

By RICHIE BOUTON, *The Wilson Post*

LEBANON -- There's a saying that goes something like "you go into battle with the army you have, not the one you wish you had."

No one knows that more than McClain Christian Academy Athletic Director Shawn O'Conner. Barely out of his own rookie year teaching at MCA, O'Conner has taken on the task of fielding the school's first football team. And, ready or not -- the team's first game is a little over a month away.

No stranger to the rigors of a busy athletic schedule in addition to academics, O'Conner played freshman football at Lebanon High School, then played basketball and baseball after transferring to Watertown High School.

O'Conner also played jayvee basketball for Cumberland University and did a three-year stint coaching Amateur Athletic Union hoops.

Adding "football coach" to his resume, O'Conner is also the MCA boys basketball coach and says getting the football program going has been humbling and a learning experience.

"It hasn't been easy," says O'Conner who jokingly adds that black coffee has been a huge help in getting through the 16-hour days. The amount of support from the MCA parents and community has been overwhelming, but we still have a long way to go."

Fortunately, O'Conner isn't going it alone. Volunteering their time, a handful of MCA parents and even a grandparent have stepped up to help with rigors of daily practice.

His assistants are an eclectic mix of old and new that O'Conner says has worked well so far in molding a team on the practice field.

Notable in the MCA coaching staff is former Lebanon High School head football coach David Petty, who was in charge of the Blue Devil program in the early 1970s following the tenure of Jim Meyer and before Ralph Overton. Under Coach Petty, the Blue Devils reached the Mid-State Bowl in 1972, falling to McGavock High.

Petty, a former fullback at Middle Tennessee State University where he played for the legendary Charles "Bubber" Murphy, will run the MCA defense.

"Having access to Coach Petty and his experience has been an incredible resource both on and off the field," said O'Conner.

O'Conner says one thing his staff has in common is their desire to see the team win their first football game. But before that first win, there had to be practice. And with practice, the specter of injuries showed its head.

The football program was literally days old and O'Conner had a handful of players sitting out with an assortment of injuries.

For established teams with a 40-plus player roster, three or four on the injured list may seem trivial.

For MCA, four or five players sidelined with injuries is a significant percentage of the team.

"Any injury is one too many," says O'Conner. "But, injuries are an unfortunate part of the game and we have to address them as they happen.

Taking all the stress involved in starting a football team into consideration, O'Conner has nothing but praise for his fledgling team.

"We literally started with nothing and these young men have given the program an incredible amount of effort," said O'Conner. "I am very proud of them for stepping up and setting such a

good example for our school.”

O’Conner adds that the fact that they are playing on the school’s first football team is important too.

“I hope this is an experience they carry with them for the rest of their lives,” said O’Conner.

MCA will be competing as a junior varsity squad in the Middle Tennessee Athletic Conference, a league composed of approximately 15 similar-sized schools across the state.

“We’re looking at a roster of 16-20 players,” O’Conner said, “we’ve got one senior, two sophomores and the rest of the team is mainly seventh and eighth graders.”

Play in the league is eight-on-eight and not the traditional 11-man format. The school’s athletic teams share the “Bulldog” moniker with partner school Cumberland University.

With a six game regular season slated, the MCA football Bulldogs have their first game scheduled at home against Providence Christian Academy on August 19.

“We have a football field adjacent to our school and hope to have the goal posts installed within the next couple of weeks.

MCA players reported for the start of camp Monday, July 19 with an out-of-two retreat planned for July 23, 24 and 25. The team will visit Sacred Heart School Saturday, July 31 for a scrimmage.