

By JOHN HENSON

Harlan County Sports.com

Heading into his first game as coach of the Paul Laurence Dunbar Bulldogs, first-year coach Derrick Thomas knows he will find out quite a bit about his team in the season opener Saturday against Harlan County in the i-High Fayette County Football Frenzy at Lexington Lafayette.

"This will definitely show us where we are," Thomas said. "I think Harlan County is ranked in the top 10 in the state, so this is really hard for a first-year coach to start off with a great team like that. It will definitely be a challenge for us and show us where we are in comparison to the other district teams we'll face."

Harlan County (1-0) played like it was deserving of the state's No. 3 ranking in 5A in a 36-0 rout of Morristown (Tenn.) East last week. The Bears gave up only 63 yards on defense and moved the ball consistently, both on the ground and through the air.

"Harlan County is a solid team and very strong. They are experienced with a lot of seniors," Thomas said. "The strength and experience they have concern me."

The Bears rolled up 289 yards on the ground in last week's win over Morristown East, led by Marcus McMillian with 97 yards and Jake Middleton with 94. Harlan County dominated the line of scrimmage and Thomas knows his defensive front will face a big test Saturday.

"They will bring the ball right at you, and they are very good at it," he said.

"They've won a lot of games that way."

Senior quarterback Jordy Brewer also had a big day for the Bears as he completed eight of 12 passes for 134 yards and one touchdown.

"Our kids are working hard in practice. They're focused," Harlan County coach Tom Larkey said. "I've tried to express to them the exposure they can get in this game. People from all over the state will be watching. It's a great bowl game and there will be a lot of college coaches there. It's a game that could really help some of these kids."

Dunbar has struggled in recent years, posting a 1-10 record last year and a 9-46 mark over the past five seasons.

Thomas knew he was inheriting a rebuilding project but likes the way his squad has worked in the summer.

"I'm pleased with the way we've progressed," Thomas said. "They've had to learn a lot in a short amount of time. They've been working very hard to do that. They are showing signs of picking it up."

Larkey saw the Bulldogs scrimmage two weeks ago against West Jessamine and was impressed with their athleticism.

"They have 80 players, when they used to have 35, and they have some athletes and a lot of skill," he said. "The quarterback throws the ball really well and they have a receiver who is faster than anybody we've got. I'm

scared to death of their speed. I think we'll be much more physical, and I'm hoping to keep the chains moving."

Senior Blake Martin returns as the Dunbar quarterback. He threw for 1,085 yards and seven touchdowns last year, and he led the team in rushing with 705 yards and 11 touchdowns.

Returning at wide receiver are senior Jordan Wilkins and sophomores Emory Thompson, Brandyn Duncan and Cameron Pergram. They combined for 37 catches for 350 yards last season.

John Rose, a 6-foot-1, 205-pound senior, is expected to be Dunbar's top running back and will play middle linebacker.

Anchoring the offensive line will be seniors Clint Bacon and Zane Williams. Luke Bryant and Alec Tenfelde will also be on the line, along with Seth Haga, who moved from tight end to center.

Rose and Haga will be at linebacker, along with Jackson Armstrong, J'Maurion Dunn and Andre Jones.

Wilkins, Thompson and Duncan will be in the secondary, along with Kristian Roberts and Jonathan Brown.

Kickoff is set for 3 p.m.

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For those more familiar with Lexington, directions No. 1 and No. 2 might be the preferred routes: No. 1 Take Exit 104 (Athens/Boonesboro Road); at top of ramp turn left onto Athens/Boonesboro Road which becomes Richmond Road; Turn left onto Man O' War Blvd; Take the third (3rd) right onto Alumni Drive; turn left onto the KY-4 S ramp (New Circle Road); Follow New Circle Road to Nicholasville Road or S US 27, turn right at top of ramp onto Nicholasville Road, then continue 1 mile until turning left on to Southland Drive (Shell Station) which then becomes Lafayette Parkway. Continue and turn right at stop sign onto Reed Lane. (If you reach Woodbine Drive you have gone too far). Lafayette High School is on the left.

No. 2

Take exit 104 from I-75 onto Athens/Boonesboro Road/Richmond Road; travel to KY-4 New Circle Road. Go under overpass and take left onto New Circle. Continue on New Circle Road until Nicholasville road. Go up ramp and take right onto Nicholasville Road/US 27. Travel 1 mile and turn left onto Southland Drive at Shell Station. Southland drive becomes Lafayette Parkway. Continue on Lafayette Parkway until turning right onto Reed Lane. (If you reach Woodbine Drive you have gone too far.) Lafayette High School is on the left.

For those not as familiar with Lexington, directions No. 3 might be the preferred route but requires you to travel a longer distance: No. 3 I-75 to Paris-Lexington (US 27) exit 113. This road is Broadway. Stay on Broadway through town and make a left onto Clays Mill. (There will be a dry cleaners at this intersection.) It is just past St. Joseph Hospital. Take the first left onto

Springhill Dr. and the school is at the end of that road.