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Excitement and relief as football season begins

By Jon Kingdon



Brady Huchingson Photo Gint Federas

Yes, Virginia. There is a football season in Lamorinda. Sixteen months after their last games, the football programs at Acalanes, Campolindo and Miramonte, which many were ready to write off, began their preseason practices as a precursor to a six-game season.

The coaches all felt that it was necessary to have any type of season. "It's important to have a season, particularly for our seniors," Acalanes head coach Floyd Burnsed said. "They have all worked hard to play."

Miramonte Head coach Jack Schram echoed those sentiments: "It's a feeling of relief and excitement. I'm glad for our seniors. We've been running conditioning style camps since June so it's great to finally get the opportunity to play."

It's more than just playing the games that is so crucial for the players, according to Campolindo head coach Kevin Macy. "It was more than important to have a season, it was critical, particularly for the seniors who had nothing this year," Macy said. "Everything about high school has been taken away from the students, beyond the distance learning. Playing football is another connection they can have with the school. Plus, for our freshmen, it's the first time they have stepped on campus and it's their first exposure to our program."

The protocols and precautions are never overlooked. "I have to keep telling them to keep their social distancing and their masks on," Macy said. "Our practices are super regulated, socially distanced drills with masks on at every moment."

Everything is done outside so the teams have a big screen TV set up on the track and the players can watch film while sitting in the stands while still practicing social distancing. "It's harder because we're not allowed into the classrooms to have meetings," Burnsed said.

Miramonte has been running install type drills since June so Schram has not needed to utilize the outdoor screen, but the restrictions go far past using the classrooms. "We haven't been able to use our weight room or locker room," Schram said. "In fact, only one person at a time is allowed to use the indoor bathroom."

Acalanes is the only team with a returning, starting quarterback. With a 9-3 record and making it into the second round of the playoffs last season, Burnsed is very optimistic about the team's prospects this season.

Brady Huchingson had a dominant junior season completing 63.2% of his passes along with 29 touchdowns and only five interceptions. Huchingson picked up where he left off with a dominant performance in a scrimmage against Granada. "He's the real deal," said Burnsed. "He's a good athlete that throws the ball well with good arm strength. There is still a lot of upside to him."

Despite the graduation of Jake Delaney, last year's leading rusher, the Dons will still have a solid running offense with seniors Dane Jenssen (326 yards) and Nic Rossi (323 yards). Juniors Evan Malmquist, who averaged 9.2/yds per carry for last year's undefeated JV team and Dante Montgomery will both be used in the backfield and as wide receivers.

With last year's seniors catching 87% of the team's receptions, Burnsed is relying on a strong junior class, besides Malmquist and Montgomery. "We have four junior receivers that are all learning," Burnsed said. "We may have senior Sam Hammond who is coming off a knee injury last year. If he is physically able, he could start at the X for us. Junior Will Berrien is also playing well as our Z receiver."

The offensive line, with two seniors, J.J. Sterner and Branden Clark, two juniors, Mike Kuhner and Anthony Ortale and sophomore Tyler Murphy, is a good combination of youth and experience.

The defensive line is led by Joe Carillo, who has committed to play at UC Davis next year. Carillo led the team with 20 tackles for loss last season. Josh Ramian and Dan Jenssen are also expected to be factors on the line.

At linebacker, with seniors Niko Cortessis (62T, 13TFL and 9.5 sacks) and Graham Oh (58T, 5TFL and 1 sack) proving to be leaders both on and off the field, it's a position that Burnsed is counting on for talent and stability.

Senior Joe Evans will be the leader in the defensive backfield with several juniors competing for playing time.

Not to be overlooked is kicker Hunter Ridley who according to Burnsed, "has developed into a Division I kicker." Ridley was named on the preseason watch list for kickers by the East Bay Times and confirmed his status by kicking a 47-yard field goal in a scrimmage against Granada.

Burnsed remains cautiously optimistic about the upcoming season: "We have a tough schedule with no breaks. We're young in a lot of key spots and made a lot of mistakes in our scrimmage which we're trying to correct as soon as possible. We have a lot of good players that just have a lot to learn."

The Dons won their opening game against Monte Vista, 33-27, highlighted by Huchingson's four touchdown passes.

It's proving to be a numbers game for Coach Schram and Miramonte. "We're thin on numbers due to the multiple sports occurring at the same time," Schram said. "Some kids have chosen to only play one sport which has thinned us out a bit."

With the graduation of Matt Meredith who led the team in passing and rushing, Schram feels he has found a suitable replacement in senior Russel Diep, a transfer from De La Salle High School. "Russell throws a good ball and will throw a lot more here than he would have at De La Salle," Schram said.

Seniors Aiden Brown and Jake Doran, the second and third leading rushers last season, will be expected to carry the ball more with Meredith gone. Junior Anthony Ricevuto is also being counted on to be a contributor.

Jameson Braitber (32 receptions) and Sam Ross (21 receptions) are expected to be the starting receivers with Peter Reeves also being counted on to be more of a factor this season. Tyler Dutto and Ben Murphy, guards on the Matadors basketball team have chosen to come out for football for the first time and have shown well in practice. Dutto has looked very athletic and will also be lining up at linebacker

The offensive line looks to be the strength of the team with four returning starters. Besides being solid players, Greg Hemming, Stradley Fouch, Roenigk Straug and Donald Frank have all taken on the role of leaders on the team. "These four are captains and great leaders," Schram said.

Hemming (30T, 3.5 TFL, 2.5 sacks) and Fouch (24T, 7TFL, 2.5 sacks) are also the leaders on the defensive line.

The linebacker corps is comprised of returning starters led by Sam Ross who led the team with 56 tackles and 10.5 tackles for loss, Ricevuto (23T, 1TFL, 1 Sack) and Jake Doran who had 17 tackles in only six games last year.

With Aiden Browne moving back to free safety combined with Hayden Simon, the defensive back group is another group with both talent and experience.

"We do have a good core of returning players at every position," said Schram. "The key for us is to stay healthy."

The Matadors open their season with a non-league game at Berkeley this coming Friday.

For Campolindo, Macy's initial concern in returning to practice was the mental state of the team. "The player's minds are still with us after all the distance learning and sitting in zoom classes. It's like we skipped the season and went right into the playoffs so we're looking at a lot of loaded teams on our schedules."

Coming off a 10-3 season, the first need on the field for Campolindo was replacing last year's starting quarterback, Grant Harper. Senior Jacob Griessell is going to have to learn on the run, having only thrown nine passes last year. Macy is optimistic from what he has seen so far. "Jacob's arm strength has really improved, and he has also filled out physically," Macy said. "It's just going to be how he does in the pocket."

Equally challenging for Macy will be to replace last year's runners which accounted for 95% of the yards gained rushing. Dilan Thoms will be one back and linebackers J.T. Clarke and Jake Leuteneker will also be used in the backfield. "They'll be fine," Macy said confidently.

Griessell will be helped by the return of veteran receivers. Seniors Maxwell Weaver (31 receptions), who will be playing for Davidson next year, Joey Schmidt (25 receptions) and Zach Raphael (8 receptions) will provide a lot of stability in the passing game.

The offensive line is an experienced group led by tackle Matai Bell who will be playing for West Point next year and junior Elijah Klock. "Just about all of them got a lot of playing time," Macy said.

On defense, seniors Daniel Wheeler (8.5 sacks) and Cole Curtiss (2.5 sacks) are key returners along with J.T. Clarke, "whose motor is always roaring," said Macy.

This was to be a celebratory 25th season for Macy but he's adjusted as have the players to what has

transpired. The Cougars won their opening game 27-23 at Freedom High School, led by Griessell's four touchdown passes and Thoms' 132 yards rushing.

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