniors Darius Young (WR/DB) and Gustavo Gallardo (OL) are among

Head Coach: Marlin Roberts

2022 Record: 2-7

Returning Standouts: Chris Charity (DL/RB), Josh Fuller (RB), Jason Lease (TE), Gustavo Gallardo (OL), Tristan Martinez (LB)

Ready To Shine: Moise Joseph (SS), Darius Young (WR/DB)

Top Newcomer: Jandel Diaz (QB)

Don't Miss Home Games: Lake Region (Oct. 20)

the few veteran leaders returning.

Markis Hill and Jandel Diaz are a pair of sophomores competing for a starting quarterback job. Roberts says he has a few promising running backs in Dashawn Reese, Josh Fuller and Chris Charity; while Darius Young has looked pretty good at wide receiver. Tristan Martinez is the team's top linebacker and sophomore Moise Joseph heads the list of defensive backs.

Gateway is lumped in with Liberty District 3S-8 (Suburban) which includes powers Auburndale and Lake Wales. Roberts says avoiding injuries will be vital. "We simply have not had the depth to withstand significant injuries. They have derailed us the last couple of seasons."

Football 2023

Date	Opponent	Time
Aug. 25	@ Lk Buena Vista	7:00 p.m.
Sep. 1	BYE WEEK	
Sep. 8	@Ridgeview	7:00 p.m.
Sep. 15	@Auburndale*	7:30 p.m.
Sep. 22	West Port	7:00 p.m.
Sep. 29	@Liberty*	7:00 p.m.
Oct. 6	@St. Cloud	7:30 p.m.
Oct. 13	@Lk Wales	7:00 p.m.
Oct. 20	Lk Region*	7:30 p.m.
Oct. 27	Davenport*	7:30 p.m.
Nov. 4	Gadsden Cty	7:30 p.m.

WATER YOUR BEST DEFENSE

Stay hydrated on and off the field





Returning Standouts: Chris Charity (DL/RB),

Gustavo Gallardo (OL), Tristan Martinez (LB)

Ready To Shine: Joshua Alezi (CB/WR),

Josh Fuller (RB), Jason Lease (TE),

2022 Record: 0-10

Gateway (Sept. 29)





By J. Daniel Pearson

On paper, Harmony could be in for a tough year. The entire backfield and top defender graduated or transferred, and longtime head coach Don Simon stepped down. Despite all of this, there is little panic at One Longhorn Place.

Lippert, Simon's long-time defensive coordinator, steps into the head coach role with a solid plan in place. Lippert says the Longhorns will still be the same physical, runoriented, hard-nosed defense they have been in the past, with perhaps some new wrinkles.

"We lost a lot of talent, but we have a lot of talented kids in the program ready to find their place," Lippert noted. "My new defensive coordinator is on the same page as I was when I held that post and we will still be a run-oriented offense. About the only change is we may try to throw the ball downfield a little bit more often."

Lippert noted when practices opened earlier this month, Harmony had 90+ players in uniform and felt good about the talent level. Junior Kai Amen was expected to battle sophomore Matt Davis to replace Ayden Parks at quarterback; while senior Jeremy Hilliard has been waiting

Head Coach: Nick Lippert 2022 Record: 6-5

Returning Standouts: Alex Nash (CB), Connor Flaherty (SS), Alex Nash (CB), Chase Adams (CB), Michael Capranica (G/T), Clayton Williams (DT), Ian Brigham (LB)

Ready To Shine: Jeremy Hilliard (RB)

Top Newcomer: Rick Sorano (Transfer OT) Don't Miss Home Games: Viera (Oct. 12), Tohopekaliga (Oct. 20)

> patiently to shine at running back. Transfer Rick Serano and junior Michael Capranica (6-4, 300) will likely anchor the offensive line. Defensively, Harmony returns a trio of talented backs in Alex Nash, Conner Flaherty, and Chase Adams Ian Brigham should help replace Dalton Phelan as the middle linebacker and Clayton Williams is top returner on the defensive line. Also look for Mekhi Ealy, a defensive tackle who saw extensive playing time as a freshman last year, to play a key role on the defense.

Football 2023

Date	Opponent	Time
Aug. 25	Eustis	7:00 p.m.
Sep. 1	Celebration	7:00 p.m.
Sep. 8	@Palm Bay	7:00 p.m.
Sep. 15	BYE WEEK	
Sep. 22	Wiregrass Rch	7:00 p.m.
Sep. 29	@Melbourne*	7:00 p.m.
Oct. 6	@Hagerty	7:00 p.m.
Oct. 13	Viera*	7:00 p.m.
Oct. 20	Tohopekaliga	7:00 p.m.
Oct. 27	@Heritage*	7:00 p.m.
Nov. 3	@St. Cloud*	7:30 p.m.



By J. Daniel Pearson

Hart, a former Alabama and Colorado State standout has accepted the challenge of making Liberty football relevant again. The Chargers opened last year's camp without a head coach suffered through its worst-ever seen. But the past is no concern to Hart, who takes over the program after serving as an assistant coach and head junior varsity coach of Frostproof last year.

"In most places, being a football player and student athlete means something, other students look up to them and faculty and staff expected them to be leaders and will be holding our players to a higher standard. That feeling really seemed to be lacking when I got here and it's something I know needed to change. There was little confidence and a will to compete and we started to immediately change that."

The change started this summer when Hart took players to summer 7-on-7 camps. "To some extent I think some of our kids from last year just decided they were not good enough to even compete. Those games started to change those attitudes," he said.

Hart will have small group of returnees that include senior quarterback Pierre-Louis and junior running back Jaylin "JJ" Vaughan on offense. Defensively, linebacker brothers Xae'dyn and Xae'Vez Brown return as does Emanuel Marreno. OL/DL Joshua Fabian and Amos Toussaint will anchor the lines.

"We only have about seven returning players that saw significant time last year," Hart said. "We do not have a lot of experience returning but what we do have is guys that want to be here and have accepted the responsibility of leading this team."

After finishing the season with less than 30 players in uniform, Liberty listed about 50 players on its preseason roster, a tribute to the interest Coach Hart is stirring in the program. And while those numbers include a lot of freshman and sophomores, it should provide Liberty with the building blocks it needs to return to competitiveness.

Football 2023

Date	Opponent	Time
Aug. 25	Tohopekaliga	7:00 p.m.
Sep. 1	Orlando Chr. Prep	7:00 p.m.
Sep. 8	@St. Cloud	7:00 p.m.
Sep. 15	Davenport*	7:30 p.m.
Sep. 21	@Celebration (Th)	7:30 p.m.
Sep. 29	Gateway*	7:00 p.m.
Oct. 6	BYE WEEK	
Oct. 13	@Auburndale*	7:30 p.m.
Oct. 20	@Lake Wales*	6:00 p.m.
Oct. 27	Lake Region*	7:30 p.m.
Nov. 3	@Poinciana	7:00 p.m.



REAL HOME?

Look for the R.

Contact Us For More Information :

407.846.0117 www.osceolarealtors.org www.cflhomeowners.org





Head Coach: Randy Beeken

Returning Standouts: Ernest Nunn (WR/DB),

Batista (DE), Taurence Boland (DE), Noah

Ready To Shine: Jaeden Gerard (CB/WR)

Don't Miss Home Games: Lake Buena Vista

Top Newcomer: Akeem Knox (RB),

Eliijah Bowser (S/WR), Wil Nezius (RB), Jason

2022 Record: 8-2

Cameron Brown (OB)

(Oct. 20), Liberty (Nov. 3)

Otero (LB)





By J. Daniel Pearson

The Kowboys lost a dozen starters, and face perhaps the toughest schedule in the state with seven 2022 playoff teams. That would be enough to concern most head coaches. But Osceola is not a normal team.

"We have guys that now are ready to step in and shine as starters," Pinellas said.

Those massive offensive tackle Marcus Ferrer (6-5, 300) already receiving Division I offers, quick defensive end Blaze Jones (6-3, 200, Soph.) and other defensive linemen Daniel Morales (Sr.) and Oneil Morrel (Jr.).

Osceola still has returning impact players like include junior recordsetting running back Taevion Swint (41 TDs, 3,000 all-purpose yards in two seasons). A veteran offensive line, led by tackle Thomas Gearity, guards Cameran Delke and Joseph Green and center Antonio Cruz to open plenty of holes. Sophomore Alijah Jenkins is a big-play threat as both a receiver and kick returner.

Junior linebacker Robert Lee returns as the leading tackler and fellow junior Elijah Melendez is also a big time talent. Jeff Banks returns at safety but plenty of young talent including sophomores Ja'Mario Bradford, Kyrie Watson and Larenz Walker will also

Head Coach: Eric Pinellas

2022 Record: 10-4, 7A State Semifinalist

Returning Standouts: Taevion Swint (RB), Elijah Melendez (LB), Jalen Bell (SS), Alijah Jenkins (WR), Robert Lee (LB), Jeff Banks (S), Thomas Gearity (OT), Antonio Cruz (C)

Ready To Shine: Marcus Ferrer (OT), Daniel Morales (DE), Oniel Morel (DT), Blaze Jones (DE), Jaquille Knox (DL)

Top Newcomer: Anthony Powers (Sophomore QB Transfer)

Don't Miss Home Games: Jones (Sept. 8), Lakeland (Sept. 15)

> shore up the 'back 7'. Pinellas is also excited about senior hybrid player Jalen Bell, who can lineup at safety, outside linebacker or defensive end.

> Transfer Powers appears to have the inside track on the quarterback job. "Alex has a good strong arm, but we're not going to throw the ball 40 times a game. We need someone to come in, manage the game and occasionally make a throw, to try to improve every practice and every game - that's how we will define success."

Football 2023

Date	Opponent	Time
Aug. 25	@Treasure Coast	7:00 p.m.
Sep. 1	@Seminole	7:00 p.m.
Sep. 8	Jones	7:00 p.m.
Sep. 15	Lakeland	7:00 p.m.
Sep. 22	Rockledge	7:00 p.m.
Sep. 29	@St. Cloud*	7:30 p.m.
Oct. 6	BYE WEEK	
Oct. 13	Celebration*	7:00 p.m.
Oct. 20	@Mainland	7:30 p.m.
Oct. 27	@Tohopekaliga*	7:30 p.m.
Nov. 3	@West Orange	7:30 p.m.



By J. Daniel Pearson

After decades of non-winning seasons, Poinciana head coach Randy Beeken and his administration made some difficult decisions during and after the 2021 season — dismissing several senior players for attitude issues and to foregoing district play and become an independent, eliminating any chance for post-season play.

Several good things came out of that - a huge change in players' attitudes surfaced, and several outstanding players who transferred from Poinciana to other schools returned to the school. The result was a school-record eight games and beating arch-rival Liberty for just the second winning season in school history (back to 1995).

Although Poinciana loses some explosive players to graduation, Beeken said this will be his most talented team in his five years as head coach. "We should be extremely explosive on offense. Nunn, Nezius and Bowser are all back and Cameron Brown - who went 7-3 at quarterback for Cypress Creek last year - transfers in."

And Knox, whose carries would have been limited behind star running back Taevion Swint at Osceola, transfers to Poinciana for his senior season. "There are not too many programs in the state where Akeem would not be a starter for, unfortunately Osceola was one of them. Without question, he will be our featured back."

Defensively, Poinciana has some talent on their defensive line in Jason Batista and Taurence Boland; four-year starter Noah Otero is the top linebacker; while Nunn and Bowser are two-way players who will shore up the defensive backfield.

Scheduling conflicts resulted in the Eagles only getting three home games this season, but Beeken calls the schedule "manageable" and says repeating or exceeding last year's eight wins is "both doable and a goal."

As the program continues to improve, a move back to district play in 2024 is a definite possibility.

Football 2023

Date	Opponent	Time
Aug. 25	@Nature Coast	7:00 p.m.
Sep. 1	BYE WEEK	
Sep. 8	Hardee	7:00 p.m.
Sep. 15	@Horizon	7:00 p.m.
Sep. 22	@Tenoroc	7:30 p.m.
Sept. 29	@Foundation Acd	7:00 p.m.
Oct. 6	@Davenport	7:00 p.m.
Oct. 13	@North Port	7:00 p.m.
Oct. 20	Lk Buena Vista	7:00 p.m.
Oct. 27	@Mulberry	7:30 p.m.
Nov. 3	Liberty	7:00 p.m.





5° CLOUD BULLOOGS

By J. Daniel Pearson

St. Cloud will likely play its home games at Austin Tindall Park. Despite the inconvenience, Short enters has perhaps the most talented St. Cloud team of the past decade, with experience and depth at almost all positions.

At quarterback, junior Logan King begins his third year as a starter. King completed 54% of his passes last year for 1922 yards, 18 touchdowns. "Logan is a team leader and throws a deep ball better than any quarterback I have coached," Short said. "In fact, he's more accurate on a 40-yard pass than a 10-yard swing pass." King will be slinging the ball to his favorite target from a year ago, WR Owen Conner, who caught 43 passes for 865 yards and six scores.

St. Cloud returns its top running back in two-way star TJ Griffin, who led the team in rushing yards (496), yards per carry (6.5) and rushing touchdowns (9) while sharing time with several backs. Returning its entire starting offensive line, including massive Division-I prospect Conner Howes (6-6, 310), starting center Daniel Torres, and Shawn Eplin, the Bulldogs' line should provide ample time for King to throw, as well as opening holes for Griffin.

Defensively, St. Cloud returns its entire secondary in Bryce Williams, Tyler Green, Griffin, and Malcom Senono. Junior Tashard Smith, playing

Head Coach: Mike Short

2022 Record: 7-3

Returning Standouts: TJ Griffin (RB/DB), Logan King (QB), Owen Conner (OT), Adrian Gonzalez (K), Bryce Williams (S), Tyler Green (LB), Landon Millman (LB), Kareem Elgin (DT), Daniel Torres (C)

Ready To Shine: Jacob Oviedo (DT), Julien Goicoechea (WR), Aiden Johnson (DE)

Top Newcomer: Omar Perez (OL)

Don't Miss Home Games: Tohopekaliga (Sept. 15), Harmony (Nov. 3)

football for the first time, has shown tremendous potential and will see action at safety and defensive back. Although the Bulldogs saw leading tackler Noah Carr graduate, Short said junior Landon Millman will move into that position and is confident there will be no significant drop off in production. "Wearing Number 2 is an honor and tradition we reserve for best player and leader on St. Cloud's defense," Short said. Millman, who had 37 tackles including six for loss, five sacks and an interception, will wear the number.

Football 2023

Date	Opponent	Time
Aug. 25	@Barron Collier	7:00 p.m.
Sep. 1	Pine Ridge	7:30 p.m.
Sep. 8	Liberty	7:30 p.m.
Sep. 15	Tohopekaliga*	7:30 p.m.
Sep. 22	@W. Springs	7:00 p.m.
Sep. 29	@Osceola*	7:30 p.m.
Oct. 6	Gateway	7:30 p.m.
Oct. 13	BYE WEEK	
Oct. 20	@South Lake	7:00 p.m.
Oct. 27	@Celebration*	7:30 p.m.
Nov. 4	Harmony*	7:30 p.m.









By J. Daniel Pearson

When he took over the program after the 2021 two-win season, Paradiso knew

Head Coach: Anthony Paradiso 2022 Record: 6-4

Returning Standouts: Sabby Meassick (QB), Julian Nasco (WR, DB), Anthony Paradiso (DE), Jediah Wetherington (LB/DE), Tre Punter (WR/DB)

Ready To Shine: Delvin Pryor (WR/DB), Jayden Oliver (WR/DB)

Top Newcomer: Eli Azize (WR/DB-Transfer)

Don't Miss Home Games: Melbourne (Sept. 22), Osceola (Oct. 27)

lost to graduation, the Tigers should still be explosive on offense. Meassick grew a few inches and is playing with a lot more confidence and Nasco (66-873-

The community's 'Go To' company because we care! AC Installation Repair & Maintenance

Give us a call today! (407) 594-7292 www.osceolaair.com

License # CAC181

he had a big job in front of him coming from Lake Nona. In his first year, Paradiso managed to create that new interest, as he had some key transfers come into the program and made a bold decision to start freshman quarterback Sabby Meassick. He threw for 3000 yards and 38 touchdowns, and the Tigers went 6-4. Despite the success, Paradiso noted it was just the first phase of the turnaround.

"We knew we had to get bigger and stronger on both offensive and defensive lines. We didn't have much depth to begin with and what we had simply could not compete against the better teams on our schedule. Harmony and Bishop Moore over-powered us and Osceola sort of tossed us around."

After a solid off-season in the weight room and a new influx of players, Paradiso believes Tohopekaliga will be better on the lines. "We have 12 linemen who are battling for starting jobs on the offense line, and 10 players chasing playing time on the defensive side of the ball," Paradiso noted. "Last year, we had to play a lot of guys both ways and that wore on us. We are going to play the best players again, but hopefully we will find enough where we can play a little more platoon football."

Although Nick Rawls (67-893-12 TD) and Dillan Harrell (44-360-4 TD) were

12 TD) returns as does running (741 yards rushing, 6.5 yards per carry) and catching threat, running back Churandy Duval, is a college prospect.

OLB Rashaud James, DB Tre Punter, LB/DE Jediah Wetherington and DE/ OLB Anthony Paradiso Jr. are expected to lead an improved defense.

"I've been coaching for 25 years and learned two things — culture and do things the right way, wins will take care of themselves, and we make athletics a great experience for the players," Paradiso said.

Football 2023

Date	Opponent	Time
Aug. 25	@Liberty	7:00 p.m.
Sep. 1	Fort Meade	7:00 p.m.
Sep. 8	@Foundation Acd	7:00 p.m.
Sep. 15	@St. Cloud*	7:00 p.m.
Sep. 22	Melbourne	7:00 p.m.
Sep. 29	Celebration*	7:00 p.m.
Oct. 6	BYE WEEK	
Oct. 13	Gulf Breeze	7:00 p.m.
Oct. 20	@Harmony	7:00 p.m.
Oct. 27	Osceola*	7:30 p.m.
Nov. 3	@Haines City	7:30 p.m.