

Bears face stiffest test against defending Virginia champs

By JOHN HENSON

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If everything goes as planned, the Harlan County Black Bears hope to be playing for a state championship in Bowling Green in early December.

The Bears will get an up close look at a defending state champion on Friday as they travel to Gate City, Va. The Blue Devils won the Class A, Division 2 state title last November.

"They are an excellent football team, definitely the best we've seen so far," Harlan County coach Tom Larkey said. "They run a variety of things on offense — double wing, shot gun. They have a good quarterback who throws the ball well and they have one of the best freshman running backs I've seen. "

Gate City brings back seven starters on both offense and defense from last year's 12-2 team, led by senior lineman Jay Howington (6-1, 235), senior linebacker/running back Elliott Seaver and senior defensive end/running back Derick Miller. Quarterback Nick Bowen also returns from last year's championship team. Bowen's dad, Chris, was a former star quarterback at Pennington Gap.

"We've got to play good defense. That's the key," Larkey said. "We're not going to be able to score as much as we did last week."

Harlan County (2-0) has had no problems scoring in its first two games, routing Morristown East, Tenn. 36-0 and Dunbar 48-20. The Bears rushed for 563 yards last week in Lexington as Marcus McMillian and Jake Middleton both topped the 200-yard mark.

"They are a very good football team," Gate City coach Bill Houseright said. "They are physical, come off the ball well, fly around the football, run the ball hard and block extremely well.

"We try to play like they do. We want to keep the chains moving and fly around the football."

Gate City opened its schedule last week with a 31-13 loss to Richlands, Va. It should be noted, however, that Gate City also opened with a loss to Richlands (31-0) last year before winning 11 of the next 12 on the way to the championship. Gate City could also provide a test for the huge Harlan County cheering section that has traveled to Morristown and Lexington the past two weeks. A story in Tri-Cities.com previewing the Gate City team this year noted "Gate City fans not only will jam the home side of Legion Field for home games, but they often take up half of the visitor side."

"We're fortunate to be able to go a different level when we walk through that stadium gate on Friday nights," Houseright said. "That's due to the support of our community and staff."

Larkey expects the Harlan County fans to hold their own against Gate City.

"I hope we can take a lot of fans to support our kids. It's not that far," he said. "I've been really impressed with the crowd the first two games. We had more people than Dunbar did last week and we probably had 1,500 or more at Morristown."