

# KEVIN WARD MISSION AS FOOTBALL SEASON APPROACHES: EXPANDING CAVALIER DEPTH



**Above:** Zerafin Guardian (76) chases down a sack against Lexington a year ago. (Photo by Ron Barry)

## By Ron Barry

Anyone who's stuck his head out the door recently has noticed an eternal fact about West Tennessee: When it's August, it's hot. Brutally hot. Ridiculously hot. Almost "fire and brimstone" hot (since this is the Bible Belt).

And with schools starting earlier in recent years, area football coaches have consistently faced a tougher climate problem than in the days when your memories of "Friday Night Lights" came with crisp and cool fall temperatures.

Today's football coaches recognize that it seems like the first half of their schedule is battled just as much against the oppressive weather conditions as it is against any formidable opponent. And for that reason, it's become almost a fight for survival in order to be healthy when the bulk of your district schedule hits.

Crockett County Coach Kevin Ward knows it as well as anybody, and it's going to be even more of an issue this season as the Cavaliers are now part of a new eight-team district, which means you have to be in survival mode even longer.

When you toss in the reality that this particular group of teams seems to be fairly balanced – and strong – Ward is even more determined to try to develop a plan that can extend Crockett's potential playoff run.

"The toughest part about being in a really good eight-team district is that four good teams aren't going to be playing in the post-season," he said. "So we know that we need to be ready to play every single game that comes up this year. Any of these teams can probably beat any of the other teams if the concentration and the execution aren't there."

With that in mind – and adding the weather conditions back into the mix – Ward's pre-season mission has been to expand his team's depth, because to expect too many players to have to play both offense and defense throughout the game is no way to get to October healthy enough to make a serious run.

"Ideally we'd like to be able to play 11 guys on offense and a different 11 guys on defense, true platoon football," Ward said. "But to be able to do that, we need to have enough players rise to the challenge to claim one of those spots better than a two-way player has performed. We're still sorting things out, but we're not at the stage where we'd likely have 22 different guys out there yet."

With the annual Dyersburg Jamboree coming up Friday night – Crockett will play Munford in the second block of that four-matchup event – Ward and his staff have made some significant adjustments in positioning from some players that Cavalier fans were familiar with in 2024.

In an attempt to bolster his offensive line play, Ward has been searching for bigger bodies as possibilities after watching his team consistently playing "under-sized" in past seasons. But sometimes those bigger bodies don't come with the same "heart" demonstrated by the smaller players who have manned those positions.

"That's the toughest part about making these choices," Ward said, "and in another week, things may change again. I'm sure we'll continue making adjustments as we progress through the schedule. But right now, expanding our depth is the priority." If he had to project a starting lineup today, here's the way Crockett would potentially line up:

### OFFENSE

Center – Carson Bridger. Left Guard – Randle Perry. Right Guard – Brooks Harris or John Christopher. Left Tackle – Nolen Turner. Right Tackle – Zerafin Guardian. Tight End – Dre Walker. Receivers – Karson Burgess, Squirt Pickens, Ian Greenberg, Mason Dennis, and Gabe Dupree (any mix of these players is possible). Running Backs – DK Woods, Amarion Hobson, Demo Pickens. Quarterback – Ben Burgess. Kicker – Noah Mayfield.

### DEFENSE

Noseguard – Josh Simmons. Tackles – Guardian and Turner. Inside Linebackers – Jake Knox, Austin Carroll, and Walker. Outside Linebackers – Dupree and Hobson. Defensive Backs – Demo Pickens, Squirt Pickens or Kris Phillips, and Greenberg. Punter – Mayfield.

When Ward assesses the Cavalier schedule – “which is one of the toughest we’ve had, even the non-region games” – he’s not even certain who the probable front-runner is for a playoff berth.

“North Side might be the favorite – I honestly don’t know,” he said. “South Gibson is really the only district team that we haven’t played in a while, so we pretty much know the other teams. But we’ll get tested right off the bat with the Middle College team. They were 9-3 last season with only four seniors, but so we’ll know where we stand pretty quickly.” Thus far in the pre-season, Ward has some good news and some bad news.

“This is one of my most favorite teams that I’ve coached,” he said. “They are the definition of a team. They’re very close, and they love to be around each other. It’s a team of high character. I think the public will really enjoy their passion as they watch them play.” With six home games this season, Ward is looking forward to the crowd and the student body being a big factor in the team’s chances at success.

And the bad news?

“We haven’t exactly been as good as I’d like for us to be in our scrimmages,” Ward said. “We need to tackle better. We need to block better. We need to stick to our assignments better. Of course, our most recent scrimmage was with Westview. I’m not making excuses, but that’s one of the most talented teams that I’ve seen in a while. They have Division-I players all through the lineup, and their quarterback (sophomore Graham Simpson) is as good as advertised.”

Simpson is the younger brother of projected Alabama starter Ty Simpson. Ward said he was pleased with the way Crockett defended the bulk of the plays against Westview, but “Simpson killed us when we allowed him to scramble.

We were leaving people wide open to go somewhere else, and he’s too good to give him time to find them, because he will. We’ve got to do a better job in making those kinds of defensive reads.”

The Cavalier offense returns several veterans that give Ward optimism.

“Everybody knows what DK Woods can do when he gets the ball,” Ward said, “but we have some others who can run it too. Ben Burgess now has 12 games of varsity experience under his belt at quarterback, so he knows how the game speeds up at this level. He’s put on about 15 pounds and he’s a lot stronger now. His strength is his arm, so if we can improve our pass protection, we should be all right in the throwing game.”

Ward also returns tight end Dre Walker, who has already committed to the University of Delaware, which is moving up to Division-I this season. But this is a spot where Ward hopes to also occasionally work in the skills of Jake Knox and Austin Carroll, who were primarily inside linemen a year ago.

While Ward was hesitant to name anyone who has really taken a huge improvement leap from the past, he mentioned Squirt Pickens as a player to watch. “Squirt just goes all out all the time,” he said, “and he has a knack for finding the ball. He’ll be a big part whatever success we find.”

Crockett officially opens with non-district foes Middle College (August 22) and Ripley (August 29) before hitting a stretch of four straight district foes: Lexington (September 5), Dyer County (September 12), Hardin County (September 19), and North Side (September 26). Then – after a non-district duel with Dyersburg (October 3) and a bye week – they’ll complete the regular season district play against South Gibson (October 17), Chester County (October 24), and Jackson South Side (Thursday, October 30).



**Above:** Squirt Pickens going “all out” in the rain at Jackson South Side a season ago. (Photo by Ron Barry)

**Below:** Coach Kevin Ward and senior linebacker Austin Carroll (56). (Photo by Ron Barry)



**Above:** Two keys to Crockett’s offense: Tight end Dre Walker (6) and running back DK Woods (32). (Photo by Ron Barry)