

HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL PREP PRACTICE BEGINS TODAY

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Some coaches have their work cut out for them a little more than others when high school football practice opens today around West Virginia.

Take St. Albans' coach Derek Christian.

No team relies on the production from its offensive line more than the Red Dragons, who rode the running game all the way to the Class AAA championship game in 2007. But SA lost four of its five starting linemen last year, and wound up going 4-6 and missing the playoffs for the first time since 2004, Christian's first year.

However, the Dragons are almost right back in the same spot this year. They again must replace four offensive line starters before they begin the season on Sept. 4 at Riverside.

"It's a key area," Christian said. "We've got to find a whole new line again. They were almost all seniors last year. So basically, we're young again - starting over. I guess it goes in cycles."

The Red Dragons, who had turnouts as high as 54 players during the three-week summer practice period, may need to lean on senior running back Markus Guy, who was one of two 1,000-yard rushers during SA's march to the Super Six in Wheeling two years ago.

"Having Markus back, that'll help out a lot," Christian said.

Also returning is senior Wade Walters, who sat out his sophomore and junior seasons to concentrate on baseball. He's expected to take over quarterbacking duties and is one of only a half-dozen seniors expected on the roster.

However, some skill players won't be back. Quarterback-running back Duran Workman transferred to George Washington, quarterback Leon Mitchell - who started much of last season - enrolled at Riverside and running back Michael Hall left for **Nitro**.

"My thing is to coach who's there," Christian said. "If they don't want to be there, then maybe it's for the best."

Christian thinks St. Albans can build with an eye toward the future, using an influx of middle school standouts.

"We've got a good group of young kids coming in," he said. "Hayes won a lot the last couple years, and they were pretty decent players in middle school. Of course, the speed of the game and all that's a lot different.

"There will be some growing pains, but I think it will pay off for us. One good thing about it is that the younger kids coming in have been part of our weight program since they were seventh graders. So they know us and we know most of them. It's been a good core of kids with us lifting weights."

Two Kanawha Valley teams will be guided by first-year coaches this season - Bob Gobel at **Nitro** and Tim Meyers at Herbert Hoover. Each also has some work to do, as the Wildcats went 3-7 last year, and the Huskies 2-8.

The veteran Gobel, who expects a turnout of 35-40 players at **Nitro**, begins his first season as a head coach since he guided Herbert Hoover in 1999. He admitted to feelings of both anxiousness and eagerness.

"It's a little bit of both," he said. "Eagerness this time of year to get with it, and get it going. It's what we do, and what excites us. It's always an exciting time. If it wasn't, then you shouldn't be doing it.

"Obviously, one of the first things we have to do is get to know one another. Of course, going at it twice a day, it doesn't take very long. We want to instill our beliefs, our methods, the way we do things with them. After that, get our basics, our X's and O's done, and work on football."

Only four Valley teams made the playoffs last year, all in Class AAA - state champion South Charleston (14-0), runner-up George Washington (12-2), Capital (10-2) and Hurricane (7-4). No one else posted a winning record.

Teams are allowed to wear pads starting on Friday, but no live contact is allowed until Aug. 11. The first scrimmages or grid-o-ramas are allowed on Aug. 15, and the second sets on Aug. 21-22. The regular season opens the weekend of Aug. 27-29.

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