

Talented sophomore class carries Hawks into postseason play

by John Hough, Sports Writer
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CARROLLTON - Long ago, legendary soccer coach, Sir Matt Busby coined the phrase, “if you’re good enough, you’re old enough.”

Coming into the season, the Carrollton Hawks had some of their lowest numbers in recent history. They have 27 players on their roster, with 13 of them comprising of sophomores. To add insult to injury, there are six seniors and one junior, so head coach Nick Flowers had no choice to start several 10th-graders.

“Coming into the season, we had low numbers, and most of the seniors from last year were all starters, and almost all the wide receivers were gone. We knew from the start we’d be in there,” Sophomore wide receiver/linebacker, Grant Pohlman said.

Inevitably when a football team relies on mostly 15-to-16-year-olds instead of 17-to-18, there's going to be plenty of uncertainty. But as recent history suggests, Carrollton football always seems to find a way to make things work out, and that's what's happened again.

Despite having one of the youngest and smallest rosters in the state, the Hawks behind a talented, resilient sophomore class has continued their winning ways and find themselves with an 8-2 record in the second round of Class 1A playoffs.

"They did a lot of growing up early at the beginning of the season," Carrollton senior quarterback Hunter Flowers said. "They had to fill a lot of shoes from last year, and they stepped into that role really well and really quick too."

The 2022 class has been on the radar in the Carrollton community for several years.

In middle school (JFL), they won their lightweight division in sixth grade and heavyweight division in eighth grade, both times going undefeated. That and consistently hitting the weight room as sophomore wide receiver Kyle Leonard says has paved the way for him and his classmates to make a quick impact on the field at a young age.

"Since JFL, we've been winning so coming in we thought as sophomores we got to step up and bring what we can bring," Leonard said. "That's what we've been doing so far."

Carrollton starts six sophomores on offense and five on defense.

On offense, Harley Angel has started every game at running back. He's rushed for 505 yards on 100 carries with five touchdowns and averages 5.1 yards per carry. Pohlman and Kyle Leonard are starting wide receivers and have been on par with each other all season. Pohlman has caught 23 passes with 391 yards and seven touchdowns. Leonard has 28 receptions with 363 yards and five touchdowns.

The sophomore duo has been fortunate to have the experience and calming influence of all-state quarterback Hunter Flowers throwing them the football.

"He gets the ball to where we want it and gives us plays to make," Leonard said.

"They know everything. They've got it down a T," Flowers said. "I trust them now to where I can throw the ball, and anyone of them can go up and get it. I've built that with them, and it's worked out."

Although he isn't a sophomore, junior Matthew Reatherford is another first-year starter who leads the team with 35 receptions and 574 yards, and ten touchdown catches.

Ethan Harrelson (offensive tackle/defensive end) and Ethan Moore (center/defensive end) are two-way starters. With senior lineman Cade McAdams limited to playing only defensive tackle last week, sophomore Myka Bryson stepped in at offensive guard.

On defense, Pohlman and Hayden Flowers start at linebacker with Ethan Harrelson and Ethan Moore at defensive end and Gus Coonrod in the secondary as a cornerback. To get even younger, freshman Wille Gilmore has started five games at nose tackle since McAdams went down with an injury in week five.

Most of the sophomores have been teammates on the gridiron since fifth grade, but the likes of Leonard, Pohlman, Coonrod, and others go way back to kindergarten with baseball and basketball.

"We know our ins and outs of everyone," Leonard said.

Kyle is the youngest sibling in the Leonard family that has produced four Carrollton Hawks, football players. Brandon (Class of 2012), Nathan (Class of 2018), and Cody (Class of 2015), who is the all-time leading tackler in Carrollton and Quincy University history.

The 2022 sophomores share a similar situation with Cody's 2015 class when they were sophomores back in 2012. That year the Hawks, started five 10th-graders on offense and four on defense along with Luke Palan (running back), Marcus Lippert (linebacker), and current Carrollton coaches, Jacob Smith (quarterback), and Derek McGowen (center /defensive end).

If you'd have to pick a standout sophomore this year, it would have to be Pohlman.

The 6-1, 165-pound two-way starter leads the team with 988 all-purpose yards, 12 touchdowns, and 72 points. He was an immediate impact in the first game of the season against Unity-Payson when he ran back a 95-yard touchdown kickoff return on the very first play of the season.

"As soon as I caught that ball and saw that hole, I took off," Pohlman said. "It was the most exciting thing I had ever been apart of for football right there."

On defense, he's registered 83 tackles as an outside linebacker with four interceptions, two of which he ran back for touchdowns against Brown County, and recovered two fumbles.

"From the start that it was going to be a tough position," Pohlman said. I remember last year Isaac Cox got hurt, and I came in. I'm not going to lie; I did kind of bad. I knew I was going to be at that spot, and ever since then, I've been working hard and ready to go for round two."

Carrollton got out to a 4-0 record to start the season but lost 22-14 in a heart-breaking game against main rival Greenfield-Northwestern. Despite costing them a third straight WIVC South outright title and a higher playoff seed, the loss has affected the Hawks for the better going forward.

"It's built a lot of character in us and showed us that we need to get better. We're better than we've shown against Greenfield," Leonard said.

The Hawks are coming off a first-round 24-15 playoff victory over the Arthur (A-Lovington-Atwood-Hammond) Knights. The defense arguably played their best game of the season, limiting the Knights to 211 total yards.

"Coach (Nick Flowers) gave us a little pep talk, and we were all fired up from the get-go," Pohlman said. "From the first play on defense, we were ready to go for the rest of the game."

Pohlman finished with 11 tackles and a fumble recovery while Coonrod added eight tackles to help the Hawks reach the second round for the eighth consecutive season.

Carrollton prepares to face the #2 seeded Argenta-Oreana Bombers (9-1) on the road at 1 pm this Saturday.

Argenta-Oreana has a high-powered offense. Led by senior quarterback, Josh Williams senior and running back, Makail Stanley, the Bombers are averaging 41.8 points per game and just knocked off the North Greene Spartans 42-0 in the first round.

Predominantly a running team in a spread offense, Williams has rushed for 1,366 yards with 23 touchdowns on 121 carries while Stanley has tallied 1,761 yards on the ground with 27 touchdowns on 138 carries. Williams has completed 43-of-86 (50%) passes with six touchdowns and four interceptions.

Argenta-Oreana, however, allowed 22.5 points per game during the regular season and given up over 28 points five times. Carrollton has scored an average of 34.4 points per

game and surrendered 19.1 per game. A common opponent the Hawks and Bombers have is Arthur, whom A-O beat 42-34 in week eight.

With the Hawks coming off of their best defensive game and how the Bombers haven't lined up against a pass-happy offense like Carrollton's gives the away team reason to be optimistic for a tightly contested ballgame.

"We've been watching film all week on them. We just need to hit hard and play our game. If we play our game, then I think we'll come out on top in this," Leonard said.

This will be Hunter Flowers' seventh career postseason game, and having known what it's like to win and lose in the second round will be invaluable. Additionally, he's glad the underclassmen were able to get their first playoff game as starters out of the way and under their belts.

"They're seeing what playoff football is all about," Hunter Flowers said. "That last game was really good for a lot of them, and I've enjoyed how they've stepped and how they've played."

This young Hawks team may not be as young anymore through ten games, but they'll still be considered underdogs on Saturday. Regardless, they've come a long way in a short time, and the future is undoubtedly bright for Carrollton football.

From the start of training in June until now in November, did these sophomores expect to be in the position they are now?

"One-hundred percent," Pohlman said.



