

Lions *from A1*

the past few years. “But I have learned a lot in the last six months or so, and it’s good to be back on the field,” he said.

The fact that he would be coming back to coaching during the pandemic was a consideration, however it did not stop Polamalu’s return. “It was a little different. Who knew what it was going to be like? [It] was June, so we were right in the middle of it,” he said. “But I guess the impression was that life was going to get back to normal soon. And it just never did.”

But as far as Polamalu is concerned, as a new coach it was a great opportunity to see what the program was about, where it was at, and have an opportunity to build relationships with other coaches. For him, building the staff, getting to know players and administration and the community, the pandemic pause provided him with extra time to get his bearings.

“But never did I dream that we’d be playing in the beginning of March,” he said.

With so many years of experience, Polamalu knows what it means to face challenges, and this year is no different. As a result of COVID-19, one of the changes Cottage Grove has had to make to its football program this school year was the decision to play only at the junior varsity (JV) level; the team just didn’t have the numbers to compete at the varsity level.

“Challenge is always around the corner,” said Polamalu. “I’m not sure I’ve ever been in a situation where we [only] had two seniors. I think it’s the not knowing, and the pandemic that we’re in. So,

the numbers were really low. We were sitting at anywhere from seven to 12 kids on a daily basis for our workouts, so it wasn’t looking very good.”

Polamalu said he and his coaches talked about the situation before Christmas break, and he was worried about the numbers — which he saw as the bottom line in the decision.

“[So, we] took the approach that we’re going to do what’s best for Cottage Grove and not put our kids in a bad situation, but [rather] a positive learning environment, and competitive,” he explained. “As the time got closer, we finally made that decision, and I appreciate the support of the administration.”

Making the final choice to play only JV was not one that Polamalu or Athletic Director Matt Myers wanted to make. “It’s not an easy decision. Kids come here to play varsity football. But I felt it was best for our program and our kids, and to [help] build our numbers,” Polamalu said. “So, we moved forward and had a couple of tough conversations, but our numbers are slowly but surely beginning to rise.

“With the word from the governor and the health department that we’re playing, we’ve been able to move the number up to about 25 to 27 kids.”

With recent positive news finally giving everyone a bit more hope each day, Polamalu said he is grateful for the team he has. “It’s been a daily grind, but I love the kids I’ve got out there; they’ve got some great attitudes, some great work ethic. Hopefully we’ve got time to learn. I’m a big process guy, so we’ve got a lot of teaching to do, and we’re

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— CGHS head football coach Joe Polamalu

going to take that time to do it.”

The decision to play JV this season certainly reflects a common theme across all local schools, as all have had to do things differently in some way this year. Polamalu has hope that when the next season comes this September, things will be better. But in the meantime, he understands the disappointment felt by his seniors.

“I feel bad for them. We’re now going on two years,” said Polamalu. “As with a lot of things, we’ve been on our own to make do with what we have, to keep hopes up and minds in a fresh place, and it’s been a battle.”

But the new coach said he sees the corner turning a little bit, along with a little glimpse of hope.

“Kids [are] getting an opportunity to be a part of something special, which is really just being together; we care less about winning and losing, and who’s better, and [we’re happy] just to get on the same field for a while,” Polamalu said. “Along with our seniors, we’ve got a great group of juniors, and I’m excited to see them. Our line is slowly but surely coming around, and I definitely have some guys that have really worked throughout the time I’ve been here.”

Among them is junior Ayden Freeman, who Polamalu describes as a “no-nonsense” kind of player who just works hard and is a great example. “Not only on the field, but in school [as well]. I know he’s constantly working and doing stuff. The kids look up [to him], especially in his position area. I pretty much feel he’s kind of the rock right now.”

Polamalu also spoke highly of another junior, lineman Cole Johns, who Polamalu said put in his two weeks’ notice at work to make sure he can make practice on time. “[He’s] keeping up on his grades and also working a full-time job and doing good things. I’m excited to see him back and enjoying running around and being a kid again,” Polamalu said.

Other standouts include junior Brennen Bouche and sophomore twin brothers Ethan and Hadyn Petersen. “I enjoy watching their effort every day in practice, but [also the fact that] like brothers, they are always competing.”

Leading the team from the pocket will be sophomore Brayden Crump, who Polamalu said he is particularly proud of. “Brayden right now is looking really good and is another great young man.”

Polamalu said his players’ efforts, attitudes and

support of each other have all aided them in following what he considers the most important aspects of being a player at Cottage Grove — and the most important factors there are in order to be a starter.

“We continue to work on that on a daily basis,” said Polamalu. “They know how important these [aspects] are to me and this program and to them, especially in life. You’ve got to have high marks in those areas, and so far, I see it working more and more every day. We continue to work daily on it.”

In addition to the team’s dedication and hard work in preparing for the upcoming 6-week season, Polamalu expressed his appreciation for the Li-

ons’ coaching team he has working with him. “The coaches have put in a lot of time, and I appreciate them jumping on board and making the transition seamless for me,” he said. “And, of course, [Athletic Director] Matt Meyers has done a lot to support us.”

In all, Polamalu is clearly ready to get the football program running at Cottage Grove. The Lions open the season at home next Wednesday, March 3, when they kick off against Elmira beginning at 5:30 p.m. As with all sporting events for now, there will be no spectators allowed.

However, fans can watch games live on the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) Network for a small fee.

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