

Gabriel Turner, Kylan Jordan and Travis Jones won't mince words if you ask them what the West Lowndes High School football team hopes to accomplish in 2023.

"We are out here practicing hard every day, and we have a good chance to win a championship this year," said Turner, a senior mainstay on the offensive and defensive lines.

Said Jordan, another senior who will play up front on both sides of the ball, "We had a good season last year, and we hope to make it even farther and hope to get to play for a state championship."

West Lowndes' road to the title game figures to be a little easier now that Bay Springs, the Mississippi High School Activities Association (MHSAA) Class 1A state champion the last two seasons, has moved to Class 2A in the latest reclassification. The move leaves West Lowndes, which went 8-4 in 2022 and lost to Bay Springs in the second round of the playoffs, as one of the preseason favorites to contend for a championship.

Anthony King, who is in his 13th year as head coach at West Lowndes, said he is happy Class 1A will have to crown a new champion after Bay Springs ended West Lowndes' season the last two seasons.

"Bay Springs was loaded," King said. "They taught us how to play. They were way more physical than we were and had more depth."

Despite falling short of a title the last two years, West Lowndes has won 19 games in the last two seasons, which is believed to be the most in the school's history, which dates back to when the school – then known as Motley High – opened. The Panthers may not have a big senior class – only five – but King likes his team's numbers (35-38 players) and its size up front, which suggests it will again rely on a rushing attack to drive its offense.

“We have a young team, a very experienced team,” King said. “We are expecting big things out of them.”

Turner, Jordan and Jones will play key roles up front in a “bully ball”, as King likes to call it, system. The Panthers’ size up front has allowed them to use their ground game to wear teams down the past few seasons. In 2023, King hopes to diversify the offense as the season progresses and his players mature because opponents have resorted to flooding the box to shut down the Panthers’ ground game.

Even if West Lowndes’ offense adds more passing to its attack, Jones said the Panthers’ aspirations won’t change. In fact, a more diverse offense may make it easier for West Lowndes to achieve its goal.

“It feels good to be a leader,” Jones said. “Everybody has been pulling hard for each other and working hard in the weight room to help us try to get a state championship.”

West Lowndes will face plenty of familiar faces – Biggersville and Baldwyn – as well as a handful of larger schools – Aberdeen (Class 3A) and Byhalia and North Pontotoc (Class 4A) – as it moves into Class 1A, Region 4 with Okolona, Smithville and Vardaman. King said the games against schools in larger classifications will help prepare his team for the postseason, provided his players stay healthy.

“We have got some big guys, so we kind of have been the bully,” King said. “I think we’re going to have size for the next few seasons, so we’re going to continue being a bully and play solid defense and be a physical team. We hope the success rubs off on guys and they get a better work ethic.”

King said West Lowndes is doing all it can to get bigger and stronger and to stay healthy. He said depth will be a key issue as the team looks to young players like two-year starter Cam Evans (linebacker / running

back) and sophomore Jaqualon Sharp to be physical and to be playmakers.

“We have to get our get passing in,” King said. “We have some guys who can run and we have one or two guys who can throw the football. We just have to put them in the right formations and get repetitions so we can increase our passing game.”

West Lowndes will face Leake County at 11 a.m. Saturday, Aug. 19, in a scrimmage at Louisville High. It will open the regular season on the road Friday, Aug. 25, against Class 1A French Camp.