

The Mudders!

Mountaineers Open Football Practice Monday Following Big Thunderstorm

By GARY STEWART
Editor of the Herald

A now to-be-expected afternoon thunderstorm had just delayed the first day of Kings Mountain High football practice for an hour. The Mountaineers had gone through their usual loosening up drills on a soaked practice field behind John Gamble Stadium and had broken into smaller groups to learn the finer points of blocking, handing off, firing off the line and running pass patterns.

"I don't want to hear any complaining. It might rain on a Friday night so you might as well get used to it," assistant coach Tony Leigh barked as his backs went through hand-off drills.

With that the players seemed to settle into the routine and make the best of the situation. Most of them, in fact, acted like they really enjoyed it. Running, hitting blocking dummies and often slipping and falling in the water cooled them off and was much better than practicing in 100-degree heat which is often the case in August.

Head coach Denny Hicks and his staff enjoyed it too...not so much the water as the desire of the players to perform well in spite of the conditions.

"All of the coaches are really excited about the attitude and work ethics of this group," said the veteran KM boss. "They came down here for the first day of practice and 10 minutes before we were ready to go on the field, the big storm came through. We had to split them up in the field house and jump rope and do other exercises because we had to get in this day of practice."

Almost an hour later, the rain stopped and the clouds moved away.

"We went outside and the water was standing everywhere," Hicks noted. "But you just have to believe these kids love to play football because they were ready to go out and work hard. We really enjoyed the recent two-week mini camp we had with them, and for them to come in in such adverse conditions and then do everything we asked of them speaks really well of them."

Hicks, who said this year's team gave more effort in the mini camp than any other he's coached here, can see that desire paying off for the Mountaineers when the season starts.

"We have six days of conditioning and our main concern during that time will be getting them into shape," Hicks said. "The toughest part of the football season is always the first six to 11 days. But this year, the state has allowed us to use field equipment and to hit pieces of equipment, and that will help get them used to contact. That's one of the best rule changes we've had in a long time. You can only condition so much, and in football you have to condition toward contact as well as sheer, physical condition."

The Mountaineer coaches used the first three days of practice to review the team's basic offense. The rest of the week they'll start putting in the defense.

"We just want to get everybody in the right place," he said. "We stress alignment, key and first step. That's

going to take six days to get down to where the players know exactly where they're supposed to be and what they're supposed to do."

The Mountaineers will use Saturday morning to get in their required six days of conditioning and then will begin hard contact next Monday. They'll practice twice a day Monday and Tuesday and then go to afternoon-only drills when teachers return to school Wednesday.

Hicks has 16 lettermen, including nine starters, back from last year's 5-5 team but the Mountaineers will be young in the line. They have experience and a lot of speed in the backfield.

Because of that inexperience up front, Hicks says the kicking game will be more important than ever this year.

"We always spend 20 to 25 minutes a day on the

kicking game," he said. "It has to be more productive this year than it's been the past couple of years, not just in kicking distance but in kickoff returns and punt returns. Break downs in punt coverage the last couple of years has not been too good to us. We're really hoping to sell our kids that the kicking game could possibly carry us in the first two or three games until the young line begins to set up and jell."

The Mountaineers return four players who started part or full-time in the offensive backfield last year, including quarterback Ryan Hollifield, tailback Victor Bell, fullback Jeff Lockhart and flanker Darius Ross. Ross, a junior, has been the team's leading pass receiver the past two years and Bell was one of the leading rushers as a sophomore last year.

Other members of the team are Steve Robbins, Quan Smith, D.J. Williams, Andy Hollifield, Marcus Brooks, Kevin Moss, Dale McClain, Keith Brown, Petie McNeal, Rodney Houser, Mike Byers, Stacey White, Lee McDaniel, Reggie Moss, Greg Beckwith, Chuck Bridges, Daryl Gash, John Hicks, Daniel Honeycutt, Scottie Hopper, Timmy McClain, Chris Putnam, Jon Reid, Jeff Rogers, Brandon White, Brent Wilson, Matt Shirah, Troy Watson, James Howard, Allen Moore and Chris Moore.

Many of the new players played on a jayvee team which finished 8-1 last year and had the best record in the conference.

"We feel like the young players that came out of mini camp will stay with us," said Brooks. "The people we have we can depend on. They've made a commitment to Kings Mountain football and have already gone through two tough weeks and showed up on the first day of practice. We feel real good about them. We've just had a tremendous response to the mini camp and came out with the whole group intact. That's very unusual and speaks well of this group."

Hicks doesn't plan any major changes in personnel or the Mountaineers' style of play.

"Some of the new kids coming in may have to be moved around some to give us some depth, but we don't anticipate any major changes unless it's because of injuries," Hicks said. "We'll continue to run the I-formation on offense but we probably won't be in a two tight end set like we were the last two years. We've got more speed and will run a lot of Pro-I and Pro-II slot."

"Defensively, we'll be the same," he added. "When Dan Brooks brought me here in 1981 it was to put in the split four and when I took over as head coach in '83 I told our guys then that we were going to build our fame and fortune on the split four defense. It's one of the more versatile defenses in the country and we can adapt our personnel to it more easily than any other defense."

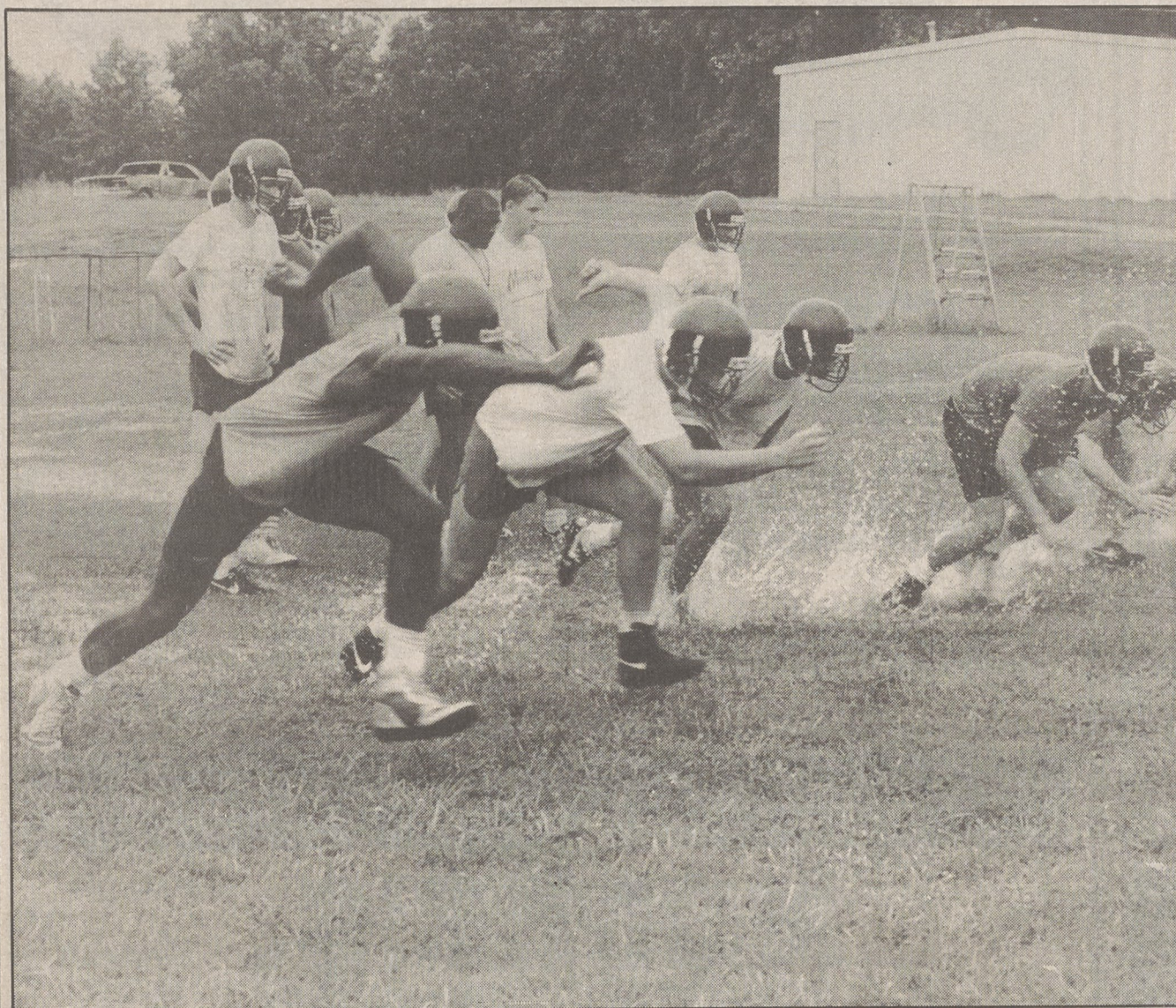
After next week's five days of heavy workouts, the Mountaineers will scrimmage East Burke on Sat., Aug. 12 at John Gamble Stadium and will travel to West Caldwell for a scrimmage on Thurs., Aug. 17. Their first game is August 25 at Canton Pisgah.

"We've got four tough weeks ahead of us, and two scrimmages," Hicks noted. "If this group stays together like I think they will, I think it's going to be a group we're going to enjoy working with and one that fans will enjoy watching."



STRETCH THAT NECK!

Ryan Hollifield gets loose at KMHS football practice



FIRE OFF THAT LINE!

Coach Chuck Gordon keeps eyes on The Hawgs



THE BIG SPLASH!

KM blockers hit dummies and water puddles