

QUESTIONS FOR VALLEY'S 12 PREP FOOTBALL TEAMS

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IT'S ON. High school football season begins Monday with the opening day of practice around the state.

Only four area teams made the playoffs last year, so several need to start looking for the right answers when workouts commence. With that in mind, we present a dozen questions heading into the season - one for each of the Kanawha Valley's 12 teams.

n South Charleston (14-0 last season, Class AAA champion): The Black Eagles certainly return enough impact players from last year's run to the title - most notably quarterback Tyler Harris and lineman Blake Brooks - to again figure into the chase. But holding a state-high 16-game winning streak, will they stay hungry? You have to like their chances for a couple reasons. First, some key players were part of the basketball team that was again denied at the doorstep of a state crown last March. That should help fuel a chip-on-the-shoulder attitude. And don't you think they'd like to prove that last year's team was more than Aaron Dobson and Aaron Slusher?

n George Washington (12-2, AAA runner-up): Like SC, the Patriots still horde talent like tailback Felix Mollett and lineman Todd Battle. They also inherit versatile Duran Workman, a transfer from St. Albans who can play a number of skill positions. GW lost its entire secondary, but fleet receiver-DB types have proliferated on The Hill in recent seasons, so the well shouldn't be dry. The schedule is virtually the same, with SA replacing Ripley as the only change. The big switch could be in home field, as GW could play as many as the first three home games on its South Hills campus, including key tilts with SC and Spring Valley. Will the built-for-speed Patriots feel as much at home on grass on The Hill as they did on the turf at Laidley Field, where they were 8-0 last year?

n Capital (10-2, AAA quarterfinals): The Cougars are stocked at the skill spots with tailbacks Keion Wright and Justin Cousins, quarterback Joe Beane and versatile Josh Sharp. Their big question mark is on the defensive side - the team's top four tacklers a year ago were linebackers, and three of those have departed. Only J.C. Morrison returns. Can Capital rebuild on the fly at that position well enough to match last year, when it gave up just 15 TDs in the regular season?

n Hurricane (7-4, AAA first round): It's all on the line for the Redskins, as in their offensive line. Hurricane lost all five starters on the front wall, not to mention tailback and Kennedy Award contender Terrell Martin and fullback Kyle Cooper, who teamed up for 2,445 yards and 36 TDs rushing. Can they find folks to run and block? Half the schedule is also new, and it's a mixed bag. The Skins lose SC and gain Logan, Princeton and Greenbrier East (a combined 8-22), but also meet Capital and Cabell Midland (8-3).

n Buffalo (5-5): Can the Bison go back to a grind-it-out style and succeed? In the last six seasons under coach Mike Sawyer, Buffalo has averaged 1,351 passing yards and 16 TDs. But breaking in a third QB in as many seasons (junior Caleb Dunn), and losing his top two receivers may force Sawyer back to a balanced rushing attack like he had in 2002, his first season at the helm. Experienced runners abound in Tray Davis, Joseph Moore, Cameron Jones and Dustin Reed.

n Sissonville (5-5): After losing most of his skill players, but returning all five offensive linemen, coach Todd Chevalier might be tempted to play it conservatively, especially in the early going. The Indians also welcome back their front eight on defense, so they could emphasize running the ball on offense, and stopping the run on defense. Can they play it so close to the vest and succeed in the Cardinal Conference, where no team looks like it's ready to take a step backward?

n St. Albans (4-6): Lucky Red Dragons. The vagaries of the MSAC schedule have them playing each of the league's big three from last season -- SC, GW and Capital. Only Riverside faces the same fate in the 16-team league. Can SA get back to its earth-moving ways from 2007, when it rode the rushing attack all the way to the AAA Super Six finals? The Dragons have an experienced ball-carrier in Markus Guy (2,080 yards, 15 TDs the past two seasons), but lost QB Leon Mitchell to Riverside and the offensive line, like last year, is largely inexperienced with just one returning starter.

n Winfield (4-6): Can the Generals stay afloat as an independent in the heart of MSAC country? Entering its second year in AAA, Winfield lopped three more AA opponents off the schedule, and among the teams to replace them were three playoff powers - Cabell Midland, Parkersburg South and Spring Valley. The Generals, seeking their first winning season since 2004, lost almost all their skill players, and must build around lineman Danny Thomas, running back Josh Clark and receiver Alex Campbell.

n **Nitro** (3-7): Can the Wildcats hold onto the ball? Last year, they had 29 turnovers (15 interceptions, 14 lost fumbles), which more than anything put them on the fast track to a losing season. The development of Mark Chandler at quarterback over the final three games gave **Nitro** hope for the future - he went 30-of-49 for 461 yards, four TDs and just one pick in those games and ran for 505 yards and six scores. Not surprisingly, **Nitro** was 2-1 in that stretch.

n Riverside (3-7): Actually, two questions for the Warriors. First, can they get the ball enough to all-state receiver Raheem Waiters (who has already committed to Marshall)? Waiters caught 43 passes last year despite starting QB Tyler Long's knee injury in the opener. Seth Shanklin stepped in under center as a sophomore and should improve now that he's grown. Also, can Riverside continue to live on the edge and survive? In a span of six weeks last year, the Warriors played four games decided by three points or fewer and went 1-3. Flip those around, and they could be in the playoffs this time. In 2007, they went 3-2 in games decided by four points or less.

n Herbert Hoover (2-8): The Huskies of first-year coach Tim Meyer definitely have some leftover parts to work with, including quarterbacks Patrick Ryan and Jamie Hurd, who combined to throw for just over 1,000 yards and seven TDs last year. But the big question is: Can the Huskies fix their defense - which allowed an average of 29.4 points - to keep them in the game?

n Poca (2-8): An outlook much like Hoover, its fellow Cardinal Conference member. Returning are proven offensive talents like tailback Caleb Arthur (3,075 career yards rushing, 29 TDs) and quarterback Jason Cuffee, but will the Dots have to continue to outscore their own defense, which gave up 36.7 points per game last season?

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