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2023



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2023

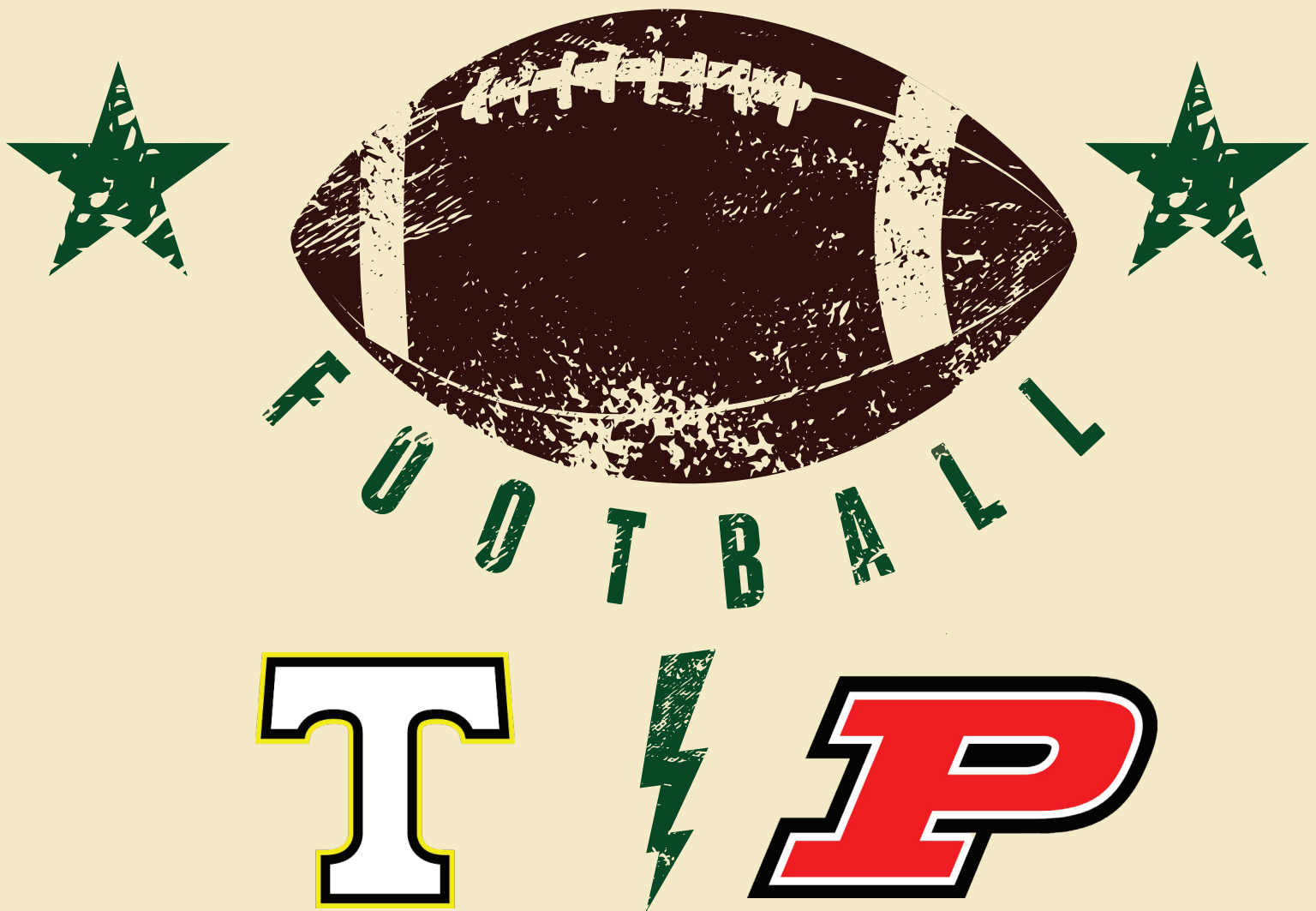
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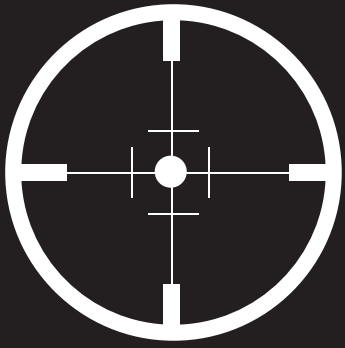
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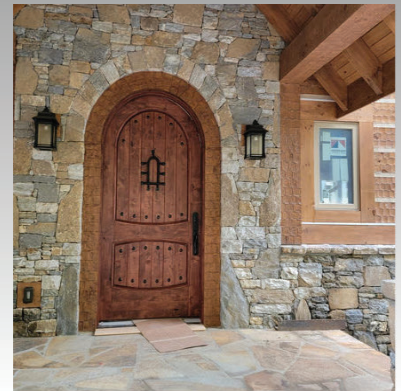


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County Clash casts a spell over football fans



Diana Gates

PACKED HOUSE — The Tuscola side of CE Weatherby was packed with fans and family supporting their Mountaineers.

By Tyler Auffhammer
tauffhammer@themountaineer.com

The Haywood County Clash. The Great American Rivalry. The Mill vs. The Hill. It's a game that goes by many names and one we've seen many times before, but for some reason, it's a show whose shine never seems to fade, a tale whose story never gets old. It's Pisgah versus Tuscola, and we can't get enough of it.

Every year, droves of Mountaineer and Bear fans wait in advance to get into C.E. Weatherby Stadium or Pisgah Memorial Stadium just to catch a glimpse as one of the country's most storied football rivalries plays out on the sacred acre.

Since 1966, when Pisgah and Tuscola high schools were created out of consolidation, these two teams have gone to battle 59 times, sometimes twice in one season, although neither team ever takes a long-standing edge in the series.

Pisgah won the first seven games, Tuscola the next four, Pisgah the following three and Tuscola the next 10. The intensity grew as the rivalry entered the modern era, and momentum jumped back and forth across the mountain.

It wasn't until 2013 that Pisgah began its nine-year reign of dominance that was ultimately shuttered by Tuscola in 2022, although it took a mammoth double-overtime overtime victory to do it.

As both teams enter the 2023 campaign, the stakes are as high as ever.

Tuscola is coached by first-year head coach Jonathan Crompton, a Tuscola grad and former pro quarterback who must look to replace a senior-heavy graduating class last year.

"I know what it feels like to run out at C.E. Weatherby," Crompton said when he was hired in March. "I know those feelings when it's a big moment... There's nothing like 'the game.' Just in case anyone is won-



Mikell Clark-Webb

THE NATION — Pisgah faithful show team spirit during a football game against Enka in 2022.

dering, it's only 200 days away today. We'll make sure we mark that one down."

Pisgah, meanwhile, is led by coach Brett Chappell, who returns a roster full of familiar faces, like junior quarterback Aaron Clark and senior line-backer Tytus Bridges.

"It seems like from my first year in 2013, each year has been unique in itself," Chappell said. "It's never the same game... We probably have more kids that have played in this game before. It might give an advantage early on, but that game is unique. You can always throw the records out the window."

Not only will Pisgah and Tuscola battle for crosstown supremacy, the Haywood County Cup and bragging rights for the next calendar year, but the Great American Rivalry Series crew will be in town to give a trophy to the winner, a medal to the most valuable player and scholarships to each team's top academic student-ath-

lete.

Numerous media members (yours truly, included), local and statewide, will cover the game on Facebook, X and every other relevant social media platform. And to top it all off, countless former players from both teams will sit in the concrete bleachers at Weatherby to watch the ballet of blood and bone unfold before their eyes.

When Pisgah and Tuscola's football teams step onto the field on Oct. 13, it'll be for the 60th time as Black Bears and Mountaineers.

Not since Oct. 13, 2000, has the rivalry game been played on a "Friday the 13th." That year, Tuscola narrowly edged Pisgah 23-21 to begin the new millennium.

What spells will each coach will try to cast over the other in efforts to eke out another series victory? But you can be certain that the game, and its aura, will cast a spell over the community that won't dissipate anytime soon.

Top five football games of last season

By Tyler Auffhammer

tauffhammer@themountaineer.com

From Tuscola's thrilling double-overtime victory to end Pisgah's 10-year reign of dominance to the Bears' shootout against Smoky Mountain's high-octane offense, the 2022 football season had highs, lows and everything in between.

Here are the top five games of 2022 as decided by the staff of *The Mountaineer* sports department.

5. Pisgah stomps East Henderson to end a three-game skid

Date: Oct. 21, 2022

Location: East Henderson High School in East Flat rock

Pisgah had not won a Mountain 7 Conference game heading into the second-to-last regular season game against East Henderson. And coming off a 35-34 double-overtime loss to rival Tuscola, the Bears looked primed to go winless in the conference.

But Pisgah had other plans against the Eagles, especially given the playoff hope a win would give the Bears.

Pisgah came out of the gates swinging with a five-play, 74-yard touchdown drive. The drive's highlight came on just the second play, as sophomore Carter Browning broke off a 52-yard dash down to the Eagles' 22-yard line.

Three plays later, Browning once again gashed the defense, this time for an 11-yard touchdown.

"I thought we did a really good job early," said Pisgah head coach Brett Chappell. "I thought we maintained our focus well."

Pisgah sophomore Sawyer Belue then picked off Eagles sophomore quarterback Lex Burns to give the ball back to Pisgah.

After exchanging turnovers, Pisgah took over deep in East Henderson territory, just 30 yards from pay dirt.

Sophomore quarterback Aaron Clark bounced back from the interception with a 30-yard touchdown pass to Belue on his second attempt of the night.

"Sawyer has had to step up and be the guy for us out wide," Chappell said. "It's been good to see."

After an East three-and-out, the Bears ran four plays before junior Breydon Reynolds punched it in from six yards out on a fourth-and-goal run to extend the lead to 20-0 in the first quarter.

Just five plays into the second quarter, Clark pitched the ball to Reynolds at the

The score was 34-0 at halftime, and Pisgah's backups got a heavy dose of playing time in the second. Pisgah's 41-14 victory over East Henderson kept the Bears in the hunt for a wild-card playoff berth into the 3A state playoffs.

"It was a good night overall," said Chappell. "You're getting your kids a chance to get out there and play and learn and grow. I'm just excited for

last-second heroics that helped Tuscola walk out a winner.

But the idea of the Mounties walking away with a victory looked unfathomable as Mustangs junior quarterback Jed West — who threw for 253 yards, ran for 97 and scored twice — marched his offense downfield and into Tuscola territory with under 30 seconds to play and down one point.

Smoky Mountain head coach Ricky Brindley put the ball in West's hands as he had done all season.

West scrambled for a first down, but Tuscola's defense denied another on the following three plays and forced Smoky Mountain into a 4th and 10 at Tuscola's 36-yard line with 0:26 remaining in the game.

"Against most teams that throw the ball, you don't run a five-man front because you're going to get gashed. The kind of defense we play, though, we're going to give up a throw here or there," then-Tuscola head coach Chris Brookshire said. "But we knew what we had to do to win. Hats off to our defense."

Facing pressure as he had all night, West found sophomore Jaycee Stillwell at the Tuscola 20-yard line with 0:19 remaining for a first down. The catch put the Mustangs nearly in range for a game-winning field goal.

Faced with an ever-descending game clock, Smoky Mountain relied on the passing game. Even though West couldn't find a completion, Tuscola got a defensive pass interference penalty that put the ball at the 7-yard line.

West dropped back to pass on first down, but the ball fell incomplete.

"On a drive like that, you want to keep West in the pocket," Brookshire said.

Brindley sent in the field goal team with just a little less confidence than at the beginning of the game after the earlier blocked extra point.

The snap. The hold. The ball flew through the air, but senior James Propest blocked the ball with his helmet.

Tuscola's special teams came up again



Mikell Clark-Webb

TURN — Pisgah's Breydon Reynolds cuts and turns up field against East Henderson.

20-yard line, and Reynolds handled the rest. He weaved through the defense for his second touchdown of the night and extended the lead to 27-0.

The Eagles got the ball at their 10-yard line, but Belue had other plans, however, and jumped a route near the line of scrimmage and took it into the end zone. It was Belue's second touchdown and second interception of the game.

where we're at right now."

4. Tuscola narrowly outlasts Smoky Mountain

Date: Oct. 21, 2022

Location: C.E. Weatherby Stadium in Waynesville

In a game that pretty much decided who would be the second-place team in the Mountain 7 Conference behind undefeated West Henderson, neither team wanted to give an inch. But it was some

Top five continues on page 10



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Mikell Clark-Webb

STEP FORWARD — Sophomore quarterback Aaron Clark took a step forward in his performance against Smoky Mountain.

for the Mounties faithful and sealed the ninth-straight victory for the Mountain-eers. Smoky Mountain players fell to the turf in horror at what just happened.

“We spend a lot of time [practicing kick blocks] during the week,” Brookshire said. “We lost some games last year because of special teams, so we emphasized it in the offseason.”

3. Pisgah duels Smoky Mountain in a shootout

Date: Sept. 16, 2022

Location: Smoky Mountain High School in Sylva

The first Mountain 7 Conference game for either team turned into a shootout that came down to the wire, with Smoky Mountain pulling out a narrow 43-40 victory in their home stadium.

Although Pisgah had gotten off to a rough 1-2 start to its season, the Bears rebounded and showed out against their conference foe.

Sophomore quarterback Aaron Clark had a solid game, going 19 for 28 (68% completion) for 298 yards passing and two touchdowns.

“We did some good things [in the passing game],” Pisgah head coach Brett Chappell said post-game. “We had five different receivers catch the ball.”

Pisgah rushed for 201 yards with carries from six different ball carriers. Senior Logan Free was the lead back with over 100 yards rushing and three scores.

But Smoky Mountain, led by senior dual-threat quarterback Jed West, racked up 481 yards of offense — 295 passing and 186 on the ground.

“Defensively, we had a hard time stopping them. They won the line of scrimmage. We’re just not very big up front. We had a couple of injuries at linebackers and had a couple of kids that were playing hurt,” Chappell said.

West found his rhythm at the end of the first half and led the Mustangs on five-straight touchdown drives.

But Pisgah had one last chance to walk out of Sylva with a win: Down three points with 1:42 left in the game and no timeouts, Clark rolled out to pass on a 4th and 3-yards to go and threw the ball to a wide receiver running across

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the middle of the field.
The receiver gained separation from the defender, but the ball sailed just out of reach of the wideout, ensuring a 43-40 Mustangs victory.

Pisgah head coach Brett Chappell said it was a really good ball game all the way through.

“It had twists and turns and just about everything you could ask for. And it came down to the very end, which continues to be the theme for us, and it certainly came to fruition again,” he said.

2. Tuscola wins first playoff game since 2018

Date: Nov. 4, 2022
Location: C.E. Weatherby Stadium in Waynesville

After losing only one regular season game all season, Tuscola got to host its first playoff game since 2016. The Forestview Jaguars came to town, but it didn’t look like the Jaguars were prepared for the rushing attack the Mountaineers ran down their throats.

The Mountaineers ran the ball 47 times for 259 yards while throwing it

nine times for 127 yards.
After Forestview took a 7-0 lead on their first possession, Tuscola’s Jett Benson found fellow-senior Lucas Ritter on a long pass and then junior Bryant Oancea in the endzone to tie the game.

After some back-and-forth, including a slew of penalties, Tuscola took the ball 70 yards in 11 plays, capped by an 8-yard touchdown run from senior Dez Rodriguez. Rodriguez finished the game as the leading rusher with 16 carries for 95 yards for an average of 5.9 yards per carry.

After a Forestview three-and-out, Benson took the punt 60 yards to the Forestview 20-yard line. A face mask penalty and an encroachment call set Benson up six yards from the end zone. He took the snap, ran to his right and found the end zone, extending the second-quarter lead to 21-7.

“Jett’s a leader,” Tuscola head coach Chris Brookshire said. “He’s great at school, in the weight room and on every field that he plays. He’s very com-

Top five continues on page 12



HARD RUNNING — Tuscola running back Jourdyn Butler runs through the Forestview defensive line.

Diana Gates



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petitive. He's got a lot of fire and spunk about him."

Forestview got the ball back with less than two and a half minutes in the first half. Eight plays and 53 yards later, Jaxson Hill threw a 9-yard touchdown pass to Nathan Aguilar. The touchdown cut the lead to one possession going into the halftime break.

After a scoreless third quarter, Tuscola's first fourth-quarter drive featured the longest pass of the game. The Mountaineers executed a double pass on third and six at their own 38-yard line that saw Benson toss a screen pass back to James Propest, who then threw it to Ritter running down the right sideline.

Ritter broke a couple of tackles before being brought down 55 yards later. Ritter hauled in four catches for 116 yards in the game. The Mountaineers capped the drive off with Benson's second rushing touchdown of the night, this time from three yards out. Benson ran 11 times for 72 yards in the game.

Forestview got the ball back, down two scores. The Jaguars threw the ball

more often, trying to push the tempo and get themselves back into the game, but Benson jumped a deep pass that gave the Mounties the ball.

Down 28-14 in the fourth, Forestview's quarterback threw the ball deep down the left side of the field, where Oancea snagged the interception and ran 78 yards to the end zone to secure the win.

Tuscola's 35-14 win marked the first playoff win for the Mounties since 2018 and the first at home since 2016.

1. Tuscola outlasts Pisgah in double overtime

Date: Oct. 14, 2022

Location: C.E. Weatherby Stadium in Waynesville

Along with being the 100th-anniversary of football in Haywood County, a Pisgah win would have tied the record (10 straight wins) for the longest winning streak of the County Clash.

"Nobody's going to break that streak on our watch," said Tuscola head coach Chris Brookshire. "It was a hard-fought game by two teams that didn't want to

lose that game."

Turnovers and trick plays highlighted what turned out to be one of the best games in the history of Haywood County football.

Tuscola senior quarterback Jett Benson threw an interception in the game's opening possession, and Pisgah took advantage of the error, converting a fake punt on fourth down to take an early 7-0 lead.

Both teams punted on their ensuing possession, and Tuscola tied it up 7-7 with a touchdown pass from Benson to senior Lucas Ritter.

It was the start of a string of scores leading to halftime.

Pisgah sophomore quarterback Aaron Clark found sophomore Sawyer Belue in the end zone on the Bears' next possession to go up 14-7.

Tuscola converted a fourth-and-two to keep their ensuing drive alive, and senior tailback Jourdyn Butler found the end zone to cap the first half, but a failed extra point put Tuscola behind 14-13.

Coming out of halftime, both teams

exchanged turnovers on downs, but the Clark to Belue connection put the Bears up 21-13.

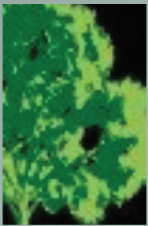
Tuscola's next three possessions ended in a punt, a turnover on downs and an interception in the end zone (caught by Belue), and Pisgah didn't find much success either, punting once and throwing two interceptions (caught by Butler and senior James Propest).

Down eight, Butler scampered 26 yards for a touchdown, but an extra point wouldn't tie the game at 21-19. A fake run by Benson turned into a lateral to Ritter, who forced the ball into the end zone to tie the ball game with 3:34 remaining in the game.

The next Bears possession amounted to zero points, and Tuscola kneeled to send the game into overtime.

Tuscola got the ball first in overtime, with four tries from the 10-yard line to score. Behind two solid runs of 6- and 4-yards, Butler found the end zone to put the Mountaineers up 28-21.

Pisgah put the ball in junior Breydon Reynolds' hands twice, but he couldn't



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punch it in. Clark took the snap on third down and found Belue on the slant to tie the game at 28.

Tuscola then gave senior Dez Rodriguez the chance to make a play, but his two rushes only got the team to the 1-yard line. Benson kept it on a QB keeper on third down and, thanks to a second effort push, reached across the goal line to go up 35-28.

Down seven in double overtime, Reynolds took the ball three straight times for 5-, 2- and 1-yards to give the Bears the ball on the 2-yard line. On fourth down with the game on the line, Clark faked a keeper and lobbed the ball over the line, but the ball fell incomplete.

Tuscola's 35-34 victory brought the Haywood County Cup back to Waynesville for the first time in nine years.

"Everyone of our kids and families and communities in Waynesville are excited," Brookshire said. "This is all about [the players]. They made the plays, and they do all the work. It was an awesome night to be a Mountaineer."



ELUSIVE — Tuscola senior quarterback Jett Benson tries to elude Pisgah defender.

Diana Gates



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Pisgah Bears find their way back home



File photo

PACKED HOUSE — The stands at Pisgah Memorial Stadium are packed hours before the kickoff of the Pisgah/Tuscola football game.

By Aarik Long
along@themountaineer.com

On Aug. 18, the Pisgah Bears take the field at Pisgah Memorial Stadium in Canton for the first time in 875 days.

The team has faced everything you can imagine, from at-home learning due to the Covid pandemic to a flood severely damaging their stadium. Not to mention the closure of the town's primary industry — the Pactiv Evergreen paper mill.

In the past few months, the team has taken to the field for spring practice and 7-on-7 scrimmages. The stadium also hosted a combine for some of the top athletes in Western North Carolina in the spring.

But there is one thing they have not gotten to do yet.

"Every little thing that we are doing now is just one more piece back to being normal again," Pisgah head coach Brett Chappell said. "The only thing we haven't

done is play under the lights. That's the next big thing for us."

That all changes when the Black Bears welcome the Brevard Blue Devils to Canton on Aug. 18.

"The Brevard game is going to be such a big game coming out of the gates, especially being at home," Chappell said. "I'm hoping we have a really big crowd. I hope our people come out and support our kids their first time back at home and let our kids feel what it's like to be in that atmosphere."

Last season's meeting was a one-score game. Pisgah drove downfield with a chance to win but came up just short to open their year with a loss.

This year, Pisgah looks to change that in front of what is sure to be a riled-up crowd.

Some key starters on this Black Bears team have never stepped foot on the field at Pisgah Memorial Stadium with a crowd in the bleachers. For example, junior

quarterback Aaron Clark was entering his freshman season when the flooding hit.

"It's so special," Clark said. "It feels even more special because I have never played on it ... I've never had a home field in high school. To be out here with everyone [for spring practice] is great. It finally

feels like home to me."

Senior Breydon Reynolds said that it never really felt the same practicing at the practice field adjacent to the high school.

"It feels like home," Reynolds said. "Up there, it's just not the same."

The Bears will get to stay close to home this season. The longest trip is an 85-mile ride to Hayesville.

"We wanted to try to stay as close as we could," Chappell said. "We're kind of in the middle of the conference. We've got Hampton (Tennessee) at home. We go to Hayesville. Enka is away, but it's close. It'll be nice not to have to travel as far. I think that will help to be able to stay in your own locker rooms."

Despite all of the adversity they faced, the senior group has fought to the state playoffs every year.

"This group of seniors has done a very good job," Chappell said. "They've been good leaders for us in the offseason. They were very active and have been at just about all of our workouts. I'm excited about what they bring to the table. They've had a lot of success."

The first home game of the season will be more than just a game. It will be a community event, a gathering to celebrate overcoming the adversity the team and the community has fought through and a chance for the team and the community to show their Mill Town pride.

"I'm excited to get this team back together on the field," Chappell said.



Mikell Clark-Webb

HOMETOWN FEELING — The starting offense runs plays as assistant coach Trevor Seibert (in black shirt) watches on. The Pisgah football team has started practicing at Pisgah Memorial Stadium for the first time since 2021.



Pisgah Bears Varsity Football Roster 2023-24

Name Pos. Gr.

1 Breydon Reynolds SS, WR Sr.	12 Aaron Clark QB, FS, SS Jr.	45 Hudson Smith FB, OLB, MLB Sr.	68 David Brooks Jr.
3 Sawyer Belue WR, CB Jr.	13 Matthew Bennett WR, OLB Sr.	50 Brody Hanson G, DT Sr.	69 Camden Edwards T, DT Sr.
4 Jake Lowery Jr.	20 Cuyler Franklin WR, SS Sr.	52 Preston Wright Jr.	70 Jason Robertson Jr.
5 Matthew Mehaffey So.	21 Cadden Davis WR, CB Sr.	54 Scott Thompson Sr.	72 Zachary Ledford Jr.
8 Walker Fox WR, CB, K Sr.	22 Landon Pope So.	55 Kole Smathers G, DE Sr.	77 Eli Hyman G, DT Sr.
10 Tytus Bridges OLB, FB Sr.	24 Carter Browning MLB, RB Jr.	63 Hayden Ledford Jr.	79 Jonathan Starling DT, T Sr.
11 Kenyon Moore Jr.	33 Eli Griffith WR, SS Sr.	64 Austin Lawrence DE, G Sr.	81 Ty Upton WR, DE Sr.
	42 Jaxon Bautista So.	65 Robbie Hensley Jr.	89 Ben Frazier Jr.
	44 Jake Henson TE, DE Sr.	67 John Frazier Jr.	99 Dominick Messer Jr.

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Five Pisgah players to watch

By Aarik Long

along@themountaineer.com

Pisgah endured growing pains last season by starting a slew of talented but inexperienced sophomore players. Despite some rough games, the group pushed through and made the state playoffs.

Now last year's young players have one additional season of experience on their cleats and are ready to make a push against some of the conference's top teams.

Here are the top five Pisgah Bears to watch this season:

Sawyer Belue

- Class: Junior
- Position: Cornerback/Wide Receiver
- Height: 5'10
- Weight: 155 pounds
- 2022 Honors: All-Mountain 7 Conference

Belue had one heck of a sophomore season. In addition to his all-conference honors, the cornerback grabbed seven interceptions. Not only is that number astounding for ten games, it was tied for the second highest total in the state last year.

That East Henderson game was a big one for Belue, as well. The then-sophomore grabbed two interceptions, taking one back for a touchdown. He added a 30-yard touchdown catch to his tally to show his talents are not limited to just the defensive side of the ball.

Like Clark, Belue was named one of the top players in Western North Carolina to watch by the Asheville Citizen Times heading into this season.

Tytus Bridges

- Class: Senior
- Position: Linebacker/Fullback
- Height: 6'1
- Weight: 205 pounds

Bridges will help fill out a very good linebacker core for the Bears. The group will present challenges to opposition offenses no matter which way you cut it.

On offense, the 205 pound senior could provide some utility in short yardage situations to plow through the line and pick up first downs or touchdowns when needed.



Mikell Clark-Webb

WATCHLIST — Pisgah junior linebacker Carter Browning was named one of Western North Carolina's linebackers to watch in 2023 by The Citizen-Times in Asheville.

Carter Browning

- Class: Junior
- Position: Linebacker/Running Back
- Height: 5'9
- Weight: 205 pounds

Browning served as one of the top linebackers in Western North Carolina last season and will likely keep that form coming into this season. As a sophomore, Browning picked up over 100 tackles and four sacks.

This was enough to see him named to the Asheville Citizen Times' Western Carolina watch list for the 2023 season.

His work on the offensive side of the ball will likely be just as important as his ability to cover the middle of the field on defense. His ability to run the ball was shown last season after some late season injuries.

Aaron Clark

- Class: Junior
- Position: Quarterback
- Height: 6'0

- Weight: 170 pounds
- 2022 Honors: All-Mountain 7 Conference

Clark comes into the year as a junior signal caller with a full season already under his belt. As a sophomore, he completed 61% of his passes for 1,055 yards and 11 touchdowns. Clark had moments where he showed how special of a talent he could be. In the conference opener against Smoky Mountain, he threw for two touchdowns and over 300 yards against one of the top teams in the Mountain 7 last season.

Prior to this season, the Asheville Citizen Times named Clark one of the top quarterbacks to watch this season across all of Western North Carolina. This season will be a big year for Clark as he looks to take the next steps toward being one of the top quarterbacks in the area.

Breydon Reynolds

- Class: Senior
- Position: Safety/Wide Receiver

- Height: 6'0
- Weight: 170 pounds
- 2022 Honors: All-Mountain 7 Conference

Last season, Reynolds was a force on both sides of the ball. Once he got the ball in his hands, it was hard to keep him out of the end zone. He also served as an option out of the backfield on numerous occasions, making him a true plug and play athlete.

On defense, he was able to lock down receivers and grab a handful of picks. Reynolds will be a key part of the secondary that will see a lot of action against a few offenses in conference that look to be pass heavy this season.

Last season, he showed his big game potential numerous times, most notably in the game against East Henderson. Reynolds rushed for three touchdowns and grabbed an interception in the blowout win.



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Expectations are high for junior varsity Bears

By Tyler Auffhammer
tauffhammer@themountaineer.com

The future for football looks bright in Canton. Pisgah's junior varsity team has not lost a game in nearly three full seasons and went 8-0 in 2022 on it's way to another Mountain 7 Conference title.

Varsity head coach Brett Chappell said much of the team's historic success comes from the way the team coaches its players: Pisgah coaches and practices the varsity and JV teams together.

"It's not done in very many places. We've done it this way ever since I've been here. I did it at East Henderson for years, as well," Chappell said. "You get a chance to have those relationships a lot earlier with these kids and our coach-

es. They have really solid coaching, and they're healing the same thing for four years instead of two years."

Chappell said it can be beneficial to let players develop at the JV level, especially when they're receiving the same coaching and building rapport with their teammates.

"Some programs will pull up sophomores and freshmen more so than they need to, and they will tell you that it gives them a chance to get used to the varsity level quicker. They're right; it does," Chappell said. "I feel like it's been more beneficial for us to keep those groups together and have those successes all the way through."

The success is undeniable. In Chappell's 10 years as head coach, Pisgah var-

sity and JV programs have won 12 conference championships total — five in a row with the JVs.

Chappell said he tries to keep the JV players in groups.

We try not to pull from those sophomores if we can keep that group together," he said. "It gives us an advantage. I feel like our JVs are probably more advanced technique-wise than maybe some other JV programs."

Chappell said the "Pisgah way" has its drawbacks.

"You're asking an awful lot from your coaches. You're asking them to coach hard on Thursday and Friday nights. There's no easy way around that. Our guys have been good about doing both and juggling both

programs," he said.

Pisgah's JV team has not lost a game since an 18-7 loss to Tuscola in 2020. That kind of resume creates a lot of high expectations heading into this season. Chappell said a conference championship is the expectation of every JV team.

"When we bring both middle schools together, that's the first thing we talk about," Chappell said. "They see what those JV records are, and they see the conference championships. It's understood that is the expectation."

And every decision made about the JV program matters for the varsity team, too.

"The successes we've had at the varsity level start with the success that we have at the JV level," Chappell said.



Pisgah Bears Junior Varsity Football Roster 2023-24

Name Gr.

1 Ayden Rana Fr.
2 Dominic Carver So.
3 Mason Putnam So.
4 Maddox Wright So.
5 Luke Griffith Fr.
8 Miguel Gamez So.
10 Mason Sims Fr.
11 Chris Ostrowski So.
12 Keaten Mason Fr.

13 Ari Blakenship So.
19 Aiden Harris Fr.
20 Levi Early So.
21 Jacob Cruz-Reyes So.
22 Kane Bryson Jr.
24 Camden Yawn Fr.
25 Antwan Allison Fr.
30 Krew Plemmons Fr.
32 Hunter Nelson So.
34 Landon Wilson So.
40 Karson Sartori So.

44 Logan Williams So.
45 Jacob Trull So.
47 Isaiah Warren So.
48 Terry Ramey Fr.
49 Strawder Capps Fr.
50 Zach Shoaf So.
52 Jacoby Head Fr.
54 Jordan Capps So.
55 Luka Francis So.
56 Nick Messer Fr.
63 Nevan Browning So.

64 Peyton Pressely Fr.
65 Jayse Creson So.
67 Diesel Chambers Fr.
68 Roan Looman Fr.
69 Jared Capps Fr.
71 Carson Riley Fr.
75 Malachi Sawyer So.
77 Harris McClure So.
89 CJ Webb So.

Pisgah cheerleaders ready to support the Bears

By Payton Renegar

Staff writer

Pisgah's cheerleaders will cheer for the football team this fall at Pisgah Memorial Stadium — something no girl on the team has done yet.

Many of them have not even stepped foot on the field until recently, thanks to the COVID pandemic during their freshman year in 2020 and the flood that devastated the Canton community and destroyed the field in 2021.

"Being on that field on a Friday night with lights shining down on you, and there's a whole stadium screaming, is the biggest adrenaline rush, and it's the best feeling in the world," Pisgah's head cheer coach Morgan Smith said. "For them not to have been able to feel that has been very hard as a coach."

These back-to-back state championships have more in sight than a football game, however. They'll defend their state title this winter after the football season concludes.

Smith said that she won the state softball championship as an athlete at Pisgah, but winning a state championship as a coach felt better because she helped her athletes attain one of the greatest high school achievements.

The squad's championship was hard fought in the face of adversity. Coinciding with the setbacks, the lack of practice space inhibited the girls from practicing their routines in full.

However, Smith said that the school supports the team, which helps them endure the challenges they've faced over the past two seasons.

"Our athletic director [Heidi Morgan] does a great job at making sure we always have somewhere to practice that is safe for our girls," she said.

In addition to the struggle for practice space, the lack of accessible all-star cheerleading gyms in the area makes it difficult for girls to come to high school with the techniques that Pisgah's competitors have.

The cheer team goes through an in-



Mikell Clark-Webb

LEADING THE CHEER — Pisgah cheerleader Emeri Wright cheers during a basketball game in 2022. She'll be one of the team's captains in 2023 as the team returns to Pisgah Memorial Stadium.

tense workout regimen to prepare for the season — lasting from August until March.

All-State cheerleader and captain Emeri Wright explained that the athletes must develop muscles to perform to the best of their abilities. They throw their teammates into the air, tumble and push themselves no matter the circumstances, she said.

"I mean, she's not going to go up by the grace of God," Wright said. "You've got to have muscles. Some people underestimate [that] you're

lifting an adult up in the air with only three people under them."

The team's other captain, Savannah Garnes, said her sights are set on another state championship while they strengthen themselves as a team and individuals.

"We have an amazing team this year, and I know that each one of us will give it our all this season," she said.

The girls continue to grow closer to one another as they strengthen their skills as a team. Smith said that her

cheer coach in high school, Tammy Ensley, inspired her coaching style.

The squad acts as a sisterhood for the girls, Smith said, preaching the importance of leadership and hard work.

As the girls zero in on a third championship title, they stress the importance of winning as a family and push themselves to the limit at practice.

"Sometimes they amaze me at the things they can do," Smith said. "No matter how bad it hurts, no matter how tired you are, you still have to do it, and you have to give it your all."

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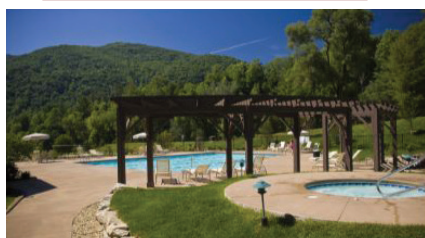
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Jonathan Crompton's career comes full circle

By Tyler Auffhammer
tauffhammer@themountaineer.com

When Tuscola head football coach Jonathan Crompton steps onto the field at C.E. Weatherby Stadium on Aug. 18 for the team's first regular-season game against Asheville, it will be the first time in a long time.

"It's almost like a sigh of relief, coming home," he said. "I enjoy being here. My family is from here, and my wife's family is from here. It'll be fun to be able to do it in front of family and friends and be out in the community."

Crompton built a five-star prep resume in 2003 and 2004 as the starting quarterback of the Mountaineers, including two decisive wins over Pisgah, back-to-back playoff berths and a Parade All-American selection.

A four-year collegiate career at the University of Tennessee was followed by a fifth-round selection in the 2010 NFL Draft by the San Diego Chargers.

Crompton said he could have never imagined he would be back at Tuscola, albeit as a coach this time around.

"I left for school at 17 years old. You didn't know what you were eating for dinner that night," he said. "I am honored and thankful to be here, for sure. The history here is second to none."

Crompton spent last season as offensive coordinator at West Henderson, which became known for its potent aerial attack.

When he arrived at Tuscola, he inherited a team built around the run game and assistant coaches that found a lot of success doing so last season.

"It's been a learning curve for them to learn our system, but as far as helping me get acclimated, it's been great. I've got a good staff," Crompton said. "Every time there's a coaching turnover, everybody's got to learn everybody."

Thankfully, Crompton wasn't unfamiliar with some of the coaches on his staff. Coaches Austin Chambers and Zach Shepherd are Tuscola alums, too. Crompton and Shepherd even graduated together. And Crompton said he's known coach Austin Sluder's family his entire life, despite never meeting Sluder.

"It definitely helped," Crompton said. "We've solidified what we need to. It's going to be a good season as far as working together."

Crompton also has a number of experienced players to teach his new system to this offseason. He said they've done a great job of taking it all in stride.

"The kids are working their butts off continually. I'm excited for them to showcase what they've worked for all off-season. This is not about me or one coach or player on this team. It's a collective effort. They've bought into that," Crompton said.

When asked about seniors like Stephen Brooks, Bryant Oancea, Sy-eed



Diana Gates

KICKERS — Tuscola head football coach Jonathan Crompton speaks to quarterback Jed West during a 2023 preseason practice.

Jackson and K.J. Vang, Crompton said their leadership has been invaluable.

"They've worked their butts off this offseason studying the playbook, learning how we do things. I'm glad they're on our team," he said. "From a leadership role, they've done a tremendous job, buying into what we do, buying into the culture, buying into the standard that we have here now."

Despite his lengthy collegiate and professional resume, Crompton said he'd rather the games not be about him anymore.

"I've been fortunate enough to do it for a long time in my life, and now it's time for me to be able to help the younger generation, let them enjoy it and put their stamp on the game," he said.



Diana Gates

Tuscola head football coach Jonathan Crompton speaks to his team at the end of a preseason practice.



Tuscola Mountaineers Varsity Football Roster 2023-24

Name Pos. Gr.

0 Jude Delcambre WR, DB Sr.
1 Griffin Wilson RB, DB Sr.
2 Amos Rich WR So.
3 Bridger Jones TE, LB Jr.
4 Cooper Williamson RB Jr.
5 Jonas Howard WR, DB Jr.
6 Sam Decker WR, DB Jr.
7 Gavin Langley RB, LB Jr.
8 Jed West QB Sr.
9 Julius Albarren DL Jr.

10 Hudson Blackburn LB Sr.
11 Ty Walker DB, RB Fr.
12 Brandon Jordan DB, WR So.
13 Bryant Oancea WR, DB Sr.
14 Kj Vang CB Sr.
15 Chris Wells K Jr.
16 Jeremy Horton WR, DB So.
17 Jeb Garner DL Sr.
18 Bo West QB Fr.
19 Syeed Jackson LB Sr.
20 Jesus Gonzalez WR, DB Sr.
21 Aaron Wyatt WR, DB Sr.

22 Isaiah Hyatt WR, DB Fr.
23 Easton Edwards LB So.
26 Walker Bolden LB Jr.
33 August Fama RB Fr.
34 Bryson Haynes LB So.
50 Dustin Moore OL, DL Jr.
51 Avery Messer OL So.
52 Charlie Greene OL, DL Sr.
53 Conner Song DL, OL So.
54 Stephen Brooks OL Sr.
55 David Bowman OL, DL Jr.
55 David Bowman FB, DE Jr.

56 Iann Balok OL, DL Jr.
57 Brian Michua OL, DL Sr.
58 Lucas Rhinehart OL, DL So.
61 Jackson Sutton DL, OL Sr.
64 Odi Garrido OL, DL Sr.
65 Jesse Bledsoe DL Jr.
68 Jaxon Mathis OL, DL Jr.
69 Zak Rathbone OL, DL Jr.
72 Josh Krueger OL Sr.
73 Bryce Causby OL, DL So.
77 Alex Caldwell OL So.
88 Canaan Gentry WR Jr.

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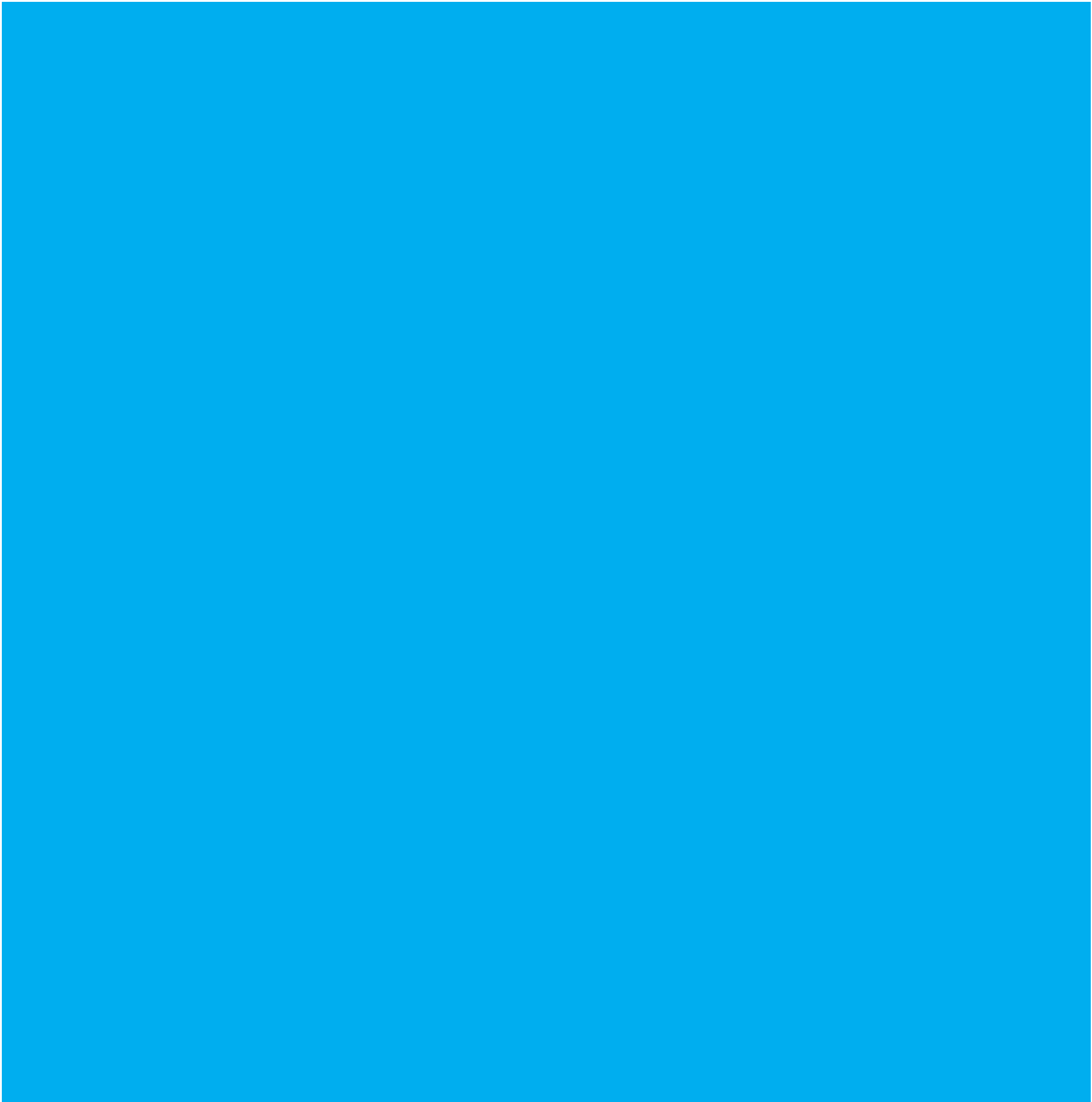


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Five Tuscola players to watch

By Tyler Auffhammer

tauffhammer@themountaineer.com

Tuscola graduated 22 senior football players last season, leaving a gap on both sides of the ball heading into 2023. Thankfully, the Mountaineers have a solid core of talented players that will look to step up and lead Tuscola to another successful year.

Here are our top five Tuscola players to watch this season:

Stephen Brooks

- Class: Senior
- Position: Offensive Line
- Height: 6' 4"
- Weight: 305 lbs.
- 2022 Honors: Second Team All-State (HighSchoolOT.com), All-Mountain 7 Conference

Who was running behind Tuscola's massive offensive line didn't matter much last season. The Mountaineers' offense rushed for nearly 3,200 yards (265 yards/game) at an average of 6.3 yards per carry. And it wasn't just pushing the pile behind a bell cow back: the Mountaineers fielded a three-head monster at tailback.

Senior Stephen Brooks, a second-team all-state selection by HighSchoolOT.com, was a major factor in why Tuscola's rushing attack worked so well. Standing at 6 feet, 4 inches and weighing over 300 pounds, the senior will be relied on as one of the leaders on the offensive line, especially after Graham McClelland transferred to Rabun Gap-Nacoochee this offseason.

Bryant Oancea

- Class: Senior
- Position: Wide Receiver
- Height: 6' 3"
- Weight: 175 lbs.
- 2022 Honors: All-Mountain 7 Conference

You'll be sorely disappointed if you judge senior wide receiver Bryant Oancea's 2022 campaign based purely on his statistics. He hauled in

14 receptions for 223 yards and four touchdowns last season, limited by one of the top running games in Western North Carolina. But the receiver put his nose down, blocked game-in, game-out, and could be rewarded this season with the arrival of new head coach Jonathan Crompton.

As offensive coordinator at West Henderson last season, Crompton coordinated one of WNC's best aerial attacks. Junior wideout Truitt Manuel was the primary beneficiary of Crompton's offense, amassing 93 catches for nearly 1,400 yards and an unreal 27 receiving touchdowns. If the 6-foot, 3-inch Oancea can study the playbook and find a connection with his new quarterback, the sky is the limit for him this season.

Sy-eed Jackson

- Class: Senior
- Position: Edge Defender
- Height: 6' 3"
- Weight: 200 lbs.
- 2022 Honors: All-Mountain 7 Conference

As a junior, Sy-eed Jackson burst onto the scene as one of the Mountaineers' top edge defenders. The junior linebacker found consistent pressure all season on his way to 35 total tackles, including 12 tackles for loss. One of the 6-foot-3, 200-pound linebacker's best games was against East Henderson when he tallied and strip-sack of the Eagles quarterback.

After Tuscola lost 22 seniors to graduation last spring, Jackson will be one of the leaders of the team's

defense in his senior campaign. If his burst and acceleration remain the same, Jackson can only improve as a senior, thanks to a year of experience in 2022. I wouldn't be surprised to see Tuscola use Jackson in multiple positions, from edge rusher to drop-back, cover-ball linebacker in space.

K.J. Vang

- Class: Senior
- Position: Defensive Back
- Height: 5' 6"
- Weight: 125 lbs.

What K.J. Vang lacks in prototypical size, he makes up for with athleticism. The defender snagged two interceptions last season as a junior and racked up 41 solo tackles. With the graduation of two of Tuscola's top backend defenders, expect Vang to step in as one of the starting defensive backs on day one. Plus, he moonlights as a shifty receiver and could crack the lineup in Crompton's new-look offense.

Jed West

- Class: Senior
- Position: Quarterback
- Height: 6' 1"
- Weight: 175 lbs.
- 2022 Honors: All-Mountain 7 Conference

Jed West's much-anticipated arrival in Waynesville gives the Mountaineers a solidified dual-threat at quarterback coming into head coach Jonathan Crompton's first season as head coach. Last season with Smoky Mountain, West completed 60% of his passes and threw for more than 2,400 yards and 23 touchdowns last season. He also rushed for 902 yards and eight touchdowns. Tuscola narrowly beat West's Mustangs last season thanks to a blocked field goal, but West accounted for 350 all-purpose yards and two touchdowns in the game. If he can get acclimated quickly, expect big things from West this season.



Diana Gates

WATCHLIST — Tuscola senior offensive lineman Stephen Brooks has been named one of Western North Carolina's offensive linemen to watch in 2023 by The Citizen-Times in Asheville.

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Tuscola junior varsity team looks to improve in 2023



Diana Gates

STIFF ARM — Tuscola junior varsity player Eli Freeman carries the ball versus West Henderson in 2022.

By Tyler Auffhammer
tauffhammer@themountaineer.com

Tuscola's junior varsity team went 3-6 last season, but new head coach Jonathan Crompton said winning games begins with building young men.

"It's not always about wins and losses. They are huge, but it's about making sure they get better on and off the field and about growing up as an individual in their teenage years," Crompton said. "We're football coaches but we're also mentors to the kids, as well. We choose to do it positively. Winning is huge, but it's not the ultimate end goal."

As with any new season, the JV Mountaineers will have a new crop of freshman players to get up to speed. Coinciding with Crompton's arrival, it

gives the team an opportunity to move forward as one unit.

"In general, everybody's bought into what we do system-wise, program-wise, culture-wise, and they've done a tremendous job getting ready for the moment," Crompton said.

As part of building the JV program, Crompton said Tuscola is working the JVs with the varsity team.

"We work both varsity and JV because they're going to be coached by our guys when they move up. It's a familiarity with who is coaching you," he said.

Crompton said there is less learning curve for the JV players who move up when they've spent their first years learning under varsity coaches with varsity players.

"There's always a learning curve



Diana Gates

CATCH AND RUN — Tuscola junior varsity player Boyd Kirkpatrick catches the ball against Erwin in 2022.

from the football side of it — from the system side, the verbiage, from your coach," Crompton said. "But I think there's an advantage to having one staff to both."

And when players move up to varsity, it will be when they're ready and when the team needs them, Crompton said.

"It depends on the position and where they are as far as the knowledge of the game at said point," he said. "There's a lot of factors that go into it. Physical maturity plays a role in that as well. There's no design model to go by. Every year is going to be different."

Tuscola cheer preps for Friday night lights

By Payton Renegar

Staff writer

The Tuscola cheer team is straightening their bows and getting into the spirit before stepping under the Friday night lights when the football team hosts its first game on Aug. 18.

With a younger team of mostly freshmen and sophomores, head cheer coach Kari Setser is excited to watch the girls grow and develop over the next few years.

“When I cheered [at Tuscola], the stunts and the competitive nature of the competitions of cheer were a lot different,” Setser said. “Now, it’s harder and much more athletic. To see them grow in that ability, but more importantly ... it’s cool to see them mature and develop into independent young women.”

Setser enters her fourth year as Tuscola’s coach, but when she started coaching, Setser said it was a lot like being a new teacher. At first, it was overwhelming, but developing an initial routine and building off of that was helpful to the cheer team’s success in elevating Mountaineer pride.

“Our main goal with school cheer is cheering on the sports teams at our school and boosting spirit,” she said.

Setser said it’s been rewarding to watch the girls grow their athleticism and skill levels and to see girls leave the team carrying the lessons the sport taught them to their next stage of life.

This year’s Tuscola cheer team has six seniors who will show the younger athletes the ropes. However, the excitement for a new season is combated with the bittersweet feeling of cheering in their last season of high school.

Captain Chloe Thompson said she’s learned the importance of hard work, commitment and leaning on others when in need.

“I am someone who likes to be in control,” she said. “Though after flying for many years, I have learned how to push past my fears and put trust in others. Cheering has shown me that I don’t always need to be in control, and it’s OK



Diana Gates

CHEER THEM ON — Tuscola cheerleader Baylee Cabe helps lead a cheer during a football game against Erwin in 2022.

to rely on others.”

Thompson added that although she’s sad that she will leave a place with so many memories, she’s ready to see what the future has in store for her.

Another cheer captain, Madi Hord, said the cheer squad isn’t just a sports team — it doubles as a family that supports the surrounding community.

“In cheer, we don’t only cheer on our teams at different sports events; we also have our own competitions and help

the community with fundraising, youth camps and volunteer activities,” Hord said.

Cheering helped the third captain, Callie Parker, embrace authenticity while she stepped out of familiar territory and entered the cheer world.

“One thing that I want people to know about cheer is that it’ll get you out of your comfort zone and to not be afraid to get out there and try something new,” she said.

This year, the team will have competitions in November and December. The girls prepare for football season while evolving and growing together as a team before the school year starts.

Setser said the program is a sisterhood for the athletes, where the girls can share their passion for cheer.

“And just to build a strong program and keep it going, it’s an honor to be able to give back in that way,” Setser said.



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GO MOUNTIES!



Mountain 7 Conference outlook



Mikell Clark-Webb

RUN HIM DOWN — Pisgah linebacker Tytus Bridges, No. 10, pursues West Henderson quarterback Lukas Kachilo in 2022.

By Tyler Auffhammer

tauffhammer@themountaineer.com

West Henderson ran away with the Mountain 7 Conference title last season, especially after its 55-7 victory over Tuscola to end the regular season. But what teams have made enough improvements in the offseason to make a push this season? And what teams have lost a step in the conference title hunt?

Here's a look at each team in the conference:

West Henderson Falcons

2022 mark: Best team in the Mountain 7.

It was obvious that the Falcons would be a force to be reckoned with in the Mountain 7 Conference in 2022. With Jonathan Crompton (now Tuscola's head coach) as offensive coordinator, the Falcons' offense amassed 3,400 passing yards and 2,100 rushing yards on their way to an undefeated conference season.

Sure thing: Returning seniors will dominate.

The Falcons are blessed with an uber-talented class of seniors this season. On offense, wide receiver Truitt Manuel leads the charge after catching 92 passes

for 1,391 yards and an other-worldly 27 touchdowns. I wouldn't want to be an opposing DB lined up against him. And on defense, Eben Mann amassed 109 tackles, 12 tackles-for-loss and eight sacks as a junior. If he can return to form or, to put an even scarier thought in your mind, improve on his junior season, he'll be nearly unstoppable.

Question mark: Who will throw the ball?

Quarterback Lukas Kachilo, who put up a 43-9 touchdown-to-interception ratio as a senior, has graduated and enrolled at Gardner-Webb University, so who will throw the ball? West Henderson's junior varsity team had two primary quarterbacks last season — Cade Young and Brayden Settles — but neither put up the kind of numbers Kachilo did. But if the Falcons can solidify their signal caller situation, they could be in for another big-time run this season.

Expectation: Another conference championship.

Tuscola Mountaineers

2022 mark: Nearly won a conference title.

It was obvious from the first game Tus-

cola played against East Rutherford that the team's success would come on the legs of its three-headed monster at running back. And the Mountaineers found success, a lot of it, winning nine straight until they fell to West Henderson, the conference champion. But Tuscola wasn't done. It won its first-round playoff game, the first in a number of years.

Sure thing: Crompton will sling it.

The Mounties offense fans will see in 2023 will be starkly different than last season, with new head coach and former pro quarterback Jonathan Crompton calling plays. Crompton was offensive coordinator for West Henderson's high-powered air raid offense last year, and the team even found time to post a 1,000-plus yard rusher, too. Crompton will come out slinging against Asheville in week one.

Question mark: Can West execute?

Until the last week of July, no one knew who would execute Crompton's air raid offense for the Mountaineers. Enter Jed West, who left the Smoky Mountain Mustangs and enrolled at Tuscola right before the start of fall practice. Crompton had privately tutored West over the past year, so the intricacies shouldn't be too much for the senior signal caller. But can West execute the Crompton offense like West Henderson's Lukas Kachilo did last year? I think a lot depends on the players around him and how much West is forced to scramble out of the pocket.

Expectation: Fighting for the conference title.

Smoky Mountain Mustangs

2022 mark: Just out of reach of the conference title

Smoky Mountain took future conference champion West Henderson to the brink of a loss but ultimately fell 23-21. And had it not been for a narrow loss to Tuscola, the Mustangs would've likely ended up in second place in the conference. And they did it all behind the arm and legs of quarterback Jed West. But what now?

Sure thing: Isaiah McNeely returns.

As a sophomore in 2021, McNeely

burst onto the scene with a 2,000-yard, 31-touchdown season after only carrying the ball 12 times as a freshman. And in the first six games of last season, the junior tailback averaged 97.6 yards per game with 10 total touchdowns. Then, he was lost to injury. This season, expect McNeely to be back, full-force, with a chip on his shoulder after missing the last half of his junior season. If the line keeps the pile moving, another 2,000-yard year isn't out of the question.

Question mark: Who will throw the ball?

Quarterback Jed West was electric last season, passing and running the ball, especially in the wake of McNeely's injury. He averaged 207 yards passing and 75 yards rushing per game, making him one of the conference's true dual-threats. But that all changed in late July when news broke that West was leaving Smoky Mountain and enrolling at rival Tuscola for his season year. To say this leaves a hole in the Mustangs' plan moving forward is an understatement. The only other play to throw a pass last season was junior Jarek Jones, who completed one 6-yard pass, albeit for a touchdown. Smoky has some work to do.

Expectation: Fighting for a wildcard playoff berth.

Franklin Panthers

2022 mark: Made the playoffs.

Although the Franklin Panthers won three Mountain 7 Conference games last season, those wins all came against teams that finished below the .500 mark in the conference — Pisgah, North Henderson and East Henderson. The Panthers earned a playoff berth but couldn't get anything going against West Rowan.

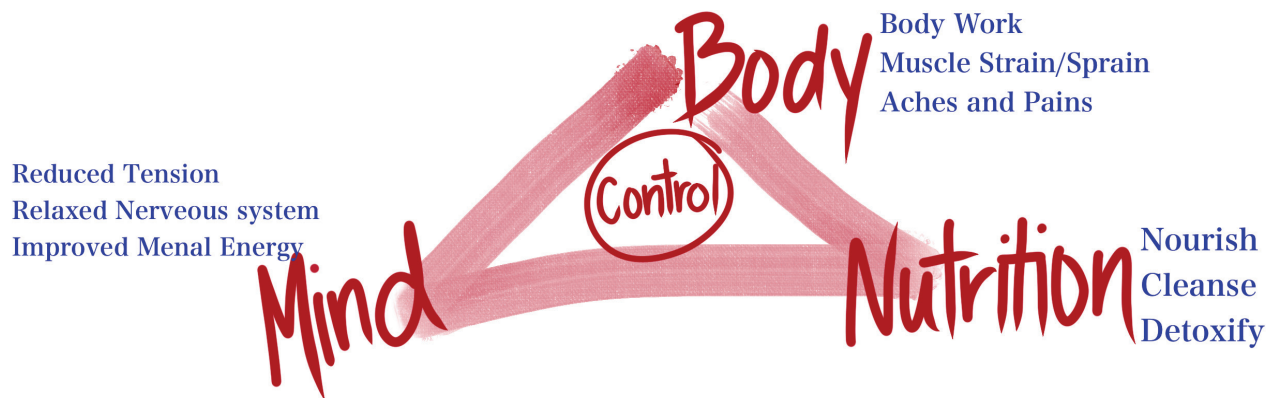
Sure thing: New faces emerge.

Franklin had a senior-class heavy roster last year, and nearly every player who made significant marks has graduated. Panthers fans will see many new faces on both sides of the ball this season, but which ones make an impact remains to be

Mountain 7 continues on page 37

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seen.

Question mark: Can young players get Franklin back to the playoffs?

Despite an underwhelming 2022 season, Franklin managed to make the playoffs and get a chance to play for a state championship. It didn't go well as the Panthers fell 35-7 to West Rowan. Even if young talent can emerge and give the Panthers a fighting chance, can they get the team back into the playoffs?

Expectation: Out of the playoffs.

Pisgah Bears

2022 mark: Made the playoffs with a young team.

Pisgah had talent up and down the roster, but the guys at key positions were young and inexperienced, a choice that didn't pay immediate dividends last season. After losing their first four Mountain 7 Conference games, the Bears beat North and East Henderson to get a playoff game against reigning state champion Dudley.

Sure thing: Experienced players improve.

The Bears played a host of young talent last season — Aaron Clark (QB), Sawyer Belue (WR/DB), Jake Lowery (WR/DB), Carter Browning (LB) — and it took time for them to find their footing and make a splash. But the kids turned the heat on in the final two weeks of the season, which gave hope for a lot of Bears fan returning this season. Expect a leap forward for the Bears, especially on offense.

Question mark: Can Chappell put it all together?

Chappell took a chance playing a lot of young players last season, whether by design or by necessity. But this season there's no excuse. Those young kids have grown up and now they're upperclassmen with high expectations. Can Chappell put their talent to good use and push the Bears into the conference's title hunt?

Expectation: Fighting for a conference championship.

North Henderson Knights

2022 mark: Battling to stay out of the bottom.

North Henderson did not make the playoffs last season, and it was often a struggle to remain competitive. The Knights were tied for the lowest points total in the Mountain 7 Conference with

East Henderson, and their only conference win came against the aforementioned Eagles.

Sure thing: Knights won't make the playoffs.

This team just doesn't have the talent and momentum to make a playoff run, especially in a stacked Mountain 7 Conference. Although some quality players return on both sides of the ball, this team is a year or two away from competing against teams like West Henderson and Franklin.

Question mark: Can Fowler replace Willis?

Three-year starting quarterback Jaxon Willis, despite all of his injury woes over his final two seasons, was a steady presence at quarterback. Replacing him is senior Mason Fowler, who will need to hit the ground running in the non-conference slate to give his team some confidence heading into the grueling conference games.

Expectation: One conference victory against East Henderson.

East Henderson Eagles

2022 mark: Couldn't win one conference game.

East Henderson just can't right the ship. The Eagles have not won more than two games since 2018 when they posted five victories. Although the offense wasn't stellar by any means, the defense was worse — giving up a conference-high 272 points against conference foes.

Sure thing: Eagles will get shut out at least once.

A 51-0 drubbing at the hands of West Henderson was East Henderson's only shutout loss of last season. Expect it to happen at least once this season since the team has graduated many of its top players on both sides of the ball.

Question mark: Can Justice take a step up?

Quarterback Joseph Justice threw for over 1,600 yards last season, third in the Mountain 7 Conference. If he can take a step forward and find receivers he can connect with, the team could post its first three-plus-win season in five years.

Expectation: East Henderson finishes in last place.



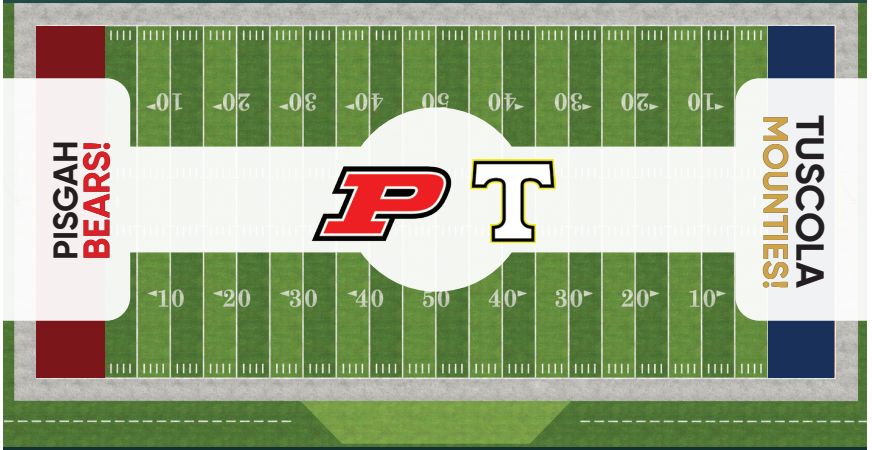
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Pisgah schedule preview

By Aarik Long

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Pisgah's young players fought through adversity and made the state playoffs last season. With Brett Chappell back at the helm, can the Bears make a push for a Mountain 7 Conference championship this season?

Here is everything you need to know about Pisgah's games this season:

Week 1 vs. Brevard Blue Devils

Date & Location: 7:30 p.m. Aug. 18, in Canton.

Last Meeting: Brevard won 21-14 last season at Brevard.

It will be a truly special moment in Canton when the Black Bears take the field at Pisgah Memorial Stadium for the first time in 875 days.

The last time the team played at home was in the 2020-21 spring season when Hendersonville took down Pisgah 23-21.

That summer, flooding would hit Canton hard, putting the stadium out of commission for two seasons.

Now, the Bears return home looking to kick off a promising campaign with a rematch against the Blue Devils from last season. Going into last season's meeting, Pisgah had won four straight in the series. However, that changed after the Blue Devils took a seven-point win.

The loss kicked off a season slightly below the team's expectations, largely due to injuries down the stretch.

Last year's game was a physical battle. Brevard did most of its damage on the ground, picking up 255 of its 336 yards on handoffs.

Last season, Brevard went 5-6 on the year. Their top two rushers, Nahshon Griffin and Jacob Stockton were both seniors last season, giving Pisgah a potential leg up coming into the rematch. Senior quarterback Colt Swicegood returns for one last campaign after throwing for just under 1,000 yards, five touchdowns and two interceptions last season.

Week 2 vs. Enka Jets

Date & Location: 7 p.m. Aug. 25, in Enka.

Last Meeting: Pisgah won 14-7 last season at Enka.

Last season's meeting marked 10 straight wins for the Bears against the Jets, but it was the closest of that entire stretch. It was the only one-possession game during the streak and one of only three to be decided by less than 20 points.

Last year, the Jets struggled, finishing the year 3-6. The previous season, Enka won just four games, their most since 2012.

Quarterback Matthew Rogers took snaps for most of last season but was a senior last year. His backup, Cam Wait, appears primed to take over the signal caller position in his senior season.

If Wait is the starter, Pisgah should be ready. He got his lone start at quarterback last season against the Bears, going 8 of 13 for 43 yards through the air. Caden Robinson and Sawyer Belue both snagged interceptions off of Wait, as well.

The Jets will also be without their only three rushers to break 100 rushing yards on the season: Rogers, Riley Pugh and Ladarrell Mashburn all graduated this past spring.

The next fourth and fifth-best rushers were also seniors.

Last season, the Jets relied heavily on the rushing attack, but it is truly unclear how they will plan to move the ball this season with so many question marks throughout the roster.

The team is returning its top pass catcher, junior Graham Cannon, who caught seven passes for 95 yards last season.

On defense, senior defensive back Sam Waddell returns as the only player with a takeaway last season, grabbing an interception in a 20-14 loss to Erwin.

Week 3 vs. Hampton (Tennessee) Bulldogs



Mikell Clark-Webb

PICK — Pisgah sophomore Sawyer Belue intercepts a Swain County pass. He had two picks on the night.

Date & Location: 7:30 p.m. Sep. 1, in Canton.

Last Meeting: This is the first meeting between the schools.

Last season, the Bulldogs went 9-3, including a 3-0 record in Tennessee's 2A Region 1. The team has won at least eight games in the past four seasons, with 2021 being their most successful campaign, as the team went 11-4.

Week 4 vs. Hayesville Yellow Jackets

Date & Location: 7:30 p.m. Sep. 8, in Hayesville.

Last Meeting: Pisgah won 21-7 in 2014 in Hayesville.

The game will serve as the season's longest road trip for the Bears, sitting just under 85 miles from one school to the other.

Last season, the Yellow Jackets went 7-6. They did not face Pisgah last season

but did square off with the other Haywood County school, falling 42-14 to Tuscola.

Like others on this list, Hayesville's starting signal caller has graduated. Last season, Logan Caldwell completed nearly 60% of passes for 1,362 yards and 15 touchdowns.

The team will be returning its leading rusher, however. Senior Taylor McClure picked up 838 yards and 10 touchdowns on the ground during his junior season. He also caught 23 passes for 321 yards and four touchdowns.

The rising senior also lined up at linebacker and was tied for the most sacks on the team with 1.5 and led the team in forced fumbles and tackles with three and 138.

The secondary for the Yellow Jackets have been kept together with rising juniors Michael Mauney and Tate Roberts

Schedule continues on page 40



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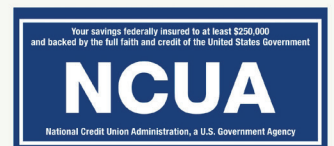
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and rising senior Asher Brown all coming back. Last season, Mauney had three interceptions, while Roberts and Brown each had two.

Week 5 vs. Smoky Mountain Mustangs

Date & Location: 7 p.m. Sep. 15, in Canton.

Last Meeting: Smoky Mountain won 43-40 last year in Sylva.

After knocking out the four-game non-conference schedule, the Bears being the Mountain 7 slate with a meeting with Smoky Mountain. Last year, the Mustangs went 7-5 and 4-2 in Mountain 7 play.

The Mustangs were poised to be a conference title contender this year behind rising senior quarterback Jed West, who finished last season second in the conference in passing yards. West also led the team in rushing.

However, West is no longer a Mustang. Pisgah will still have to face the promising quarterback prospect, however (we'll get to that later).

Rising senior Isaiah McNeely had the second-most rushing yards on last year's team, finishing the year with 586 yards in just six appearances.

The Mustangs also return their top three receivers, including their top pass catcher, Da'Mare Williams, who caught 61 passes for 1,024 yards and 13 touchdowns, all team bests.

On defense, sack leader Antonio Lorenzo is gone. Also graduating were Tanner Gerrity and Brett Richmond, who finished tied for second in interceptions.

Many of the major players on defense are returning outside of those three.

In addition to dominating as a receiver, Williams led the charge in the secondary, grabbing a team-best three interceptions. Rising senior Joe Hill finished second in sacks with two.

Editor's note: Pisgah has a bye week Friday, Sept. 22.

Week 7 vs. Franklin Panthers

Date & Location: 7:30 p.m. Sep. 29, in Canton.

Last Meeting: Franklin won 23-21 last year in Franklin.

Franklin eked out a tight 23-21 win

over the Bears last season to stop a four-year winning streak Pisgah had in the series. It was yet another close loss for the Bears in a year where they seemed to be just one possession away in more games than not.

Graduating classes have hurt some of the teams on Pisgah's schedule, but Franklin took a huge hit with their class.

Starting quarterback Davis Anders was the only signal caller to take snaps last year. He was also number four in rushing yards for the Panthers.

Anders, along with the top three rushers and top four receivers, all graduated this spring.

On defense, three of four players to record a sack have graduated. All four players who combined for all seven interceptions last season have also graduated.

So, who does that leave? On offense, junior Eli Brown and senior Ashton Shope are the only returning players with touchdowns from last season.

On defense, the strength will certainly come from the defensive line, with returning seniors Gabe Nickerson and Jacob Gibson leading the team last season with eight tackles for loss each.

Week 8 vs. West Henderson Falcons

Date & Location: 7:30 p.m. Oct. 6, in Hendersonville.

Last Meeting: West Henderson won 45-21 last year in Hendersonville.

The 2022 season was a banner year for the Falcons. One season removed from a 3-8 record and three years after their last winning season, West Henderson put together a perfect 10-0 regular season.

Once playoffs rolled around, they'd win two more before finally losing their first game in the third round of the state playoffs.

The team's success came from quarterback Lukas Kachilo, who completed 72.5% of his passes for 3,380 yards and 43 touchdowns while throwing only nine interceptions. He was also third in rushing yards with 339 and a team-best nine rushing touchdowns.

Kachilo is now playing his ball at Gardner-Webb, leaving a hole to be filled under center.

Despite losing a huge piece of the offense, the firepower is still there.

The team's leading rusher, senior Carson Dimsdale, returns after a season where he racked up 1,087 yards and six touchdowns. The top two receivers, seniors Truitt Manuel and Diego Castro, are set to return for one more run.

Manuel racked up 93 catches for 1,391 receiving yards and 27 touchdowns, while Castro caught 51 passes for 722 yards and eight touchdowns.

On defense, the team's leading pass rusher, senior Eben Mann, is back after a season with team bests eight sacks and 12 tackles for loss. Senior Finley Sullivan will add to that pass rush with his seven sacks from last season.

The secondary lost their leading ball hawk, but Manuel and Castro did damage on the defensive side, grabbing five and four interceptions, respectively.

Week 9 vs. Tuscola Mountaineers

Date & Location: 7:30 p.m. Oct. 13,

in Waynesville.

Last Meeting: Tuscola won 35-34 (2OT) last season in Waynesville.

The game everyone in Haywood County has circled on their calendars every year — the biggest rivalry in Western North Carolina and arguably in the state and southeast as a whole.

Last season, Tuscola snapped a nine-year losing streak in the series. The game was one of the best the series has seen, a double-overtime thriller settled on a failed two-point conversion attempt.

Things will look differently this year, however. A new coach and quarterback are set to give the Mountaineers an entirely new look offense.

Jonathan Crompton was the mind behind the West Henderson offense last season. Now, the Tuscola graduate and former NFL quarterback is back on The Hill to lead his alma mater.

Joining him is former Smoky Mountain quarterback Jed West, who finished last season second in the conference in

passing yards. West also led the Mustangs in rushing yards.

Last year's Tuscola team went 10-2 with 3,188 rushing yards compared to just 641 passing yards. Expect this to change this year with a new coach and quarterback. Additionally, the top seven players in terms of rushing yards on last year's team have graduated, including running back Dez Rodriguez, who had 1,368 rushing yards, and quarterback Jett Benson, who rushed for 929 yards.

Senior Bryant Oancea will likely be the primary pass catcher in the offense, grabbing a team-best 14 catches for 223 yards and a team-best four touchdown catches last season.

On defense, senior KJ Vang could be a player to watch out for. Last season, he appeared in four games and racked up the third most tackles. He is also the only returning player with an interception.

Senior Sy-eed Jackson is another name to watch after leading the team in tackles for a loss with 12.

Week 10 vs. East Henderson Eagles

Date & Location: 7:30 p.m. Oct. 20, in Canton

Last Meeting: Pisgah won 41-14 in Hendersonville

Last year, the Eagles went 2-8 for their first multi-win season since 2018. It could be a turning point for East Henderson to get back to where they were back in 2012 when they went 11-2 under a familiar face to Pisgah fans — head coach Brett Chappell.

Senior quarterback Joseph Justice re-

turns after a season where he completed 50% of his passes for 1,606 yards.

The team is losing their leading rusher and top four receivers, however. The top receiver returning is sophomore Isaac Schulz, who caught six passes for 101 yards.

The defense is losing a lot of help, too, including its leading tackler, its top two players in tackles for losses, all four players who recorded sacks and three of the four players who recorded an interception.

Junior Leland Prutzman grabbed two interceptions last season.

Week 11 vs. North Henderson Knights

Date & Location: 7:30 p.m. Oct. 27, in Hendersonville.

Last Meeting: Pisgah won 30-3 last year at Erwin High School in Asheville.

This match-up served as the Bears' senior night last season. Typically, senior nights happen during the final home game of the season. However, with no home games on the calendar, this game was played at a neutral site Erwin High School.

This year, the Bears will hit the road to visit the Knights in Hendersonville.

Last year, the Knights went 3-7 behind graduating senior Jaxson Willis under center. The team will be looking to the rushing attack more this season, with senior running back Zion Fauntleroy-Mcdaniel likely having to take much of that responsibility.

Fauntleroy-Mcdaniel will also be a returning weapon on defense, grabbing an interception last season.



Mikell Clark-Webb

DIVE — Pisgah's Jake Lowery dives for a catch against North Henderson.

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Tuscola schedule preview

By Tyler Auffhammer

tauffhammer@themountaineer.com

Coming off a 10-win season in 2022, the Tuscola Mountaineers have high expectations heading into this season. But can the team put it all together under new head coach Jonathan Crompton?

Here is a breakdown of every Tuscola game this season:

Week 1 vs. Asheville Cougars

Date & Location: 7 p.m. Aug. 18, in Waynesville.

Last Meeting: Asheville won 13-12 in 2020 in Asheville.

In what will be head coach Jonathan Crompton's first game carrying the clipboard, the Mountaineers welcome the 4A Asheville Cougars to C.E. Weatherby Stadium.

The Cougars nearly ran the table on their Mountain Athletic Conference foes last season, going 5-1 in the conference with an 8-3 overall record that put Asheville in the playoffs. Although they fell 28-26 to Mount Tabor, the Cougars showed they're a powerhouse in the Western North Carolina area.

Asheville returns its top signal caller and ball carrier this season in sophomore Meek Slydell and senior Nic Williams. Slydell threw for over 1,600 yards and 20 touchdowns last season, while Williams scampered to 780 yards and seven scores.

Where the Cougars will need new faces is at receiver after graduating their top three wideouts — Tayveon Porter, TJ Williams and Jay Avery. Seniors Jeremiah Jones and Tre Codrington, who combined for roughly 400 yards and eight touchdowns last season, will need to step up to help out the team's young quarterback.

On defense, Tay Davis' 20 tackles for loss and Oliver Mooney's 10 sacks will be hard to make up for now that those two players have graduated but look for seniors Noah Shaw (115 tackles, three TFLs, three sacks and two interceptions), a Rutgers commit, and Zy-rque Smith (101 tackles, eight TFLs and one sack) to be the

main two cogs in the Asheville defense.

Also, look for edge Brenton Handsford, a transfer with offers from Appalachian State and Montana, to be a key player on the defensive side.



Diana Gates

72 TRUCKING — Tuscola offensive lineman Josh Krueger prepares to steamroll an East Rutherford defender in 2022.

Week 2 at Polk County Wolverines

Date & Location: 7:30 p.m. Aug. 25, in Columbus.

Last Meeting: Polk County won 25-20 in 2012 in Waynesville.

In the team's first road game of the 2023 campaign, Tuscola will face a foe it hasn't met on the gridiron since 2012 when the Polk County Wolverines defeated the Mountaineers 25-20.

Not only are the rosters completely different from that game over a decade ago, but both teams are sporting new head coaches coming into this season. Polk County will be led by Dustin Fry, who replaced longtime head coach Bruce Ollis.

The Wolverines will also compete at the 1A level this 2023 season after a successful mid-alignment appeal, although the team will remain a Mountain Foothills 7 Conference member.

Polk County went 5-6 overall last year and an even 3-3 in its conference. Although the Wolverines lost by large margins (39-7 vs. Christ School; 40-26 vs. West Henderson), Polk County put up some high-scoring wins (49-7 vs. Landrum; 42-9 East Rutherford), too.

The Wolverines' offense graduated its top passer and rusher graduated, but the top receiver, senior Antonio Simpson, remains. He hauled in 50 receptions for a school-record 1,094 yards and six touchdowns last season, including a school single-game record 224 yards on six catches in the win over Landrum.

Defensively, the Wolverines look to reload, too. The team's top three tacklers, sack leader and interceptions leader have all graduated, leaving behind a bevy of young, unproven players.

Week 3 at McDowell Titans

Date & Location: 7 p.m. Sep. 1, in Marion

Last Meeting: Tuscola won 44-19 in 2016 in Marion

The Mountaineers will go toe-to-toe with the McDowell Titans in Tuscola's second game against a MAC opponent in three weeks.

After going 5-2 to open their 2022 season, the Titans lost three straight games and missed the playoffs. But don't write off McDowell by any means.

The offensive attack is led by junior Josh Ellis, the second-leading rusher in the conference last season with 1,426 yards and nine touchdowns. If he can replicate or even improve on his sophomore campaign, he'll be a force to be reckoned with.

Editor's note: McDowell did not input statistics into Maxpreps.com for the 2022 season, so *The Mountaineer* cannot provide a complete report.

Week 4 vs. Swain County

Maroon Devils

Date & Location: 7:30 p.m. Sep. 8, in Waynesville.

Last Meeting: Tuscola won 37-27 in 2018 in Waynesville.

Although it's been nearly five years since Tuscola and Swain County have met on the gridiron, the connections are hard to ignore.

Maroon Devils' head coach Sherman Holt and offensive coordinator Austin Cooke are former Tuscola assistant coaches, Holt from 2019-22 and Cooke from 2020-2022. And while we cannot confirm he'll be on the football coaching staff, the head coach who led Tuscola to a 10-2 record and a playoff win last season — Chris Brookshire — now works at Swain County Schools.

Last season, Swain County was a thorn in the side of Mountain 7 Conference teams. After taking Smoky Mountain to the brink of a loss before the Mustangs secured a 21-20 victory, Holt and company scored back-to-back wins over Franklin and Pisgah. And the pieces are there to do it again.

Although senior quarterback Reese Winchester won't wow you with passing statistics in Cooke's grind-it-out offense, the signal-caller is a threat. Winchester scored eight touchdowns last season — four on the ground and four through the air.

Seniors Joshua Collins and Josiah Glaspie will share the load at tailback. Collins racked up over 700 yards and four touchdowns, while Glaspie added nearly 500 and seven scores of his own.

Collins is also one of Swain's best defenders, leading the team with 87 tackles, 11.5 tackles for loss and two interceptions (tied with Glaspie for team lead). Look for senior Brandon Frost (51 tackles) and junior Grady Lewis (team-leading three sacks) to step up to fill the void created by last year's seniors.

Schedule continues on page 44



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Editor's note: Tuscola has a bye week Friday, Sept. 15.

Week 6 at Franklin Panthers

Date & Location: 7:30 p.m. Sep. 22, in Franklin.

Last Meeting: Tuscola won 31-7 last year in Waynesville.

Tuscola and Franklin slugged it out at C.E. Weatherby last season in a matchup of two running-oriented offenses. Both teams, however, will need to revamp this season after losing the key cogs in their rushing attacks to graduation.

The Panthers starting quarterback, running back and receivers have all graduated, so this year's offense will field an array of new faces head coach Josh Brooks hopes can fill the gaps.

Senior Ashton Shope and junior Eli Brown are the only two players from last season's roster who scored a touchdown. Shope scored one receiving touchdown, and Brown scored once on the ground.

There are similar deficiencies on defense, but the rotation is more clear. Keep an eye out for seniors Gabe Nickerson (42 tackles, eight tackles for loss) and Jacob Gibson (38 tackles and eight tackles for loss) to make splashes early and often on defense.

Week 7 vs. North Henderson Knights

Date & Location: 7:30 p.m. Sep. 29, in Waynesville.

Last Meeting: Tuscola won 48-10 last year in Hendersonville.

Tuscola cruised to a route of the Knights last season, and it could be more of the same depending on how the rosters shake out again this year.

North Henderson senior quarterback Jaxson Willis has graduated, so look for senior runner Zion Fauntleroy-Mcdaniel to shoulder the offensive load. And since the Knights only averaged eight points per game last season, it'll need to be an increased load from last season.

The Knights return a bevy of other young, experienced players: junior tailback Mason Gasperson, senior wideout Jonathan Costley and senior defender Zach McCraw.

The question is whether these young guys can combine their experience with

their talent and show something on the field this season.

Week 8 at East Henderson Eagles

Date & Location: 7:30 p.m. Oct. 6, in East Flat Rock.

Last Meeting: Tuscola won 42-22 last year in Waynesville.

The Mountaineers won their seventh-straight game by pounding the Eagles at home last season, but can East Henderson turn it around and make it a game this season?

Tuscola blanked East 21-0 in the first quarter, so the Eagles must start fast and stay disciplined to give themselves a chance.

Head coach Bobby James is surely thankful to return senior quarterback Joseph Justice, who threw for over 1,600 yards and 11 touchdowns last season. Unfortunately, however, senior Marcus Mccarson, whose 637 rushing yards and seven touchdowns led the squad, has graduated. And so has the team's top three receivers — Wesley Murray, Robert Adams and Isaac Burleson — who accounted for over 1,400 yards combined and 12 touchdowns.

So James will need to reassemble his offense and, likely, base it around what his senior quarterback does best — sling it.

On defense, top defender Nick Lyons (110 tackles, 11 tackles for loss — both team highs) has graduated, so look for juniors Lucas Lyons (73 tackles and seven tackles for loss) and Leland Prutzman (45 tackles) to provide a stop-gap in his absence.

Week 9 vs. Pisgah Bears

Date & Location: 7:30 p.m. Oct. 13, in Waynesville.

Last Meeting: Tuscola won 35-34 (Double OT) last year in Waynesville.

To say last year's Haywood County Clash was an exciting game would be an understatement — a back-and-forth heavyweight bout highlighted by a double-overtime finish on a last-second lob pass on the goalline that fell just short and ended Pisgah's 10-year inter-county reign.

But this season's clash has all the makings to be another instant classic: the return of Tuscola star quarterback Jonathan

Crompton, this time as a coach; the third-straight clash at Weatherby, thanks to the 2021 floods that destroyed Pisgah's home field; the new-look Mountaineers offense versus the experienced Bears. And the fact that this year's battle takes place on Friday the 13th.

Pisgah's offense returns a slew of experienced and talented players, including junior quarterback Aaron Clark, senior offensive weapon Brayden Reynolds and junior wideout Sawyer Belue.

In a normal year, one may wonder how the Bears' offense will function after the graduation of top receiver Caden Robinson, but after losing him in the final month of the season last year yet still going 2-2, the outlook is good.

On defense, junior linebacker Carter Browning will be the name to watch, along with defensive backs Belue (who nabbed seven interceptions last season) and Jake Lowery.

Week 10 at Smoky Mountain Mustangs

Date & Location: 7:30 p.m. Oct. 20 in Sylva.

Last Meeting: Tuscola won 17-16 last year in Waynesville.

By all accounts, Smoky Mountain could have finished the No. 2 seed in the Mountain 7 Conference behind West Henderson last season, but a blocked field goal gave the Mountaineers a clear shot at finishing in second place.

The only problem for Tuscola is that the Mustangs return nearly every top player from last season except one.

Senior tailback Isiah McNeely looked primed for success (586 yards and 10 touchdowns in six games) before injuries derailed his junior season. He'll look to return 100% healthy and back to 2021 form when he ran for over 2,000 yards and 31 touchdowns.

Senior wide receiver Da'mare Williams, an East Carolina commit, looks to bounce back after failing to record a reception against the Mounties last season. Despite the no-show, Williams tallied 1,024 yards receiving and 13 touchdowns last season. And No. 2 wideout Jayce Stillwell, a junior, was close behind with 644 yards and six scores.

The only missing piece will be senior

quarterback Jed West, who jumped ship to Tuscola in late July after a stellar junior campaign with the Mustangs. West passed for nearly 2,500 yards and 23 touchdowns while leading the team in rushing with 902 yards and eight scores in 2022.

The Mustangs' defense will need to replace Antonio Lorenzo's five-and-a-half sacks and the four interceptions that Tanner Gerrity and Brett Richmond nabbed in their senior seasons. Look for Williams and Stillwell to provide talent on the backend.

Week 11 vs. West Henderson Falcons

Date & Location: 7:30 p.m. Oct. 27, in Waynesville.

Last Meeting: West Henderson won 55-7 last year in Hendersonville.

The Falcons dealt Tuscola its only regular-season loss, a 55-7 rout that put a stamp on who was the dominant Mountain 7 team last season. A lot has changed on both teams this year.

Crompton has jumped ship from coordinating the Falcons' high-powered passing attack to leading his alma mater but has inherited a young and unproven team.

Yet West Henderson also has several questions to answer heading into this season's finale: senior quarterback Lukas Kachilo, who passed for an astounding 3,380 yards and 43 touchdowns last season, will be carrying a clipboard on the sidelines at Gardner-Webb University this season.

Kachilo was a damage-dealer to the Mountaineers in last year's regular-season finale, throwing for a career-high 484 yards and four touchdowns.

Although it's unclear who will fill Kachilo's huge shoes, head coach Paul Whitaker returns some familiar faces this season: wide receiver Truitt Manuel, running back Carson Dimsdale and linebacker Eben Mann, all seniors. Manuel, Mountain 7's Offensive Player of the Year, caught 13 catches for 218 receiving yards and five touchdowns against Tuscola last season.

Mann and the other defenders will have big shoes to fill, too, after the departure of Mountain Co-Defensive Player of the Year Andrew Schultz.



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Top five games to watch this season

By Tyler Auffhammer

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There's 20 varsity footballs, slate on Pisgah and Tuscola this season, including exciting non-conference games, pivotal Mountain 7 matchups and rematches from last season. How can a discerning fan decide which games to attend?

We've broken down the top fives games to watch this season, no matter which side of the county you live:

5. Smoky Mountain at Pisgah

Date & Location: Sep. 15, 2023, in Canton.

Pisgah and Smoky Mountain dueled in a shoutout last season, with both teams getting rime opportunities to pull out their first Mountain 7 Conference victory in the remaining minutes of the game.

Smoky Mountain senior quarterback Jed West, who accounted for 377 all-purpose yards and three touchdowns, calculated a fourth-quarter, game-winning drive to beat the Bears 43-40.

Despite West's production and a big game by running back Isaiah McNeely (128 yards and three TDs), Pisgah's cast of sophomores took the Mustangs to the limit. All that looks like it could change this season.

West is no longer enrolled at Smoky Mountain, and the Bears' talented but inexperienced sophomores are now one year older and hungrier for a shot at a conference crown.

What do the Mustangs do at quarterback, and can Pisgah capitalize on a hamstrung Smoky Mountain team? An early season victory over a contender like the Mustangs could go a long toward putting Pisgah right in the hunt for the outright conference title at the end of the season.

4. West Henderson at Tuscola

Date & Location: Oct. 27, 2023, in Waynesville.

To say West Henderson poured it on Tuscola in 2022's regular-season finale is an understatement. Both teams entered the game a perfect 9-0, but it was clear that the Falcons were the better team from the very first drive.

Senior quarterback Lukas Kachilo put up

302 yards and six touchdowns, with junior wideout Truitt Manuel catching 287 yards and five of the scores. The Tuscola defense just could not keep up. But the Falcons lost Kachillo to graduation and Gardner-Webb University this offseason, so who will step up? And can whoever that is replicate the performance last season, even with Manuel catching passes?

And there's another layer to the storyline, too: Jonathan Crompton, who coordinated the Falcons' aerial attack last year, is now head coach at Tuscola. Can he and his new quarterback (see game No. 3) make

son thanks to a blocked field goal, but then star quarterback Jed West transferred to Tuscola in the offseason.

What made both teams great in last year's game is gone. Tuscola's three-headed running back attack that racked up 234 yards rushing against Smoky Mountain last season has graduated, and one of its top offensive linemen, Graham McLelland, has transferred to Rabun Gap-Nachoochee School. Smoky Mountain, meanwhile, watched its senior signal caller leave the team right before fall practice commenced and is now wearing black and gold in



Diana Gates

LEAP — Tuscola junior receiver Bryant Oancea leaps for the ball as Pisgah junior Breydon Reynolds (No. 1) and sophomore Sawyer Belue (No. 3) defend.

the most of their match-made-in-quarterback-heaven and pull out a win over West Henderson?

The winner of this one could clinch the Mountain 7 Conference championship. That is if a certain Canton team isn't rallying in a late-season push.

3. Tuscola at Smoky Mountain

Date & Location: Oct. 20, 2023, in Sylva.

Talk about a revenge tour. The 2023 matchup of Tuscola and Smoky Mountain has quite the laundry list of reasons for the Mustangs to look for a morale victory against the Mountaineers. Not only did Tuscola edge out a 17-16 victory last sea-

son.

And to make matters worse for West, he'll travel with his new team to Sylva to play in the stadium where he made a name for himself. He'll be relying on new head coach Jonathan Crompton's aerial attack and a slew of talented wide receivers to make sure he leaves Smoky Mountain with a win.

2. Brevard at Pisgah

Date & Location: Aug. 18, 2023, in Canton.

The Brevard Blue Devils shocked Pisgah last season with a 21-14 victory, but this year's Bears have a lot to play for in their first true home game at Pisgah Memo-

rial Stadium in 875 days. To say there's a lot on the line for Pisgah when they invite the entire Canton community into their sacred acre is an understatement.

And Pisgah may have the chops to get a revenge win this season. The Brevard offense that gained over 250 yards on the ground in last season's contest lost its top two rushers to graduation, giving Pisgah an edge in this one.

1. Pisgah at Tuscola

Date & Location: Oct. 13, 2023, in Waynesville.

The one everyone will circle on their calendars happens on Friday the 13th this season, but whether each team is cursed or not depends on how the season shakes out in August and September.

Injuries, position changes and experience will likely show two different teams than are fielded week one in August. But that doesn't mean it won't be another classic rivalry game between Pisgah and Tuscola.

On one hand, you have the Bears, coached by Brett Chappell for the past decade, and then you have the Mountaineers who, after going 10-2 last season, have a new head coach in Jonathan Crompton leading them to the field.

Last year's Mounties authored a 35-34 double overtime upset on the back of their offensive line and running backs. This year's Tuscola offense, now led by senior quarterback Jed West, look to be a pass-first offense akin to last year's West Henderson team. But who he'll throw it to remains a mystery. Thankfully, West can run, too.

Across the field, junior quarterback Aaron Clark will have a tough time deciding which receiver to throw the ball to. He's got a bevy of options in senior Breydon Reynolds and Cadden Davis and juniors Sawyer Belue and Jake Lowery.

This one will come down to defense. Which group can stifle the other team's explosive offense and put to quarterback off-kilter? This is a hard game to predict in August, but by the time we reach Oct. 13th, you can bet this will be the game everybody is watching on Friday night.

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