

Sports

A culture in the midst of change

Football programs set up for bright futures

BY ABBY HOOVEN

Deion Sanders has taken the college football world by storm this season. In his first year at Colorado, Sanders has gained the attention of national media outlets as he has transformed the program and put the Buffaloes on the map. For months, we've seen videos of speeches and interactions of Sanders with his new team. Most of his players are new to Colorado's program and want to be part of what Sanders is building. Culture change, at any level, takes 100% commitment from top to bottom. Yet, it truly begins with the leadership of the head coach and their staff. On a local level, we've seen a tremendous culture change effort take place this year within the Eminence football program. A year ago, the Warriors finished the season without a win. With a small senior class, a roster full of underclassmen without much varsity experience and a number of late-season injuries to impact players, Eminence's 2022 season was a learning experience for all involved. Coming into this fall, head coach Ryan Jones made some drastic changes to his coaching staff that aided to the turnaround. A small but mighty group of four coaches in 2022 tripled in 2023. Among the coaching staff are several long-time coaches that boast decades of experience in the high school football realm. Jones began conversing with those coaches during last season and added them to the staff this year. Along with many other benefits, a larger coaching staff meant Eminence could hold position-specific portions of practice and double the overall length of practice from 2022. During the preseason, I was able to catch a glimpse of the culture change before the Warriors officially hit the field. Large groups of players weren't waiting on the sideline for the next drill. Everyone was organized, following directions and listening intently to what their coach was teaching. Every instruction was



Eminence head coach Ryan Jones and his experienced staff have played a major role in the Warriors' culture shift this season.



Henry County head coach Matt Wright and his staff have led the Wildcats to back-to-back 7-4 seasons. Wright credits this year's senior class for playing a pivotal role in the program's recent success.

seemingly followed with a "yes, sir" or another respectful response. As I spoke with several players, they all noted the differences within the program in just a year's time. The leadership from coaches and upperclassmen was paying off, and they were eager to get into game action. Each player said fans would see a change once the regular season began, and they were right. During games, players were fully invested whether they were on the field or on the sideline. If a player wasn't in

the right place, a coach made sure they were quickly in their correct spot to be ready to hit the field. All these positive shifts helped Eminence start the season 5-0 and end with a 6-5 record. The Warriors technically had seven wins overall but had to forfeit their season opening win against Bellevue. While the Warriors' season ended against Paris on Nov. 3, this year was the start of an important culture change at Eminence that will surely continue to grow in the coming seasons.

In the same way, Henry County's football program has undergone a culture shift in recent years. This year's senior class helped build up the Wildcats from a team with minimal wins to a team that nearly won a playoff game for the second straight year. Before the season, several seniors told me that they wanted, and expected, more this year after a 7-4 finish in 2022 that featured district runner-up honors and hosting a playoff game that went down to the wire. Moving up to Class 4A had its challenges, but Henry

County was ready for each one. Despite losing two nail biting games, the Wildcats came away with a huge win against Shelby County to secure a spot in the postseason late in the year. The level of determination and grit was evident in each game, especially in make-or-break situations. Henry County ultimately fell to DeSales in the opening round but gave everything they had to make it a competitive game. Head coach Matt Wright said the senior class would be a tough one to lose, but knew the program was on a good path because of the leadership and demeanor with which they carried themselves the past few years. Two straight 7-4 finishes have Henry County ready for more next fall, and players are all-in on making a name for themselves in the history books. The culture change effects for both programs are evident on the field, but the off-field impact is also noteworthy. Players have strong role models to show them how to be better players and better men, and the lessons they're learning will extend beyond Friday football games. No matter who you root for, both football programs are building something special and will be exciting to watch next season, and in the years to come.

HENRY COUNTY ALL-DISTRICT TEAM SELECTIONS



- BY ABBY HOOVEN**
- The following athletes were named to the Class 4A, District 4 All-District Team:
- **RB** — Ray Matthews (honorable mention)
 - **FB** — Nathen Corum (honorable mention)
 - **TE** — Kyle Gillingham (honorable mention)
 - **WR** — Blaik Nation
 - **OL** — Layne Hancock
 - **OL** — Alex Prewitt (honorable mention)
 - **LB** — Nathen Corum (honorable mention)
 - **LB** — Craig Cole
 - **DL** — Kyle Gillingham
 - **S** — Morgan Wilson (honorable mention)
 - **KR** — Blaik Nation (honorable mention)
 - **Long Snapper** — Brody Staples

Craig Cole was one of nine Henry County football players named to the All-District team.

Abby Hooven