

FALL SPORTS PREVIEW



2008 NCHS boys' golf team

Members of the Nicholas County Boys' Golf team for 2008 are, back row left to right: Coach Phil French, Wes Hopkins, Zach Lemons, Dalton Hampton, Jarrod Mitchell, Chad Ockerman, Jared Napier, Dylan Carly, Josh Rawlings. Front Row Left to Right: Casey Fryman, Jake Bowles

Photo by Visual Sports



2008 NCHS girls' golf team

Members of the Nicholas County Girls' Golf team for 2008 are, back row left to right: Coach Phil French, Hannah Coldiron, McKenzie Hopkins, Heather McCall, Madeline Gallagher, Kelsey Randolph, Halli Webb, Megan Campbell. Front Row Left to Right: Haley McConnell, Brandy Norman, Kendall Wills

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FALL SPORTS PREVIEW

16 seniors to lead Nicholas County football

Despite having 16 seniors, starters returning at 14 positions and a team that improved its win total by three games from the previous year, Nicholas County football coach Robert Hopkins is guarded about the Bluejackets' outlook in 2008.

"I'm optimistic. We have a lot of returning starters, but we haven't done much the last two years," Hopkins said of his team that went 6-6 in 2007 and 2-8 in 2006. "We've got to play hard for four quarters. We have to forget the last play and make the next play better. We need to build confidence."

One area where the coach has a lot of confidence is in his offensive line. It is a position where he has impressive size.

"Our offensive line is loaded. It's the best it's been in the last several years," Hopkins said. "At the EK League championship camp, we came in third. That included schools from all over Kentucky, plus Tennessee, Ohio and Indiana."

The senior-dominated line features tackle Stephen Tolson, who is being recruited by several Division I colleges. However, the team will be without Tolson, a first-team All-Eastern Kentucky Conference selection last year, for an undetermined amount of time. The 6-4, 299-pounder sustained an ankle injury while attending an Eastern Kentucky University summer camp.

"He is a big kid with good speed," said Hopkins of Tolson.

If and when Tolson returns to the lineup, he will challenge a pair of senior tackles, Brandon Price and Jim Conyers, for playing time. Conyers is nearly as big as Tolson at 6-2, 290.

Another senior, Jonathan Tobin, will play center, while the guards will be senior Justin Little and junior Cody Barnett.

"We average 260 pounds across our offensive line," Hopkins said.

In general Hopkins likes the physical makeup of his squad.

"We have size and strength across the board," he said. "It is the strongest team I've ever had."

Another senior, Seth Hiney, will add depth at center. The rest of the reserves are all young and inexperienced.

"Greg Letcher is our offensive line coach and he's done a remarkable job," Hopkins said. "All of our coaches have worked hard."

A total of seven starters return on offense, including four players who earned All-EKC honors last season.

The Bluejackets graduated just five players, including four starting starters, from last year's 5-6 team. Hopkins will need to replace running back/linebacker Jonathan Mattax, wide receiver/defensive back Alex Stadler and sophomore Michael Reed. Mattax was the EKC Co-Offensive Player of the Year after rushing for more than 1,400 yards, while Florence and Brown were first-team All-EKC choices.

Hopkins will look to multiple players to replace Mattax's offensive contributions. Leading the way will be senior tailback Shane Sweet, who was a second-team All-EKC selection last year. Sweet will be joined by senior tailback Brandon Tedder, senior slot backs Andy McCarly, Cody Smith and Tyler Hunt. McCarly will also be in the back in multiple wide receiver slots.

"They bring different things - quickness; they run hard," Hopkins said. "Each one brings something different."

Senior Jordan Mynear returns for his fourth year as the team's starting quarterback. The 2007 second-team All-EKC choice has a strong arm.

"He throws the ball well," Hopkins said. "He is a big kid, about 6-3, and brings a lot of experience."

Junior Zach Lemons will serve as Mynear's reserve.

"He has really grown and gotten stronger," Hopkins said. "He will get reps at quarterback."

Nicholas County does not have a lot of depth at the wide receiver position. Hopkins expects to split his running backs out as receivers. However, he will have some players who will exclusively line up as wide outs, including senior Cade Gilliland, who is injured and will be out at least the first week of the season. Junior Ben Layne is expected to handle the tight end duties.

Seven starters also return on defense. The Bluejackets will use multiple defenses, but in an area of concern for the coach.

"We have to improve on defense," he said. "We will find 11 guys who want to fly to the ball and be aggressive."

Hopkins believes his defensive line is nearly as impressive as his offensive line. Senior Jacob Frederick, a second-team All-EKC honoree last year, senior Dave Miles and junior Logan White, along with the entire offensive line group, will all vie for playing time.

None of the starting line-backer spots have been locked up.

"Our linebackers will be committed," he said.

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Justin and Jordan may all play there," the coach said. "It is a group that needs to get the job done throughout the season."

The future is bright at the position, where junior Caleb White and sophomore Wes Hopkins, the coach's son and will serve as key reserves.

The Bluejackets will use the same philosophy to fill the spots in their defensive backfield as they will at line-backer.

Coach Hopkins will look for Tedder, Gilliland, Hunt, Mynear, Smith, and juniors Bubby Kikaden and Ray Shrout, to battle for the starting spots.

"I'm hoping that with the type of offenses that we face, we will be able to lock down man-to-man and still cover the zone," coach Hopkins said. "It is an area where lots of improvement is needed. These guys need to step up their games."

The Bluejackets have not spent much time in the preseason on their special teams.

"Special teams are going to be a battle between a lot of different guys," coach Hopkins said.

Coach Hopkins has set a number of goals for his team in 2008.

"We want to make the playoffs, have a winning season and climb into the top 10 (in the state rankings)," he said. "We need to stay healthy and improve on the defensive side of the ball, and play as a team to meet those goals."

On a note of concern for the Bluejackets is their lack of speed and athleticism, but coach Hopkins hopes his team can make up for that with its depth and experience.

"We don't have a lot of team speed," coach Hopkins said. "We've got depth. We're still not athletes... We have a lot of experience. The majority of our starters are returning."

As has been the case the last few years, Nicholas County will be challenged by another tough schedule.

"We know our hands are full. Our schedule is tough," coach Hopkins said. "This is one of our most competitive schedules."

The slate will include four schools that play in a higher classification, as well as the always-tough District 5 of

Class A.

"We play in the toughest Class A district in the state," coach Hopkins said. "In the preseason rankings, LCA (Lexington Christian) is number one. Raeland is number five and Fairview is number 13. That leaves us and Paris. It is very competitive."

In addition to district play, Nicholas County is also a member of the Eastern Kentucky Conference. The 10-team league also includes Raeland, Rowan County, Morgan County, Fleming County, Fairview, Lewis County, East Carter, West Carter and Bath County.

"In the EKC race, Bath and Raeland will be good," coach Hopkins said.

The Bluejackets' opening game in the first week of the season. The team begins play by going on the road to face West Carter on Sept. 5. It opens its home slate on Sept. 12 against Fairview, before returning to the road to play at Paris on Sept. 19. On Sept. 26, Nicholas County hosts Berea.

The Bluejackets got on the road for their next three games: Oct. 3 at Bourbon County, Oct. 10 at Lexington Christian and Oct. 17 at Pendleton County. The team returns home to host Raeland on Oct. 24.

Nicholas County's final road game will be on Hallowe'en at Bracken County, before closing out the regular season campaign at home against Bath County on the first Friday of November.

"We've got a tough, tough schedule ahead of us," coach Hopkins said. "There is nobody on our schedule that we can't beat or can't beat us."

With so many experienced seniors on the roster, it will be hard for the underclassmen to receive a lot of playing time. However, it does not mean the talent level drops off after the senior class.

"We have a lot of freshmen, sophomores and even juniors who would be starters if we didn't have so many seniors," coach Hopkins said. "Next year the cupboard won't be bare (after the seniors graduate), but we won't be quite as good."

Coach Hopkins has been pleased with what he has seen through summer conditioning and preseason camp.

"We had an outstanding camp. The kids held together," he said. "The kids have worked hard. They've worked together since the seventh and eighth grade. In order for us to meet our goals we are going to have to keep that up. We've got to outwork our opponents Monday through Friday."

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