

# Veteran group, new head coach to lead Wildcat football in 2022



*Louisburg junior quarterback Declan Battle returns as the Wildcat signal caller this season after Battle recorded 20 touchdowns as a sophomore.*

This isn't just any normal season for the Louisburg football team – in fact – it is almost the exact opposite.

The Wildcats are under new leadership as Drew Harding begins his first season as the team's head coach. It is a new voice and different way of doing things for the players.

If that wasn't a big enough change, the schedule is another one.

Louisburg will travel outside the state to play Rogers Heritage High School in Rogers, Ark. for the season's first game on Friday. Not only will the Wildcats be traveling, but they will be playing a large 7A program in the process.

Then, in a game normally reserved for the final week of the season, Louisburg will face off with rival Paola in week two.

In what seems like a hectic beginning for many, there is a semblance of familiarity. Louisburg brings back 16 seniors to this season's team, and several returning starters from last year.

It is that experience that Harding hopes can provide smooth sailing for a hectic first part of the season.

“I am definitely lucky coming in with 16 seniors,” Harding said. “It is really nice from a leadership standpoint. From a competitive standpoint, when you have some seniors who aren’t all on one side of the ball, you can put together a good scout team and gives us a good look. Those guys have been willing to do whatever. In practice, if they aren’t playing on defense, they are going in to help out on offense. It has been good in developing some depth on the lines.

“Most of these guys have been playing for awhile now, so hopefully that pays off for us and that game experience is something that you can’t replicate. It is really beneficial, especially early in the season.”

Offensively, they return nearly the entire side of the ball from 2021 and it all starts with junior quarterback Declan Battle.

Battle, who amassed more than 1,800 yards and 20 touchdowns last season as an honorable mention all-league player, will lead the Wildcat offense behind an experienced offensive line and backfield.

Harding is hoping his signal caller can take another step forward this season.



***Senior Mason Dobbins returns to lead the Louisburg wide receivers after earning second team all-league honors last year.***

“From what I have seen so far, his decision making is better and he is a lot more comfortable I would say,” Harding said. “We try to give him some simple reads where he can have one quick read and then get rid of the football. Same way in the run game. Having a year under your belt as a quarterback on Friday nights is huge. I think he is primed for a big season for us.”

Behind Battle, senior Riley Van Eaton and sophomore Ashton Moore return at running back after seeing varsity time a year ago. Junior Wyatt Holland also made the move to running back as all three will get their fair share of carries.

Senior Mason Dobbins, who earned second team all-league receiving honors a year ago, will lead the wide receiver group. Seniors Jackson Kush, Corbin Hamman, along with juniors Caden Caplinger, Brady Hickey and Hunter Heinrich, will all see time on the perimeter.



***Louisburg senior Nathan Vincent returns and will play a big part on the offensive and defensive lines.***

On the offensive line, the Wildcats will see a rotation of seniors Nathan Vincent, J.R. Rooney, Brayton Brueggen, Will Hutsell, Christian Golladay, junior Jaymes Melton and sophomore Conlee Hovey.

The biggest change on offense will be at the tight end spot. Senior Mack Newell made the move from soccer to football this fall and brings size to the position.

Newell, who is 6-3 and 230 pounds, will provide help in the run game and also a big target for Battle in the open field.

“That is a big addition for us,” Harding said. “There aren’t many high school football players who have the frame that he has. The ability to move and have the strength is going to help us in the run game as a blocker. He also is a big target over the middle in the pass game. There probably won’t be too many secondary guys excited to try and bring him down. The scrimmage (last Friday) was really good for him since he hasn’t played in two years and he was able to get the nerves out.”

Defensively, the Wildcats also return several starters from a year ago.



Rooney will anchor the interior of the defensive line after being named a first-team all-league player last season. He will be joined by a rotation of Brueggen, Golladay and Hutsell. From the defensive end spot, Newell, senior Isaiah Whitley, Vincent and Hovey will all see playing time there.



***Senior J.R. Rooney will help anchor the defensive line after earning first team all-league honors last year.***

At linebacker, Holland and Moore will lead the way along with sophomores Lucas Swartz and Brayden Yoder.

Senior Jase Hovey leads the secondary from the safety spot after being named a first-team all-league player last year and will be joined by fellow seniors Layne Ryals and Carson Wade. Battle, Heinrich, Dobbins and Hickey will all see time at the cornerback spot.

“We are fast,” Harding said of his defense. “The sideline to sideline speed is really, really good. Our linebackers are really fast, our safeties can run really well and we have a lot of team speed. Our defensive line is really athletic as well. We aren’t the biggest by any means, but I think our

speed can give teams some trouble.”

Louisburg also returns its veteran kicker as Ryals, who was a second team all-league punter and honorable mention kicker a season ago, looks to take another step forward this season.

The Wildcats will certainly get a test out of the gate as they travel to face a bigger Rogers Heritage team that has struggled in recent years. Still, Harding knows it will be a challenge going up against a bigger program.

“It is definitely a different start than I was picturing when I first took over,” Harding said. “We are excited to go to Rogers and I think it will be a cool experience for us. We are playing a 7A school and it is something we are looking forward to. We are going to do some different stuff and hopefully this experience is something our kids will remember forever. There is no one in Louisburg, Kansas who said they have played a school from Arkansas.”

Louisburg is anxious to get back to the postseason after falling in the first round to the eventual state champion, St. James Academy. And despite having schools like St. James, Bishop Miege and St. Thomas Aquinas in 4A this season, Harding has high hopes for his group of players.

“Their goal every year is to win a state championship,” Harding said of his players. “We want to compete each and every game, but we can’t get there unless we get better. I know it is cliché, but we have to get better every single day. We need to come together as a team and we have a lot of potential. If we do those things, I think we have a chance to be pretty good.”