

MEMPHIS UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OWLS

HEAD COACH: Bobby Alston (18th season)

LAST YEAR'S RECORD: 8-4

REGION: Division 2-AA West

PLAYERS TO WATCH

LB Tim Hart (University of Tennessee commitment ranked third on the team in tackles despite playing in just eight games); DB-WR Thomas Pickens (Committed to Memphis as a DB; will be the Owls' prime pass-target); LB William Rantzow (led the team with 89 tackles, 12 tackles for loss as a junior); RB Bradley Foley (primed to take over from the graduated Colton Neel).

GAMES TO WATCH

Sept. 18 at South Panola (Tigers pasted the Owls last season and this time it will be on the road); Sept. 25 vs. Ridgeway (two schools separated by a ten-minute walk meet for the first time since 2007); Oct. 30 vs. CBHS (Brothers won last year's game on field goal with no time on the clock; Owls haven't forgotten).

DID YOU KNOW

The Owls have ended their season with a loss to Nashville Ensworth four straight years, twice in the D2-AA title game and twice in the semifinals.

SCHEDULE

All games at 7 p.m.

Aug. 21: vs. Central
Aug. 28: vs. Kingsbury
Sept. 4: vs. Olive Branch
Sept. 11: at Grenada (Miss.)
Sept. 18: at South Panola (Miss.)
Sept. 25: vs. Ridgeway
Oct. 2: at St. Benedict*
Oct. 16: at Briarcrest*
Oct. 23: Craigmont
Oct. 30: CBHS*

*—Division 2-AA West Region

2014 RESULTS

lost to Brentwood Academy, 31-14
beat Kingsbury, 47-7
beat Canton (Ohio) McKinley, 33-20
beat Jackson Liberty Tech, 30-12
lost to South Panola (Miss.), 48-9
beat Lafayette (Miss.), 29-24
lost to CBHS, 17-14
beat St. Benedict, 41-3
beat Craigmont, 49-26
beat Briarcrest, 34-0
beat Brentwood Academy, 30-28*

lost to Nashville Ensworth, 27-24**

*—Division 2-AA quarterfinals
**—Division 2-AA semifinals

CATCHING UP WITH LB TIM HART

Who is your football role model?: Can I pick from another sport? The way I play is like Kevin Garnett ... just that intensity. On the field your teammate is your teammate and the opponent is the opponent 24-7. For football, though, (Pittsburgh Steeler) Ryan Shazier is my favorite in terms of how a downhill linebacker plays.

You've committed to UT; why do you think that's a good fit?: I look at what they did with their linebackers last year, especially (all-SEC standout) A.J. Johnson, and I feel like they'll help me progress to where I want to be.

What is the team on your schedule you'd most like to beat?: South Panola. We beat them my sophomore year and it was just an incredible feeling. But last year I didn't play; I had a torn meniscus (and MUS lost 48-9). I think I could have helped a little.

TALENT SHOW

MUS has a few questions, a lot of stars

By John Varlas

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Tim Hart is hard to satisfy.

Hart — the MUS standout linebacker who committed to the University of Tennessee during the summer — said there was nothing really wrong with his team's performance in 2014, which ended with an 8-4 record after falling to Nashville Ensworth in the Division 2-AA state semifinals. It's just that, he's looking for bigger and better this time around.

"That's my takeaway from last year; there's always something different we could have done," he said. "I'm the type of person where even if we won the state championship, I'd be asking if there was something else I could have done. Now, we have to stay hungry and finish."

Which must be music to coach Bobby Alston's ears as the Owls gear up for a run at their third trip to the state championship game in four years.

"Any time you can make it to the state semifinals, you've had a pretty good year," Alston said. "I was pleased with the way we progressed."

DEFENSIVE DIAMONDS

Alston — in his 18th season as head coach — enters the season with some question marks but also with quite a few good answers. That's especially true on defense, where Hart and University of Memphis commitment Thomas Pickens return for their senior seasons.

"Our corners are a little young and maybe a little inexperienced, and they might make some mistakes that cost us at times," Alston said. "But it's a talented group. And some guys have to get comfortable on the D-line, but in the past we've had some success with the same kind of guys we have now."

"(But) Thomas is just a playmaker at safety. And basically our linebacking crew has a chance to be as good as we've ever had."

Hart — a rock-solid 6-1, 214-pounder who ranked third in the team in tackles despite playing in just eight games due to a torn

meniscus — will be joined by William Rantzow and Evan Smith. Another talented linebacker is Jackson Dickinson, who battled injuries for much of last season.

"We've got some good players in that slot," Alston said.

GOOD SKILL SET

There are also some questions on offense. D2-AA Mr. Football lineman winner Drew Richmond is now at Tennessee and running back Colton Neel — the school's all-time touchdown leader — has also graduated.

But — like on defense — Alston is confident in his skill players.

Juniors Cole Middlebrook and Steven Regis and sophomore Bobby Wade were in the race for the starting quarterback duties. And whoever gets the job will have the luxury of throwing to Pickens, who really came on as a receiver toward the end of last season and gives the Owls the field-stretcher they've been lacking since Devin Perry graduated a couple of years ago.

Hart and Josh Smith — whom Alston describes as sort of a hybrid receiver-tight end type — will also help with the pass game. The coach is also high on freshman Maurice Hampton who "has a chance to be the best in the city" in football and who also has major SEC interest as an outfielder.

Bradley Foley figures to get the majority of the carries at running back.

"No one loves Colton Neel more than I do, but Bradley Foley is a good football player," said Alston. "You can't cover Pickens one-on-one. I like our skill guys, we just need to get some guys ready to go on the offensive line."

HE SAID IT

Alston on this year's team camaraderie:

"The chemistry is good and the level of commitment from the boys has been good. I told them (during a pre-season practice), you're not out here right now at 9:15 in the morning because you love football; you're out here because you care about your teammates."

KNOWN COMMODITY

Talented Harding won't take teams by surprise

By John Varlas

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Last year at this time, Harding football coach Ryan Derrick said he wasn't really sure what he had on his hands. But as the coach begins his 10th season at the school, he now has a good idea.

And what he does have has the potential to be pretty darn good.

Despite having to rely on youngsters in several key spots, the Lions reached the postseason for the fourth straight year in 2014, finishing 7-4 after a first-round loss to Donelson Christian Academy in the Division 2-A playoffs.

The success was nice but makes this year's challenges all that much tougher.

"I think it may be a little more hard to duplicate that success this year," Derrick said. "Last year, we were kind of the unknown. Now we have some players that have made a name for themselves."

Added wide receiver-defensive back Calvin Austin, "Oh yeah, the expectations have definitely been raised. Our goal is to make it to state. The coaches tell us 'one game at a time' but that's definitely the goal."

DANDY DUO

The player at Harding who has made the biggest name for himself — literally and figuratively — is offensive lineman Will Lawrence. A starter since his eighth-grade year, the 6-4, 280-pounder heads into his sophomore season with schools like Alabama, Auburn, Florida State, LSU, Michigan and Ohio State among the 30 or so that have offered.

He leads an offensive line that brings back all five starters.

"We're blessed up front, and I think we'll be bigger and stronger," said Derrick. "We'll be junior-heavy up front along with Will."

Another Lion who won't be sneaking up on people is junior receiver Calvin Austin, who was the team's offensive Most Valuable

Player in 2014 after averaging 23 yards per catch and scoring 10 touchdowns.

Austin doubles as a dangerous return man, as does classmate Nick Martin, who led the team with 32 catches while averaging 26.3 yards and scoring once on kickoff returns. The combination — while not big by any stretch — should cause plenty of concern for opposing defensive coordinators.

"Our offensive coordinator (Chad Montgomery) has some ways for me and Nick to get the ball in space and make plays," Austin said. "I'm excited." Added Lawrence, "I think our offense is going to be great."

SOLID CAST RETURNING

One of the team's biggest surprises was quarterback Zach Montgomery, who stepped into the starting role as a freshman and threw for 1,570 yards and 15 scores.

"The talent level and speed is greater at the varsity level, and he did make some mistakes," said Derrick. "But there weren't very many."

If the Lions can put points on the board as expected, they have a chance to win a lot of games because the defense looks promising.

Mason Harwell, a 290-pound junior, had 48 tackles with seven for lost yards and two sacks a year ago. And Derrick is extremely excited about his young linebacker duo of Keilan Hulon (who owns the school record with a 640-pound squat) and 6-1, 220-pounder Carter Heinz.

Austin — a first-team all-district selection after recording 44 tackles and 12 pass breakups — and Martin will anchor the secondary, which lost Carliss Settles to graduation.

HE SAID IT

Derrick on his team's approach to the weight room:

"One of the beautiful things is that you can have a lineman with 30 Division 1 offers (Will Lawrence) and he's not necessarily the strongest player on the team."



NIKKI BOERTMAN/THE COMMERCIAL APPEAL

Harding left tackle Will Lawrence, 6-4, 280 pounds, is just a sophomore but already has scholarship offers from 30 colleges.

HARDING LIONS

HEAD COACH: Ryan Derrick (10th season)

LAST YEAR'S RECORD: 7-4

REGION: Division 2-A West

PLAYERS TO WATCH

OL Will Lawrence (6-4, 280-pound sophomore — who will be starting for the third year — already has offers from some 30 schools); QB Zach Montgomery (did a lot of things well as a freshman starter in 2014); WR-DB Calvin Austin (has the kind of speed you don't often find in D2-A); DL Mason Harwell (290-pounder had seven tackles for loss last year).

GAMES TO WATCH

Sept. 4 vs. FACS (two of the best playmakers in D2 meet as Calvin Austin tangles with the Crusaders' Caleb Johnson); Sept. 18 at Lausanne (must-win game for the Lions' playoff chances); Oct. 30 at ECS (league is extremely balanced this year but the finale at Legends Field could decide first place).

DID YOU KNOW

Calvin Austin was a Best of the Preps track athlete of the year finalist after winning the state championship in the 200 meters at Spring Fling.

SCHEDULE

All games at 7 p.m.

Aug. 21: Wooddale
Aug. 28: at Senatobia
Sept. 4: FACS*
Sept. 18: at Lausanne*
Sept. 25: at Magnolia Heights (Miss.)
Oct. 2: Westwood
Oct. 16: Northpoint*
Oct. 23: at Lancaster Christian
Oct. 30: at ECS*

*—Division 2-A West Region

2014 RESULTS

lost to Friendship Christian, 27-7

beat West Carroll, 38-8

beat FACS, 35-34

beat Bolivar Central, 26-7

lost to ECS, 46-13

beat Booneville (Miss.), 30-22

beat Northpoint, 20-13

beat Oakhaven, 36-0

lost to St. George's, 9-7

beat Lausanne, 41-30

lost to Donelson Christian Academy, 21-7*

*—Division 2-A first round

CATCHING UP WITH OL WILL LAWRENCE

You have about 30 Division I offers already; what's the recruiting process been like?: It's been crazy. There was a point where I went to five lineman camps in like six or seven days ... but I'm really making a lot of good relationships.

Harding puts a great emphasis on its weight program, doesn't it?: Oh yeah, it's huge for us. Even if we don't practice, we'll be in the weight room going pretty hard at it.

You're 6-4 and 280; have you always been the biggest kid around?: Yeah. I don't know how much I weighed when I was born, but I've always been the biggest. I remember when I was playing football in third grade; it felt a little awkward going against players that were so tiny.

PLAYOFF PUSH

Next on Lausanne's agenda: A trip to the postseason

By John Varlas

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Lausanne football coach Kevin Locastro has been around long enough to know that building a successful program comes in stages. And so far, the Lynx are right on schedule.

Locastro's team finished with a 6-4 record last fall, matching the victory total from its first year of varsity competition in 2013. But where the improvement showed was on the scoreboard; after losing its three games by an average of 31.3 points that first season, Lausanne was more competitive in year two, save for an early blowout against ECS.

The Lynx lost to Northpoint by 13, to Harding by nine and pushed FACS before falling 28-26.

"I think we opened some eyes," said junior defensive back Cameron Kinley. "We had a good record and we fought in our district games. FACS beat us by 30 (in 2013) and we lost by two and it went right down to the wire last year."

WORK IN PROGRESS

Locastro liked what he saw, too, from a team that was loaded with underclassmen. And with only five seniors on the roster, Lausanne still is young. "Our goal is to make the playoffs," he said. "Right now, we're focusing on Aug. 21 (the season-opening game against Germantown)

but we talk actively all the time about the process.

"Everything you do matters — eating habits, resting, hydrating, getting reps in practice. It's all part of the process. It builds levels of confidence."

GRADE-A TALENT

Despite having one of the smaller enrollments among the county's football-playing schools, Locastro is blessed with some exceptional talent.

It starts on the offensive line with tackle Isaiah Stokes, the 6-8, 280-pound younger brother of Grizzlies' power forward Jarnell. Several schools — Alabama, Auburn and Memphis among them — have already offered scholarships.

"He's getting to the point where he's starting to believe in himself as a football player and not just as a basketball player putting on a football uniform to look good."

Locastro is excited about junior quarterback Mario Nolan-Dillard, who played at Olive Branch as a freshman before transferring, and state track qualifier Adam Boyce is a big-time playmaker at receiver.

HE SAID IT

Locastro on his team as it heads into its third year of varsity play:

"We're still young, but our juniors will be starting for the third year and our sophomores for the second year ... We won't play intimidated."

LAUSANNE LYNX

HEAD COACH: Kevin Locastro (second season)

LAST YEAR'S RECORD: 6-4

REGION: Division 2-A West

PLAYERS TO WATCH

OL Isaiah Stokes (Alabama, Auburn, Florida State, Ole Miss, Tennessee, Memphis among many who have offered the 280-pound junior); LB James Babb (intelligent, hardworking defensive playcaller); DB Cameron Kinley (veteran leader of a talented secondary); QB Mario Nolan-Dillard (transfer has the skills to fill Spencer Mackey's big shoes).

GAMES TO WATCH

Aug. 21 vs. Germantown (the fact that this game — call it the Ken Netherland Bowl — is even occurring is a testament to how far the Lynx program has come in a short time); Sept. 18 vs. Harding (Lynx were winless in the league last year so a victory here would make a statement); Oct. 30 at FACS (winnable regular-season finale as Lausanne seeks first trip to the playoffs).

DID YOU KNOW

Lynx sophomore Rayshad Williams was one of five players in Shelby County to return two punts for touchdowns last season.

SCHEDULE

All games at 7 p.m.

Aug. 21: vs. Germantown
Sept. 4: vs. St. George's
Sept. 11: at Bolton
Sept. 18: vs. Harding*
Sept. 25: vs. Covington
Oct. 2: at Northpoint*
Oct. 9: vs. MAHS
Oct. 16: at ECS*
Oct. 23: vs. Manassas
Oct. 30: at FACS*

*—Division 2-A West Region

2014 RESULTS

beat Fayette-Ware, 48-14

lost to ECS, 56-20

beat Fayette Academy, 34-12

lost to Northpoint, 27-14

beat Tipton-Rosemark, 55-25

beat Lake County (Miss.), 37-3

beat Rossville, 47-14

lost to FACS, 28-26

beat MAHS, 40-0

lost to Harding, 41-30

CATCHING UP WITH DB CAMERON KINLEY

What are your earliest football memories?: When I was six, I played for the Memphis Falcons in Whitehaven. My father was the coach and we only won one game my first year but the next year we won the Super Bowl. It was great to be able to share that with my father.

Who is your football role model?: (Cincinnati Bengals defensive back) Darqueze Dennard. He was a 2-star recruit in high school with very few offers before he went against a 5-star receiver (and played well). Michigan State offered him and he went on to be a first-round draft pick.

Any pregame rituals?: I listen to rap music. I also paint crosses under my eyes and write "Philippians 4-13" ("I can do all things through Christ which strengthens me") on the tape on my arms.