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## Former prep stars making the leap

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They all enter with varying ideas of where they'll fit on depth charts and how likely they are to see the field as freshmen.

Some, like former Smyrna star Rodriguez Wilks, who was the state's Mr. Football recipient, know they'll have an opportunity to start. Others, like former Riverdale standout David Spurlock, have been told they could crack the second string.

What they all share is the common understanding that, entering their careers as Division-I football players, high school must be placed in the rearview mirror.

"College is another level," says former Siegel standout Montori Hughes. "Everybody is just as fast, just as strong."

Wilks, Spurlock and Hughes are three of the most talented high school football players ever to play in Rutherford County. Wilks (wide receiver/defensive back) and Hughes (defensive lineman) have signed to play collegiately at the University of Tennessee. Spurlock (offensive lineman) is headed for Florida State.

But even after making their college decisions official in February on National Signing Day, these athletes knew their tickets had not been punched, that there was still work to do.

And they weren't the only ones.

Rutherford County saw nine players sign Division-I football letters of intent on Signing Day. In addition to Wilks, Siegel's Hughes and Spurlock, Riverdale's Travis Lilienthal (MTSU) and David Sumrall (Navy), Siegel's Caleb Harper (Northwestern), La Vergne's Collins Ukwu (Kentucky) and Mike Bryant (Vanderbilt) and Blackman's Adam Smith (Western Kentucky) signed with NCAA Football Bowl Subdivision schools.

Almost immediately, each player received large booklets from their respective schools detailing what the programs expected them to do over the summer. Weightlifting, conditioning, flexibility, nutrition — it was all covered.

To supplement those fitness regimens, many of the players enlisted the help of personal trainers.

Spurlock and Sumrall became fixtures at D1 Sports Training in Franklin, working with former NFL Europe player and renowned trainer Will Santi.

Spurlock, who has been told by FSU assistant coach Rick Trickett he could arrive in Tallahassee as a No. 2 lineman on the depth chart, knew that a rigorous offseason workout plan was imperative.

"I'm coming in second string, and every time I'm in the weight room, I think about that," Spurlock says. "All I want to do is be ready. I don't want to get killed on the first day out there."

Spurlock and Sumrall worked with two other UT signees — Ben Bartholomew and Preston Bailey — and Santi said Spurlock was "without a doubt" the leader of the group.

Wilks and Hughes, meanwhile, trained in Murfreesboro with Dwayne Beasley, the founder of 2nd Wind Sports Training. Wilks was there five days a week, helping lead workouts and, Beasley said, doing as much as possible to enhance his already-college-level skills.

"Rod has a God-gifted ability," Beasley says. "But Rod likes to be pushed. He's kind of second-to-none in that way. Even though he has the God-gifted ability, instead of just taking off and being lazy, he takes advantage of the training that's around him to try to enhance his skills so he can compete at the next level."

### **The head game**

For all of the preparation Spurlock, Wilks and others have done, however, MTSU coach Rick Stockstill says that maturity level more often than not trumps speed, skill and strength.

"Not only do you have to have the physical ability to play," Stockstill says, "but you have to be mature enough mentally as well as physically — because there's an awful lot thrown at you come the end of August: The season starts, school starts, you've got a heavier school load

"... It's a lot more on them mentally than what they're probably used to."

Not that physical readiness isn't a necessity, as well. In that light, Stockstill says freshmen contributors tend to be skill players simply because they are more apt than linemen to have the same level of speed and strength their upperclassmen counterparts.

"There is some difference between (skill players), but not as drastic as the big guys — the offensive linemen, the defensive linemen, the linebackers," Stockstill says. "Those guys, they're having to go against 300-pound grown men that bench press over 400 pounds, and so I think for the linemen, it's very difficult for them to play as a freshman.

"And if they do play as a freshman, they're pretty talented."

### **Redshirt option**

Some freshmen are thrust into important roles before they're ready — because of necessity.

Lilienthal, who played center at Riverdale, senses that may be his case this fall. Admittedly undersized (close to 260 pounds), he would prefer to redshirt a year and develop more. But with injuries widespread among the Blue Raiders' offensive line, Lilienthal is preparing to play.

In working closely with Beasley, Lilienthal has improved his 40-yard dash time from 5.1 to 4.9. His bench has jumped from 265 to 290. And his squat is up to 515.

"I want to redshirt just because I want to get real big and real strong before I actually have to go out on the field," Lilienthal says. "I just would like an extra year. But they're talking like I might not be able to."

While he doesn't yet feel altogether ready, Lilienthal knows his work with Beasley has helped significantly.

"Coach Beasley has got me a lot closer," Lilienthal says. "I'm really thankful for him."

Starting at the end of the high school season, Beasley worked most closely with Lilienthal, Wilks and Harper — doing his best to show them exercises that would make them as college-ready as possible, like bungee-cord speed training, weighted speed sleds, NFL combine agility drills and unique flexibility routines.

"I give them a lot of training they wouldn't ever see until they got to the next level," Beasley says. "Their body complexion will change."

### **Unorthodox breeds results**

That type of training is becoming much more widespread and even creeping into the regimens of high school players. Jordon Hankins, a former player at UT-Martin and now an assistant at Riverdale, heads up the strength and conditioning program there. It's often hard for him to believe how physically imposing — in terms of speed and strength — his players have become.

"When I was coming out of high school, 4.6 was really good 40 time," Hankins says. "You go to a combine now, and watch it, and 4.6 is average."

Harper, who will play defensive back at Northwestern, attributes his improvements to Beasley's knowledge of the body and of position-specific training. He has benefited personally from the dynamic exercises taught by Beasley.

"It's a little unorthodox, but it definitely helps," Harper says. "My first week working with Dwayne, I knew that I was getting better. Not only just getting bigger and stronger, but faster too — more explosive and more agile, too."

For Spurlock, it's a lifestyle. Not only does he work out five days a week, he has committed to a strict diet: Six meals a day, with protein as the main component.

"I'm trying not to get full every time, and I'm losing fat and putting on muscle," Spurlock says.

### **Ultimate preparation**

Clearly, the focus on physical improvement is widespread. But when camp begins in a little more than a month, the mental game remains the key to securing playing time.

Phillip Fulmer, who will coach Wilks and Hughes at UT, concurs with Stockstill in that maturity is the No. 1 question mark for incoming freshmen — even for the players who arrive at fall camp ready to play physically.

"If they have got a mindset that they're going to prepare themselves and get themselves ready, odds are they'll have a chance to play," Fulmer says. "If they think they're entitled or they don't prepare or anything like that, the odds are they're not going to play."

In the end, Fulmer says, it depends on the individual and how they've been raised, how they've been coached.

"With (Wilks and Hughes), they've come from good programs," Fulmer says. "They've been around us. Rodriguez has (brother Marsalous Johnson) there, so there's no reason he wouldn't understand for sure what's expected."

"I think both (Wilks and Hughes) definitely have a chance to contribute right away."