

By JOHN HENSON

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As players, Scott Russell and Ovie Canady helped transform Evarts High School football from a winless team in 1985 to a regional championship squad five years later. The Evarts football program had fallen on hard times after the glory days of the 1960s and 1970s under Charlie Hunter. The Wildcats slowly started improving with Ron Johnson in charge and then became a state contender when Bill Musick arrived, with Russell the star tailback/linebacker and Canady the steady lineman who helped open holes in the potent Evarts ground attack.

The former teammates will be on opposite sides Friday when Russell and his Knox Central Panthers travel to the James A. Cawood field to take on Harlan County. One of the more intriguing subplots of the game will feature a battle between Russell's offense and Canady's defense. Russell, a former Knox Central assistant, is in his first year as head coach. Canady, a former head coach at Evarts, is in his fourth season running the HCHS defense for Tom Larkey.

"It will seem odd to look over and be at odds with Scott when he is probably the best friend I have," Canady said. "We were roommates in college, we were in each other's weddings, we played elementary football together on the Steelers, we played junior high football, then high school football together. We were even on the same Little League and Senior League baseball teams. We haven't been on opposite sides too much except for he used to like Emmitt Smith and the Cowboys and I hated them."

"We were best friends in high school, roomed together in college and it will be fun to play against him," Russell said. "I'm excited we're both in the positions we're in and we get to play against each other. It will be fun. I have a lot of respect for Ovie. He's done a great job, and I always knew he would be a great coach."

The game will be something of a homecoming for Russell, the 1991 Kentucky Mr. Football who set a state rushing record with the Wildcats.

"It will be the first time being back there as a head coach, and I'm sure I will see a lot of familiar faces," Russell said. "I probably went to school with some of the parents of the kids on the team. It's going to be a lot of fun."

Russell was an assistant for several years under Wayne Mills, who returned to Bell County last spring to replace Dudley Hilton.

"The last five or six years they've really brought the program along to where I thought it should have been," Larkey said. "They are a very physical team and they have some good athletes. I think Scotty Russell will continue the tradition they got started."

Knox Central is off to a 4-1 start with wins over Lancaster Academy, Tenn. (42-6), West Jessamine (21-13), Gatlinburg-Plttman, Tenn. (34-20) and Clinton, Tenn. (42-7) and a loss to Perry Central (34-28), but the Panthers haven't played quite as well as Russell expected to this point.

"We've had some kids injured and sick and had to go through some adversity," he said. "We've had some kids in new positions, and it's taking them a little time to get adjusted. I hope we'll keep getting better and peak at the right time."

Harlan County (4-0) has posted two shutouts in four games so far this season and has allowed only 27 points, but Canady's "Filthy Animals" will face a big challenge Friday

trying to stop junior running back/receiver Jeffery Canady.

"When you've got an athlete like him, you want to see him touch the ball as much as you can," Larkey said. "He's a threat with the ball in his hands. He will be a challenge to try and stop."

Canady has rushed for 540 yards on 63 carries, while sophomore tailback Jonathan Gist has added 410 yards on 48 carries. Senior quarterback Jonathan Barger has completed 40 of 71 passes for 332 yards with five touchdowns and two interceptions. Canady leads in receiving with 14 for 269 yards and one touchdown. Jason Mitchell has eight catches for 135 yards and Devon Evans has seven receptions for 105 yards.

"Scott does a great job running the offense. He puts them in lots of sets which makes it hard to prepare for," Canady said. "He likes to be balanced as far as running and throwing so that puts you in a sticky situation. Canady is an exceptional athlete. They like to get the ball to him in crucial situations. Barger is a nice quarterback who can run or throw well. Gist is a nice athlete who has some moves."

"Harlan County is very similar to Rockcastle County, which is where their base defense comes from," Russell said. "Any time you play that defense you have to do a little extra preparation. It's something you don't see every week. If you don't prepare well for it, it can cause you a whole lot of problems. They do a great job on defense. We have to get a body on a body and make some plays."

The Bears' offense has grown more diverse this year with senior quarterback Jordy Brewer off to a strong start. He completed seven of eight passes last week against Lee, Va., for 146 yards and a touchdown. Senior tailback Marcus McMillian rushed for 132 yards and scored three touchdowns on the ground and one through the air.

"They are a real physical team, and they get in there and play power football," Russell said. "They run it right at you and dare you to stop them. They have a good offensive line and they do a good job up front. If you give them a crease, their backs do a good job of hitting it. My biggest concern is them controlling the football and eating up the clock."

The Panthers will likely be without one of their top defenders, senior lineman Cody Diamond, who is serving the second week of a two-week suspension for an ejection that Russell questioned. Russell said the school has appealed the suspension. Other leaders on defense include senior lineman Dustin Grubb, Canady at safety and junior lineman John Shepherd.

Larkey said several of the Harlan County linemen have been slowed by injuries, including senior tackles D.J. Brock and Michael Smith with sprained ankles. Sophomore guard J.W. Cooper has been ill and senior center Chase Calton was out of town last week. Everyone is expected to be in action Friday.

"We've got to have our line to win this game. I think it will be won on the line," Larkey said.

Kickoff is set for 7:30 p.m.