

CFCA Football Season

It wasn't long ago that Central Fellowship Christin Academy wasn't considered much of a football school. That reputation has changed in the last three years thanks to head coach Jake Walls and a roster of talented young men. During Walls' first year in the 2018 season, CFCA started 0-4, then won five straight, snatching the region title to the surprise of many. The following year, the team won region again and finished with an overall record of 6-5, which included a 27-25 win against AA-power ACE. This year, in spite of numerous obstacles brought on by COVID, the Lancers went 11-1 and claimed the state title for the first time in school history. Though 2020 proved to be the team's best season to date, it almost didn't happen according to Walls.

"In the beginning, we were worried about having a season at all. Our summer practices and weights training was delayed until the first week of June. Then at the start of the season, our first game was pushed back two weeks. Then our second game was postponed. It was really looking bad for a minute there. But everyone on the team stuck through it and was adaptable."

The first game the Lancers played was actually a replacement, after the team they were supposed to face cancelled the day before due to quarantine. Walls called around and discovered that Thomas Jefferson Academy from Louisville, Georgia was stuck in the same boat.

"Thomas Jefferson reached out and asked if we wanted to play. It wasn't an ideal situation, because I like to do a lot of prep work in the week leading up to a game. I'll usually show our guys film of the other team and come up with a game plan. There wasn't time for any of that. We really went into that game blind. Thomas Jefferson wound up being our only loss of the season. They beat us 14-7. Thomas Jefferson was one of the best competitors we faced, but I think the outcome could've been different if we'd had time to prepare. Still, that game showed our willingness to play and our ability to adapt."

The team was forced to continue to adapt as players regularly sat out for quarantine. Two of the lacers star players, sophomore quarterback Jeb Walls and senior wingback Ethan Queen, each had to sit out for two-week periods during the course of the season. Jeb, who's coach Walls son, was the team's strong safety and leading rusher and passer. Over the course of the season, Jeb rushed for 1,100 yards and threw for 1,000, which was a statistical milestone for the school. Meanwhile, Queen was the team's leading rusher the year before and according to Walls, their "best overall athlete".

"Having those guys out, even for practices, made it hard to get in that rhythm that allows a team to improve week to week. When you've got a small roster like we do and you're missing 3-4 guys, it affects practice in a very negative way. We had lots of guys out but never more than two or three at a time. The team kept chugging along and I filled those holes with younger guys. It was challenging but also rewarding."

The team's biggest rivalry matchup was against the Flint River Wildcats, a team new to the league with an established reputation as a football powerhouse. CFCA's older rivals, Windsor and Covenant, don't have eleven-man-football programs and only compete with the Lancers in basketball. CFCA faced Flint River twice. First in an October matchup the Lancers won 34-7, then again in the state championship.

“Flint River was probably the best team we played, and they were the team standing in our way to win state. The state championship was a great game. We led 7-0 for most of the first half. Our guys stopped them inside the 10-yard-line early in the game. Then, it was back and forth until halftime. At the start of the third quarter, we hit a big play and got really comfortable. Our guys found their rhythm and the Wildcats couldn’t stop us after that. We ended up scoring 28-points in the second half and ran away with the game.”

Football at CFCA goes back nearly 35 years. The program started a few years after the school’s founding in 1970 and has continued these last five decades (excluding a brief hiatus in the 90’s). While the Lancers have long-standing traditions in basketball, track and soccer, football was never really CFCA’s thing until recently. CFCA competes in the Georgia Association of Private and Parochial Schools league, which has afforded them some opportunities other schools don’t have.

“Being a smaller school gives these kids opportunities that they wouldn’t have at Northside, Warner Robins or even Stratford. One of our kids Austin Sanders, who was an all-state player this year, transferred from Warner Robins where he wasn’t getting much playing time. Austin become a leader and one of our most talented players. He found so much success here, whereas at Warner Robins he was sort of lost in the shuffle. That’s what’s so great about athletics at CFCA. It affords opportunities to kids who might not have them otherwise.”

Although COVID stifled crowd turnout early in the season, the fans were out in full force by state playoffs time. Walls describes home games as a safe place where parents can let their kids roam free, knowing that they’re surrounded by good families with Christian values.

The team has a core group coming back next season and Walls expects his guys to again compete for a championship. The team is losing a few seniors who were key in their 2020 run: Austin Sanders, Andrew Evans, Landon Gallaher, Ethan Queen and Aaron Morgan. The team will certainly have some big shoes to fill when they start back at summer training in May.

“The way we win is through toughness, execution and preparation. Our guys put in three and a half hours a day, four days a week over the summer. That’s an unusual level of commitment and you can see the results in our record. Our team is made up of smart tough kids who know how to get the job done.”