



NEWS RELEASE

WILLCOX COWBOYS RIDING TALL IN THE SADDLE

PHOENIX, AZ (Oct. 22, 2009) – A remarkable transformation has occurred in the football program at Willcox High.

Under a new coach, Jim Hughes, the team had gone from a 2-8 finish in 2008 to a team that was 6-1 entering Friday night's (Oct. 23) Class 2A East Region home game against perennial power Thatcher.

Hughes used to be part of that power structure at Thatcher, having coached the Eagles to the state title in 1998.

But now he is a Willcox Cowboy and is on the other sideline.

Hughes was a principal in the Thatcher Elementary district and retired in the spring, or so he thought.

"I was ready to ride off into the sunset," he said.

Before he could remove his boots, Hughes inquired about the football opening at Willcox, as suggested by Joe Garcia, a teacher at Willcox and a former player for Hughes when he was an assistant coach at Easter Arizona Junior College.

"I've always enjoyed coaching, so I thought I would give it another try," Hughes said.

He found a group of players hungry for success.

"They were tired of losing," he said.

It would take a lot of hard work, but the players were willing to put in the effort.

"It's all about them," Hughes said. "They are committed and bought into the system that we were trying to teach.

"They have worked hard to get where they are. They were ready to be successful."

It began with work in the weight room and continued at a summer camp near Heber, where the team shared workouts with Mesa Mountain View, a Class 5A Division I school long known for its commitment to winning.

"Our kids saw what Mountain View does, how they approach things, and they decided they wanted to do those types of things," Hughes said.

Hughes grew up in Thatcher and lives about halfway between Thatcher and Willcox. He relies on experience gained from coaching at Thatcher and other schools in the area, including Duncan, Pima and EAJC. He also served as an assistant coach to Tot Workman at Round Valley High for a few years.

The Cowboys' strength is their defense. The leader is hard-hitting linebacker Mike Rand, a 6-foot-1, 195-pound senior.

The offense is geared to the run, with 6-0, 170-pound senior Rudy Verdugo carrying the ball a large share of the time.

“We also can pass effectively, maybe 10-12 times a game, be efficient, keep the other teams honest,” Hughes said.

What makes it all go is the play of the offensive line.

“From Day 1, they have shown the biggest improvement for us,” Hughes said. “They are getting off the ball, staying low and sustaining their blocks.”

The overall approach requires a great deal of self-discipline, and that includes how the players dress and groom themselves.

“I don’t know if it means you will win any more football games, but that’s the way we’re doing it,” Hughes said. “I guess I’m old-school, and I feel that is the right way to do it. We want them to be dressed nicely on Fridays with no facial hair, and they really have complied.”

It is working, and those who follow the Willcox Cowboys hope it carries over into this year’s playoffs and beyond.

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