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CLIMAX - There's a benefit to having freshmen forced to step into key skill positions during a high school football season. Those freshmen become sophomores the following season, sophomores with valuable varsity experience.

Providence Grove High School football coach Calvin Brown had to use freshman quarterback Luke Thomas and freshman running back Caleb Rogers as the primary weapons in the team's offense last year, a year in which the Patriots finished 6-6 after a first-round playoff loss.

This year, the two sophomores are bigger, stronger and more confident and coupled with some veteran leadership in Drew Needham, Travis Boone, Anthony Castagna and Jacob Marcum, have lifted the Patriots to a school record-tying eight wins. The Patriots (8-3) will be making their second straight playoff appearance on Friday night when they take the short trip to Ramseur to battle Piedmont Athletic Conference foe and rival Eastern Randolph High School.

"Their growth has been a big part of our success," said Brown, who is in his fourth year at the helm and eighth overall at PGHS "The situation we put them in last year was not the situation we wanted to have to do. But we knew it would be beneficial in the long run. They are so much more confident right now. They have gone through a season. Playing under the lights on Friday night is a lot different than playing on Thursday nights or Wednesdays like they did in middle school. They jumped right to Friday night. Their confidence is stronger and they bought into our weight room program. They understand what is going on."

Thomas and Rogers aren't the only reasons the Patriots are in the position they are in. But they sure have played a big part. Thomas has completed 103 of his 208 attempts for 1,745 yards and 15 touchdowns with eight interceptions after throwing for 787 yards with five touchdowns and nine interceptions his freshman season.



*Providence Grove quarterback Luke Thomas. Photo by Paul Church/The Courier-Tribune.*

"Last year, the game was really fast for him as was expected," Brown said of his signal-caller. "We kept things very simple. We wanted to call things that would make him successful. This year, we have been able to turn him loose a little. I watch him out there and I have to remind myself sometimes that he's still just a sophomore."



*Caleb Rogers, sophomore running back for the Patriots. Photo by Paul Church/The Courier-Tribune.*

year."

Last year, PG scored a total of 168 points, an average of 14 points per game. This year, Providence Grove has scored 331 points through its first 11 games, an average of more than 30 points per game.

Defensively, the Patriots have been strong for most of the season. Castagna has had another incredible year as he has recorded 118 total tackles, including 104 solo stops. He already holds the school record for career tackles and can add the single-season mark Friday night with 11 tackles against the Wildcats.

Boone has recorded 62 tackles with five sacks and Needham has played a couple of different positions, moving to defensive end recently.

Brown, who praised his coaching staff for helping teach and inspire the players to their eight-win season, has led the Patriots to back-to-back winning regular seasons for the first time in school history.

Rogers has had a breakout campaign. He has rushed for 854 yards and 13 touchdowns, while also hauling in eight receptions for 277 yards and three more scores.

"Caleb had to learn how to hit holes and read blocks," Brown said.

Cam Way (31 receptions for 451 yards and three scores) and Marcrum (27 receptions for 530 yards and five scores) have been valuable receiving weapons. Needham has rushed for nearly 300 yards and added six touchdowns.

Of course, it all starts up front where the Patriots have plenty of experience. Gavin Collins, Brett Breedlove, Garrison Powell, Nolan Lanier and Jacob Collier have protected Thomas and opened holes for Rogers.

"We had a hard time scoring last year," Brown said. "The offense has been a lot better this

Now, the Patriots, who are 0-7 in previous playoff appearances, including three first-round losses to powerful Mountain Heritage, two to ER and one each to East Bladen and Reidsville, will be looking for that elusive first post-season win. It won't be easy. The Wildcats defeated the Patriots 47-0 to open the league season a few weeks back in a game that was stopped in the third quarter because of threatening weather.

"Our coaching staff has already talked and we'll be telling our players that it's not often you lose a game to an arch-rival and have a chance to redeem yourself," Brown said about preparing for the Wildcats' high-scoring attack. "We weren't playing real well back then. We are playing better now."

That they are.