

Gates-Chili Football Plans To Re-Load, Not Re-build

By Zach Mentz

Home Team Sports

GATES — Usually when a team returns only three out of 22 starters from the previous season, the ensuing year is considered a rebuilding year for the program.

Not for this year's Gates-Chili Spartans varsity football team.

Even after losing such a strong senior class due to graduation, the Gates Chili football team is still confident that they can get it done on the field this season.

Head coach Jason Benham is certainly optimistic.

"We're a very capable team," said coach Benham, who was honored over the summer by coaching the West squad at the Eddie Meath All-Star Football Game. "We replaced our whole offensive line from last year and the difference is that this year our linemen actually look like high school kids. We are without experience but we are a very capable team.

Coach Benham is entering his ninth year as the head coach of the Spartans. His career record as a head coach is very impressive, as he has 44 wins against just 23 losses.

On the field, the team is led by not only one player, but instead a small group of returning seniors in Elijah Thomas, Levester Tucker, and Peter Corona.

Also leading the team is the quarterback of the Gates Chili Spartans, junior Malcolm Frazier.

Thomas, listed at a rugged 6-foot-1, 225-pounds, is the team's only returning two-way starter at both running back and linebacker. He is considered to be one of the best players in Monroe County as he is a punishing runner and overall very talented player.

Although Thomas fills two of the three returning starters positions, he realizes that he alone cannot carry this team to success.

"It's a group effort, its not just on me, and the few seniors we have need to step up in order to achieve our goals," says Thomas.

Thomas, who is also ranked second academically in his class, is an Ivy League candidate.

On top of his outstanding academic success, Elijah has also heard from schools who have expressed interested in him football wise. And while yes, Thomas plans to continue his athletic career through college, he says that he is "focused on high school right now."

Also sharing time in the backfield with Thomas is senior running back Levester Tucker, a 5-foot-10, 205-pound senior. Tucker was forced to miss his entire junior season due to an injury on his first carry last year.

Tucker realizes he only has one year of high school football left and isn't going to let the opportunity go to waste. In order to do that, he says he took the off-season very seriously.

"I trained four days a week, I ran hills, and I did a lot of running back oriented type of training," said Tucker. "I expect a lot of myself this year. I want to make sure I leave my mark."

Tucker is also considered to be amongst the top running backs in all of Monroe County, thus further making the Gates-Chili backfield perhaps the best in the county, if not all of Section V.

Not bad for a program that lost Rochester's top running back a year ago in Rickey Stevens, who graduated after leading the Spartans to the Class AA sectional title last fall.

Another key returning senior this year for the Spartans is offensive lineman and linebacker Peter Corona, a 5-foot-10, 220-pound force in the interior.

Corona, who is also the team's kicker, says that he has high expectations for this year's team, despite the loss of such a strong senior class.

When asked to elaborate, what Corona expects of this team is simple.

"Excellence — we need to perform at 100 percent, work hard and give it 100 percent every down," said Corona.

Corona and the Spartans have set their sights on some lofty goals this fall.

"We want to win sectionals," said Corona. "The championship is in our site, however we need to just take it one game at a time and not get ahead of ourselves."

Another prominent returner for Gates Chili is quarterback and defensive back Malcolm Frazier, a talented 6-foot-3, 170-pound junior.

Last year as a sophomore, Frazier was on the team but did not take any snaps at the quarterback spot.

Despite that, Frazier did play five games at defensive back. He takes over a Gates Chili program that won sectionals in 2003, 2006, 2008, and lost in the sectional finals in 2007.

Now you might think that being given the reigns to a program that's had so much success in recent memory, Frazier would be feeling a little pressure. However, it turns out to be quite the opposite.

"I don't really feel any pressure," said Frazier. "I was on the team last year so I think that that helps, so I feel confident about this season."

Gates Chili lost a ton of talent from last year's senior class, including Stevens, last year's AGR Player of the Year selection. The Spartans also lost AGR wide receiver Chad Dillard.

That being said, one would think that the pressure is on for the Gates Chili Spartans, however everyone on the team, from the coaches to the players, seem to feel pretty confident.

This year's team motto is "Team Unity" which was worn across the shirt of Coach Benham at one of their scrimmages versus Canandaigua.

"The well isn't running dry here," said Benham. "We have a very athletic quarterback who can improvise when needed, along with great leadership from this year's senior class. This year will be a little different from years past as we may have to manufacture a few touchdowns this year rather than just scoring with ease. We're very inexperienced, but again very capable as well."

So before you go and label this year's Gates Chili team as a "rebuilding" year, perhaps a more appropriate description would be "reloading."

If you think Gates Chili won't be a contender this year, try watching Elijah Thomas punish a linebacker with his bruising running style, or watch Malcom Frazier create plays and put points on the scoreboard.

The players and coaches have high expectations for this year, so maybe you should as well.

Any way you look at it, Gates Chili is most definitely a strong contender in Class AA this year.