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2011 Nicholas County Bluejacket Football Preview

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Jackets schedule tough as ever

By Wade Holland
KYNewsGroup

On tap for the Nicholas County Bluejackets during the 2011 football season is a trio of Class 3A teams sandwiched around a district schedule that includes some of Class A's strongest programs.

But a tough schedule doesn't appear to be Nicholas Co.'s biggest nemesis as Coach Robert Hopkins and his Bluejackets battle the 'numbers game' with just over 30 players on the roster.

Working with so few players is nothing new for the Class A program, which started last season with 37 players only to see injuries reduce that number to 23 by season's end.

"People thought we were thin last year, but this year we are even thinner," said Hopkins, who has battled the same issue throughout his 10 years leading the program. "By the time we got to the playoffs last year we were banged up. Very banged up. Hopefully we can stay away from the injury bug this year."

Despite the issues the program has had with small roster size and injuries, Nicholas Co. is considered a team on the rise. The Bluejackets have improved in the win column each of the last three seasons, including last year's 6-5 finish, the first winning record for the program since 2002.

"With all of the injuries we had last season, it was remarkable that these guys kept fighting all year long the way they did," said Hopkins. "They never

gave up. And they never gave up because the seniors that were here last year wouldn't let them give up."

Among the seven seniors who graduated from last year's team was Wes Hopkins, the two-time EKC Defensive Player of the year who ended his career by being named to the Louisville Courier Journal's All-State Team.

"Wes is the big one we have to replace on the defensive side of the ball," said the coach. "And as a full back he led the way for Caleb Pope a lot of times and was a big reason Caleb was able to do what he did. We've got some big shoes to fill there."

Also gone from a year ago are

Nate Kirby and A.J. Brown, both of whom Hopkins describes as having the heart and soul of champions. Matt Kelly, a three year starter on the defensive side, along with two-year starter D.J. Burke, will also be greatly missed.

Zach Lukins, the team's leader in the weight room, is also gone, though he didn't get much playing time a year ago after an early-season injury. Cameron Crawford, who didn't stick out in a crowd because of his small stature, will be missed as much as anyone.

"Cameron was our inspirational leader," said Hopkins. "He

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NCHS Football Head Coach, Robert Hopkins

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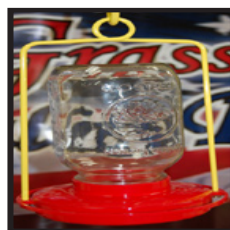
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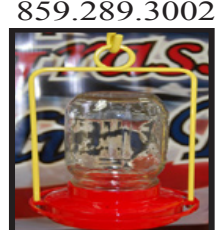
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**Tough Continued from
Page 2**

was the littlest guy out there but had the biggest heart. He wasn't afraid of nothing. Everybody fed off of what he did.

"Those seniors weren't the most athletic group. They weren't the most talented. But what they brought to the team Monday through Thursday at practice and then what they brought to the game on Friday was phenomenal" said Hopkins. "Those guys competed. They never gave up on a play. And they played every play on Friday night like it was going to be their last. Those guys were like that their entire career. They had a hard-hat mentality. They believed in coming to work every day and working hard and laying it all on the line."

Despite the losses to graduation, Nicholas Co. returns some of the most talented players in the district and region, including senior tailback Caleb Pope, the team's leading rusher, receiver and scorer from a year ago.

Pope is considered by many to be the elite player in District 7 as well as one of the top players in all of Class A. With good size (6-0, 190) and strength, Pope's biggest asset is likely his speed, which propelled him to a 4th place finish in the 100 Me-

ter Dash at the Kentucky State Track and Field Championships a year ago.

"Anytime you bring a player like Caleb back, you've still got a lot of firepower returning," said Hopkins. "Caleb's biggest thing is he is able to stay humble. He works very hard all the time, especially in the weight room. What he has done the last two years on his own, he's busted his chops. He's done what he needs to do to be a great player and we expect big things out of him."

Joining Pope in the offensive backfield will be his brother, sophomore Charby Pope, who was thrust into the starting quarterback job in week one of last season due to injuries and took every snap as a freshman. While he did a fine job under center a year ago, Hopkins expects even more from his signal caller this season.

"Just like his brother told him at 7-on-7's this summer, "You were a freshman last year. You're a sophomore now. More is expected of you. It's time to step it up", the coach recalled.

Fullback will be Austin Allison, with wingback duties going to Finn Brutsman, Trevor Booth and Devin Johnson. J.D. Wagoner and Jake Blakeman will man the slot positions, with Zack Howard and Toby Howard handling the tight end duties.

The offensive line should be a strength for the Bluejackets with all but one starter returning from a year ago. Senior Chris Morgan will lead the group, which also includes John Lee Allison, Ethan Smith, Nolan Woosley, Jake Kirby and Austin Hedges.

"We're not very big on the line. We probably average 220 pounds," said Hopkins. "But we're pretty stout. And they've got a lot of experience. The big thing about this line is, they can get off the ball."

"There's very few people in the state of Kentucky who are stronger than Chris Morgan," added Hopkins. "Chris benches 380 and his motor never stops. And Jake Blakeman has always been there and worked hard to do anything and everything we've asked him to do. If it's carry water or fill in as a starter on Friday night, he's done it. He's another one we expect big things out of."

While the offensive side of the ball is of little worry to Hopkins at the moment, defense is another story. All seven seniors who graduated a year ago were starters and important pieces of the cog on the defensive side of the ball.

"Defense is a mentality. The guys we lost off defense from last year would knock your block off," said Hopkins, who admitted he is still searching for that same mentality on this year's defensive unit, which returns only Caleb Pope, Austin Allison, John Lee Allison and Devin Johnson from a year ago.

Several players will be asked to play vital roles on the defensive line, including Nolan Woosley, Chris Morgan, Jake Kirby, Ethan Smith, Austin Hedges and D.J. Amburgey, among others.

The linebacking corps will be led by Austin Allison and John Lee Allison in the middle, and the foursome of Zack Howard, Devin Johnson, Finn Brutsman and Drake Bussell will man the outside linebacker positions.

But the defensive backfield is a major question mark for the team, with even the coach not knowing exactly who will be

See Tough Page 4

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Tough Continued from Page 3

starting or seeing time there. "We're very inexperienced and not very good right now in the secondary," he said, noting that the guys are working hard to improve in that area and he expects it to be a strength before the season is over.

Work ethic, Hopkins says, is a trademark of his program. "The guys are working real hard," he said. "They show up every day and work very hard. It's a normal Nicholas Co. team. We always work hard. We have to."

While the defense may be prone to giving up some points while it learns its way in the early part of the season, Nicholas Co. should be able to overcome some of that with what is expected to be one of the district's highest scoring offenses. The Bluejackets scored 334 points a year ago, the most for a Nicholas Co. team in more than a decade.

Nicholas County put 40+ points on the board four times a year ago, including 50+ in one game and 60+ in another.

"We're going to be able to run the ball," said Hopkins. "We'll be able to throw the ball, too. But with the running game we have, the potential to put points on the board is there."

Another strength for the team will be it's junior class, which features 14 of the best student-athletes Hopkins has ever had at Nicholas Co.

"Our junior class is very strong," he said. "And they're all good kids. I've never had even one bit of problem out of them in the classroom. They're always very respectful. But at times they can be a little on the lazy side, but all you have to do is raise your voice a little bit and they know it's time to go to work."

The senior class, although smaller than the class behind it, is also a key. Hopkins says leadership must come from his seniors.

"Those guys have been playing together since little league and they were a major part of the success we had last year," he continued.

The freshman and sophomore classes are also small in numbers, but not in talent.

With so few names on the roster, everyone from the freshman class to the seniors will play a key role for the Bluejackets. Playing time, according to Hopkins, will not be an issue for those that want it.

"The only way a kid won't get a lot of playing time is if he isn't working hard and isn't being aggressive," he said. "If you're aggressive, you'll be playing."

Meet the NCHS football seniors



John Lee Allison



Jake Blakman

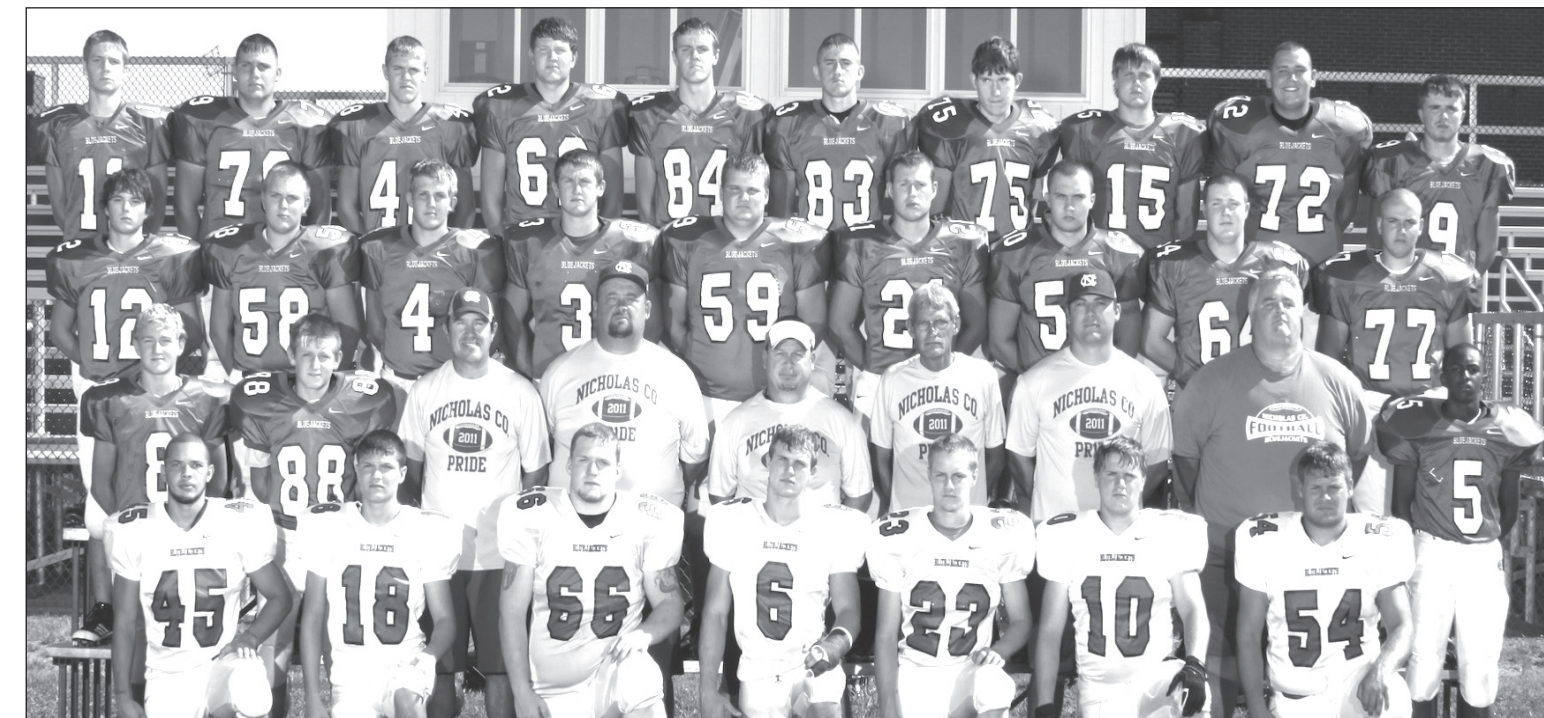


Jordan Bussell



Devin Johnson

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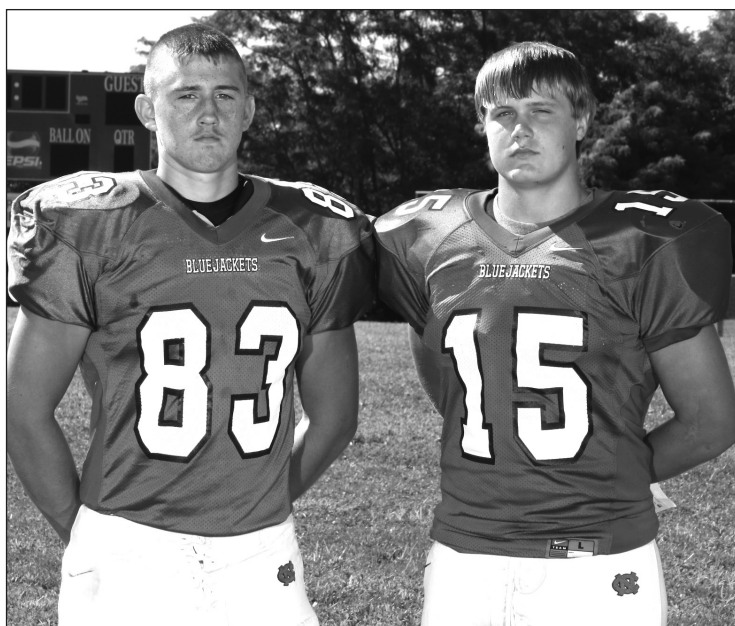
Meet the NCHS football juniors

Meet the NCHS football sophomores

Meet the NCHS football seniors



Austin Allison (3), BJ Amburgey (77), Trevor Booth (9), Finn Britsman (12), Drake Bussell (4), Austin Hedges (64), Toby Howard (48), Zach Howard (84), Jake Kirby (79), Ethan Smith (62), Scot Taulbee (72), JD Wagoner (21), Nolan Woosley (50)



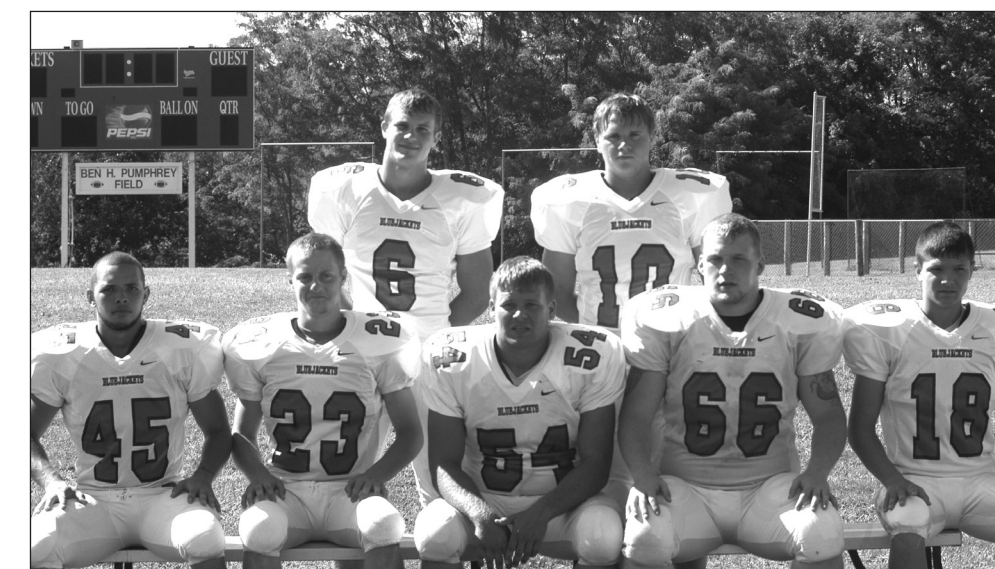
Scott Keaton (83), Charby Pope (15)



Anthony McNabb



Chris Morgan



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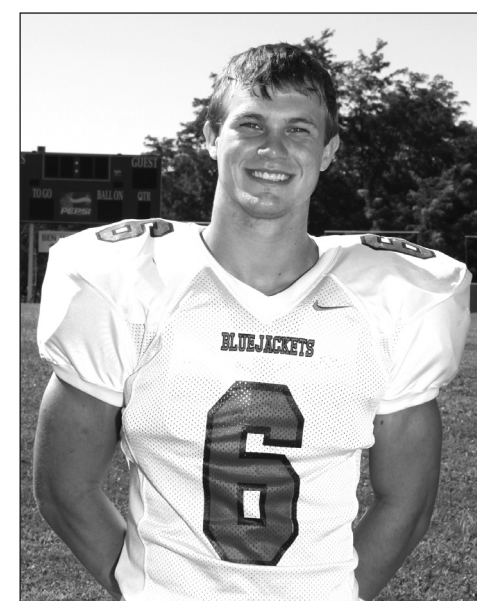


Cane Abnee (88), Ben Duncan (11), Austin Fryman (57-not pictured), Garrick Hammons (58), Randy Hays (59), Dustin Kiskaden (75), Isaac Sosby (8), Tequane Thomas (5)

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Calep Pope

2011 NCHS Football Schedule

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Aug 26, 11	Fleming County	home	7:30 PM
Sep 2, 11	West Carter	away	7:30 PM
Sep 9, 11	Berea	away	7:30 PM
Sep 16, 11	Paris	home	7:30 PM
Sep 30, 11	Ludlow	away	7:30 PM
Oct 7, 11	Raceland	away	7:30 PM
Oct 14, 11	Paintsville	home	7:30 PM
Oct 21, 11	Fairview	away	7:30 PM
Oct 28, 11	Bath County	home	7:30 PM

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KHSAA District 7 preview

By Wade Holland
KYNewsGroup

The Kentucky High School Athletic Association's realignment of teams following the 2010 season was not kind to the Nicholas County football program.

After the original draft of the realignment was released with the Bluejackets assigned to a revamped Class A, District 7, the Nicholas County school district submitted a request to the KHSAA to reconsider its placement, asking to instead be moved into District 3 where the travel time to district games would be cut in half.

The request was denied by the KHSAA, leaving the Bluejackets in a district where the average distance between district schools is over 100 miles one way, compared to an average of only 50 miles each way in District 3.

Head Coach and Athletic Director Robert Hopkins, who clearly was not in favor of the decision, said the level of competition in each district had absolutely zero to do with the school's request for a change and pointed to the

Bluejackets' schedule as evidence.

"We're not afraid of any competition," he said. "You look at our schedule and we play just as tough a schedule as anyone else in Class A ball. So it wasn't that. It was the travel and expense, not just for us, but for the other teams, too."

As it stands, Nicholas County will play in District 7 with Fairview (98 miles one way), Raceland (100 miles) and Paintsville (118 miles). The move to District 3 would have meant trips to Eminence (89 miles one way), Frankfort (58 miles) and Paris (16 miles).

While the realignment changed very little for Nicholas Co. in district play, state power Lexington Christian Academy did move up to Class 2A, while

Paris was relocated out of the district.

But the district schedule did not get any easier with

Paintsville moving in.

District success has not come easy, nor often, for the Bluejackets over the last decade. Only two times since 2001 has Nicholas Co. finished with a winning record within district play. The Bluejackets have won just five games against district rivals in the past six seasons.

But with several talented players back for the 2011 season, including what many believe to be the district's best player in senior running back Caleb Pope, Hopkins is certain his team can compete with anyone in the district if the Bluejackets can avoid mental errors and injuries.

Nicholas County gave district foes all they could handle a year ago. The Bluejackets lost by only one touchdown to then-#3 ranked Fairview in a game

where Nicholas Co. was driving for the tying touchdown late before a mental mistake allowed the Eagles to hang on for the win. Versus then-#7 ranked Raceland, Nicholas Co. gave up two easy scores in the first half of a 28-12 defeat. And defending state champion Lexington Christian was having fits with the Bluejackets all the way to the end of the third quarter when a Nicholas Co. fumble allowed LCA to turn a close game into a three-touchdown victory.

"We were right there with all them. We were in striking distance," said Hopkins, who believes his team, now a year older and wiser, can eliminate some of the mistakes that costs them victories a year ago.

Oct. 7 at Raceland

See Preview Page 7

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Preview Continued from Page 6

Well-known as one of the top passing teams in Class A, the Rams are somewhat of an unknown after losing their entire backfield from a year ago. But coach T.J. Maynard has plenty of talent to rebuild with, including seniors Marcus Reed at tailback and Bryan Caudill at fullback.

The Rams have put together a string of six straight winning seasons and are one of Class A's winningest teams since 2005 with an average of nine victories per season over that span. Raceland was undefeated at 12-0 in 2008 before falling in the region finals. Two years prior, the Rams were 11-2 overall, also losing in the regional title game.

"Raceland has always been known for football. They play good football. They'll get after you," said Hopkins.

Oct. 14 vs Paintsville
New to Nicholas Co.'s schedule will be Paintsville, though Hopkins, like all other coaches in Class A, is familiar with the tradition-rich program. Before a recent rebuilding period, the Tiggers were well known as one of the better programs in their end of the state.

"When you talk Class A, you always talk about the Beechwoods and the Mayfields, and deservedly so," said Hopkins. "But if you look at the total program in Class A competition over many years, Paintsville has to be right up there. They have a very rich tradition of athletes there."

Junior running back Trent

Burchett is undersized, but plays much bigger than his 5-foot-9 stature. Senior lineman Tyler Spriggs is anything but undersized at a very stout 6-foot-2, 250 pounds. Blake Williams, a sophomore linebacker, is one of the top underclassmen in the district.

Oct. 21 at Fairview

A program on the rise, Fairview advanced to the regional championship game a year ago and finished 11-2 with both losses coming against defending state

champion Lexington Christian.

Coach Nathan McPeck lost some key players from that team, including 15 seniors, but returns his entire backfield. Quarterback Ty Lowe and running backs Chris Littlejohn, Devin Turner and Chris Brewer will lead the Eagles in their quest for a fourth-straight winning season.

"Fairview does a real good job of getting players out for their team," said Hopkins. "They're a very strong football program."



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