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Johnson confident in Eagles' 'Hammer' offense

According to Scott's Branch High School head football coach Leonard Johnson, the offensive line is as important to his Hammer offense as oxygen is to anyone's lungs. Although he tries to mask it, Johnson can't help but feel good about returning four starters to the offensive line off of last year's 10-2 team, which was just a few minutes from advancing to the 1A Division I Lower State Championship Game.

Hammer isn't complicated. In fact, it's simplistic nature makes it even more confounding on how it hasn't been stopped.

Johnson isn't looking to light up the scoreboard with 50 points a game — not that he'd mind as long as it was within the offense. Johnson would take just as much glee with a 7-0 victory because then he knows his offense did exactly what it was supposed to do: eat up the yards and clock.

And that all starts up front and the line is anchored by 6-3, 370-pound center Deandre Pugh, the one non-returning starter.

"This is probably the biggest offensive line I've coached," said Johnson, who is entering his fourth year as head coach of the Eagles. "And they can run. Deandre Pugh — it blows my mind how this kid moves. It will blow you away. We're glad to have Deandre. He can do things that is going to force the defense to make moves.

"That's the integral part of doing what we do," he added. "We don't make any changes unless people show me they can stop us on a consistent basis."

To Pugh's right and left are 6-4, 340-pounder Troy Georgia and 6-2, 300-pounder Jeremy Bowman. Tackles Alexander Shannon and James Brunson are 5-11, 240 and 6-0, 245, respectively.

The line last year allowed the Eagles to pound opponents with 3,853 yards. They averaged 6.82 yards per carry — which is exactly 2.82 yards more than Johnson asks for.

All the head coach asks from his running backs in the Hammer is four yards per carry. That's all he asks and all he knows he needs to be successful.

"They have to run Hammer," he said. "We are totally blue collar here. We've always been blue collar. We pride ourselves on that. If we do what we do, we'll be OK. There is no pretense in doing what we do."

Quarterback Adrian Coard returns as signal caller this year and has running backs Quinton Singleton, who led the team with 1,238 yards last season, and Curtis Davis, who rushed for 906 yards, with him in the backfield.

Defensively, Johnson keeps his goals nearly as simple as those for the offense. He doesn't ask for shutouts or a certain number of turnovers a game.

All he needs is a couple of stops a game because of the confidence he has in the Hammer. The Hammer has been known to eat up a whole quarter of clock and churn out drives that last over 20 plays.

“We may be better than we were last year (on defense),” said Johnson. “We’re a lot faster. The other important factor is we are stronger.

“If our defense can make two or three stops, that gives us a big advantage,” he added. “We just need stops and they (defensive players) know they will be on the sideline for a long time.”

Johnson said the defenders have bought into the philosophy.

“I tell the kids all the time, if we have the leading tackler in the area something’s wrong,” he said. “That means you have more opportunities and the offense isn’t doing what it’s supposed to be doing.

“They don’t want to be on the field,” he laughed. “They understand our philosophy. They know that if the ball is in the offense’s hands, something good is going to happen.”

After being winless and often blown out before Johnson arrived, the Eagles have caught the attention of many. In fact, Johnson had trouble getting a schedule together.

That’s why two 3A region champions are found on this season’s schedule — which will give the Eagles a big push in points when it comes to seeding in the 1A state playoffs. The Eagles will host Timberland on Sept. 5 a week before traveling to Marlboro County on Sept. 12.

“Nobody would play us,” said Johnson. “We’re just going to go and play.”

Despite what successes might come on the field, Johnson is already proud of his team for its off-field accomplishments.

“We’ve got seven or eight kids who are college-ready with SAT and ACT scores,” he said. “It’s the first time that’s ever happened for this school. I’m more proud of that than anything else.”

The Eagles have taken a step forward each season under Johnson. Is the next step being one of the last four Division I teams playing?

“It’d be nice to play in the lower state championship,” said Johnson. “Wouldn’t that be something?”