

New-look Cougars ready for season

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BY MARK PIFER • STAFF WRITER

LOW MOOR — It's the hot topic around the area this fall — school consolidation.

And what brings a community together in these parts?

How about football under the Friday night lights?

The new-look Allegheny Cougars make their much-anticipated debut tomorrow night at Casey Field against the Waynesboro Little Giants.

Coach Will Fields will lead his 41-player roster onto the field in a game that will have just a little more juice than most season openers.

The Allegheny Mountaineers are coming off a 6-5 season where they made the Class 2, Region C playoffs. The Covington Cougars were a playoff team in Class 1, despite going 3-7 in the regular season.

The two programs became one in the offseason.

A new color scheme, new logos, and for the Allegheny kids, a new home field.

Fields said the transition has been a smooth one.

"They all know each other," he said. "They've intermingled in Little League and they know each other through social media. It's a smaller world now than it used to be. There was a little bit of an introductory period, but that's pretty much over. We had good attendance in the weight room and 7 on 7's, so they got a lot of that out. I don't know what the kids from Covington felt like before, obviously, but this just feels the same for me. Every season opener is exciting."

What is new for Fields is a roster that will provide more depth than he ever had as the boss at Bath County or with the Allegheny Mountaineers.

"Yeah, we will have more depth on both sides of the ball," he said. "We will have fewer two-way guys. But I think a lot of those guys will be like one and a half way. They will play probably solid on one side and contribute on the other side. And depending on the guy, it depends on which sides we're talking about."

The Cougars' talented roster includes several players who earned all-district honors, either All-Three Rivers at Allegheny or All-Pioneer at Covington.

The list includes Nate Phillips, Purcel Turner, Neeko Jeter, Rocklynn Phillips, Des Jordan, Joe Rogers, Mark Hunter and Ethan Martin from Covington and Nathen Chapman and Moose Clayton from Allegheny.

Both starting quarterbacks return — Jordan from Covington and Eli Entsminger from Allegheny. Entsminger threw for 632 yards a year ago and controlled an offense that was led by running back Garrett Via, who is now playing at VMI.

Jordan was racking up big numbers in his freshman season at CHS, throwing for 1,359 yards and accounting for 18 touchdowns.

"That's cleared up a little bit," said Fields of the quarterback position. "Eli has an illness that's going to keep him out for I'd say at least another three weeks. He has just recently got back to doing non-padded light running and some throwing. Covington had two young men from last year who are still competing at quarterback with Des Jordan and J'yon Smith."

Jeter is the top returning rusher, gaining 662 yards at Covington, while Turner, who will line up in the slot most of the time for Allegheny, accounted for 555 yards rushing, 54 catches and 750 yards receiving, along with 20 touchdowns.

"We have a lot of guys back there who will get carries and several who have played some varsity football," said Fields. "And we have a lot of pass catchers."

The receiving corps is also boosted by the return of Xzavier Hayslett, who broke his hand last year, and Hunter DePriest, who broke his collarbone.

In the trenches, it will be a huge offensive line that will give the Cougars a huge advantage.

"Big, big," Fields acknowledged.

The biggest of his coaching career? "It's up there," he said.

Caleb Walden (6-foot-4, 275 pounds), Casey Simmons (6-1, 340), Martin (5-9, 240), Nate Phillips (5-10, 220), Hunter (6-2, 290) and E.J. Wright (5-8, 230) are among the offensive line leaders.

"We have a lot of guys who had a good off-season in the weight room," Fields said. "We have some position battles going on."

Chapman and Clayton are expected to lead the defense up front after big seasons a year ago.

Clayton led last year's Mountaineers with 65 tackles and 16 tackles for loss, while Chapman added 15 TFL's and three sacks.

"Moose Clayton, Nathen Chapman, Mark Hunter, Nate Phillips, Evin Chapman, Sarge Persinger, Caleb Walden — we really have two-deep across our four-man defensive line that we feel pretty good about," said Fields. "Hopefully, we can stay healthy and keep those guys fresh and roll a lot of guys on the field."

The Cougars also have depth at the linebacker and defensive back positions.

Rocklynn Phillips and Andrew Cole are the top returning linebackers with 79 and 53 tackles, respectively. Hayden Knighton had three interceptions, while Turner had two in their respective secondaries.

"We have a lot of different guys with a lot of experience who are going to play in those spots," said the coach. "Andrew Cole, Neeko Jeter, Gavin Via, Carter Nicely, Ethan Martin, Rocklynn Phillips, Jay Godfrey, A.J. Godfrey, the Knighton twins, Siemien Brown, Xzavier Hayslett, J'yon Smith, Des Jordan, Purcel Turner — a lot of guys are going to be in there."

The Cougars' regular season schedule features six Three Rivers District games, including a home date with TRD newcomer Patrick County, and non-district matchups with Waynesboro, Fort Defiance, Rockbridge County and Greenbrier East, W.Va.

"The consolidation committee wanted us to start playing Greenbrier East and Rockbridge County since they were in our neighboring counties," Fields said. "That makes sense with us getting back up close to their size."

But for now, it's Friday season opener at Casey Field against the Little Giants that will have everyone's eyes upon it.

"It's the first game, it's exciting," said the coach. "If there's a big crowd there, I think the kids will obviously get a little extra charge out of it. I don't mean to downplay it, but I think a lot of people have this idea that there is this animosity or whatever. I was fairly certain there wouldn't be any of that and there hasn't been any of it."

"I think the kids are not looking at each other as what they used to be," Fields said. "Nothing bonds people together like a common enemy and that's what sports are about. Waynesboro is the enemy now."

'Blessed': Father, son extend baseball bond

July 13, 2023

BY MARK PIFER • STAFF WRITER

COVINGTON — What was scheduled to be a four-day visit has turned out to be a summer to remember for Marcelo Miranda and his son, Lumberjack first baseman Gabe Miranda.

Marcelo and his wife, Sussanne, were visiting in early June, as many Jacks' parents do during the season. But when Sussanne flew back to Orange, Calif., as scheduled, she left a little something behind — her husband.

"Gabriel was struggling at the plate a little bit and I'm in the hotel not doing anything," Marcelo said Monday. "So, I decided to come over and give him some reps in the cage."

"I told Gabriel to tell the coaches that I could throw batting practice for the guys," he continued.

"I did it one day in the cage and the next thing you know, we traveled the following day and I threw BP on the field. Renny (Tolentino, head coach) asked if I wanted to stick around a little longer and help out."

One thing led to another and Dad quickly added Lumberjack assistant coach to his title.

"We were in a bind when it came to throwing batting practice and he volunteered," said

Tolentino, who is in his second year as the Jacks' head coach. "He's done a terrific job."

Miranda is not just any baseball dad.

He played in college, is a veteran high school coach in California, and has links to professional baseball.

"He has some big-league ties, so he has experience in the game," Tolentino said. "He was a clubhouse manager for the Angels in the early 2000s, so he brings some very good knowledge to the club."

Baseball has always been in Marcelo's blood and the chance to spend another season with his son was an opportunity he couldn't turn down. "I was fortunate two years ago — I got to be a dad and I coached for Gabriel's senior year in high school," he said. "That was pretty special. Ever since he was like about four or five, we've been on the field together."

The only part that's changed this summer is the venue. It's the mountains of Virginia instead of the West Coast.

"It's been great," he said. "Obviously, I love baseball and being around the game. And to get the opportunity to be around my son — you can't beat that."

For Gabe, a redshirt-freshman at Texas Christian University last year, having Dad around has added to his summer baseball experience. "He knows my swing just about as good as I do," he said. "I think with him giving me feedback and with us working in the cage every day, it's been really beneficial."

Gabe is hoping a summer in Covington will lead to a spot in the line-up next spring at TCU.

The Horned Frogs are coming off a trip to the College World Series in Omaha this past season.

"I still have a lot of work to do, but my goal is to definitely be the starting guy," Gabe said.

"That's my goal and that's where my head's at going forward."

Regardless of how the rest of his baseball career plays out, the 2023 summer is one both father and son will remember.

"It's special," Gabe reflected. "Not everyone has their dad around, especially a dad who has the baseball background my dad has. I'm fortunate and blessed to have that and thankfully, he's out here coaching and throwing BP every day."

Dontae Miller posts wrestling career win number 100

February 02, 2023

BY MARK PIFER • STAFF WRITER

LOW MOOR — Senior night was an extra special night for Dontae Miller.

Miller joined an exclusive group of Alleghany wrestlers last Wednesday, earning a spot in the 100-win club, in the Mountaineers' 43-33 dual match loss to Greenbrier East.

The Mountaineer senior pinned Spartan Jake Pate late in the first period for win No. 100, becoming just the 14th wrestler in the program to earn the honor.

"I never thought about any records," said Miller, following his match. "I was just thinking about wrestling when I was younger. Once I made it to states, I thought a whole lot more about goals." After Saturday's tournament at Riverheads, Miller's record stands at 36-7 on the season and 102-28 for his career.

In the history-making match last Wednesday, Miller had three, first-period takedowns, building a 6-2 lead before recording the pinfall.

"He's worked hard to make himself better," said Alleghany coach Dale Burdette. "He went to Granby wrestling camp over the summer. He does all the right things. The matches he's lost have been against some pretty tough competition. He hasn't dodged any competition. A lot of times we try to get good matchups for our guys. He has always taken the tough matchup. He welcomes that and that's what has made him better."

Burdette said the accomplishment was made even tougher because it was achieved in just three seasons.

"Dontae wrestled really just three years because he lost his COVID year, he lost his sophomore season," the coach added. "He did it in three years and one of those, of course, he was a freshman. A lot of freshmen don't get a lot of wins, but he got 30. That helps."

Miller reflected on his career and some of the people who helped him along the way.

"Lucas Rogers was a very good wrestler and he showed me how to not worry too much and just go out there and wrestle," he said. "He was a good figure for me in wrestling. But in life, my mom and Marion. I went into foster care and my dad who adopted me, his wife, I've never seen anybody work harder than her."

Ethan Nicely, Sam Rusmisl and Avery Smithers also earned wins on their senior nights.

Smithers won by pinfall in just 18 seconds, while Nicely and Rusmisl posted comeback victories.

Nicely trailed 4-0 after two periods before a pin in the third, while Rusmisl was behind 4-2 late in the second period before a takedown and three back points keyed his 11-5 decision. "Nice to see those two guys turn those matches into wins," Burdette offered. "There were some closely contested matches tonight. It's always good to see your guys come out on top. Those guys work hard."

Also honored on the Mountaineers' senior night were Tyson Kimberlin, Connor Lee, James Nicely and Remington Tucker.

“A really good senior class,” Burdette said. “This is a class that with most of these guys, we’ve been working with for a long time. The majority of these guys have been with us since youth wrestling. We knew that it was going to be a good group many years ago.”

The Mountaineers finished their dual match season with a record of 25-8 and finished the regular season with a sixth-place team finish at the Big Red Invitational Saturday at Riverheads. Miller and Carter Nicely both placed third individually for Alleghany, while Tucker and Caleb Walden placed fourth.

The Mounties will wrestle in the Class 2, Region C tournament on Saturday, Feb. 11, at James River High School.

The top three wrestlers in each weight class at the regional tournament advance to the Class 2 state championships at the Salem Civic Center, Feb. 17-18.

“Once again, we are definitely one of the toughest regions in 2A,” Burdette said. “If you can survive that gauntlet, you always have a shot once you make it to the state tournament.”