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It's more than just a game for Rantoul football

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Sun, 08/12/2018 - 7:00am | [Matt Daniels \(/author/matt-daniels\)](/author/matt-daniels)

RANTOUL — A visible reminder of what Donnell Robertson meant to Angelo Brown is permanently etched on Brown's left arm.

The tattoo the Rantoul senior quarterback got in July explains what he and his other Eagles' teammates have coped with since Robertson's unexpected death in June, two months before Robertson's senior football season was set to start.

"Sometimes you go through the struggle, but you've just got to keep pushing," Brown said about the words he carries with him everywhere in honor of his close friend. "The bad things are going to turn into strengths for you."

An offseason of increasing the program's numbers and trying to reshape the culture of a program that hasn't had a winning season since 2005 took a jarring hit with news of Robertson's death earlier this summer.

News that second-year coach Tom Hess and his program are still coming to grips with ahead of Rantoul's season opener on Aug. 24 against Prairie Central at the Eagles' own Bill Walsh Field.

"A lot of people do ask about it outside the program," Hess said. "We bring it up quite often because it's always on our minds as coaches and players. The kids grew up with him. It's been a huge obstacle to overcome for our program, but these young men have been so resilient, and they've come together."

It hasn't happened overnight. And it hasn't come without some tears shed.

"It was tough," senior wide receiver Kayon Cunningham said. "He was our motivation because he was our big guy in the backfield. He was really the one that could get us our yards. Everybody really looked up to Donnell."

They still do. But it still's difficult knowing the 6-foot, 200-pound running back and linebacker last season won't join his teammates this season.

"We talk about it every day," Brown said. "We talk to each other about what happened, what was he going through and how can we make it better for everyone. The past couple months, we're slowly trying to get over it."

'We were just way behind'

High morale hasn't always existed with the Rantoul football program. Or a common bond. Hess is optimistic this year's group can break through what's happened to the Eagles — five head coaches and a combined 16-92 record since Rantoul lost a Class 4A first-round playoff game to Prairie Central in 2005 — and restore some respectability to the program, the school and the community in the process.

"To me, the No. 1 indicator of a good team is the culture you can create," Hess said. "Our culture here was really in bad shape when we took over, and we're changing the culture."

How?

Roster depth helps, with 77 players out at a recent afternoon practice this past week, more than double the 34 players Hess inherited when he took over the program in December 2016.

"It means a lot to me because I was trying to get people to come out my freshman year, but not everyone wanted to come out," Brown said. "This year, when I see everybody out here, it makes me feel good

inside."

By implementing an emphasis on work done in the weight room during the offseason.

"We were just way behind in that aspect," Hess said. "The kids have bought in and done a great job. That starts with our P.E. curriculum and our weight-lifting classes. Our athletes are in there working hard during class, and with our offseason, after-school and summer programs, we've done a lot of physical development."

Hess has implemented character and leadership programs on how players interact with their teammates, how they treat their teachers, how they act in a classroom and much more.

"What changes the culture is the players being able to make good decisions, being able to take initiative and being able to take ownership of the program and each other," Hess said. "It's not just some coach bossing them around, but actually them caring about what's going on and making good decisions. They've pushed through and pushed past. These kids have built this program up to where it's at now."

'He's a dynamic player'

All the new players in the program, all the weights lifted and all the lessons learned off the field can certainly help.

But winning football games also comes down to making plays when the Friday night lights are shining bright against quality teams in the Illini Prairie Conference.

Enter Brown, a key linchpin and hope for a possible turnaround by Rantoul this season. The 6-foot, 180-pound quarterback completed 28 of 66 passes for 412 yards, three touchdowns and no interceptions last season, while adding 590 rushing yards on 86 carries and seven touchdowns operating out of the Eagles' single-wing offense.

"He's a dynamic player," Hess said. "He's big, strong and fast. He's seasoned. He's been playing varsity football pretty much his whole high school career. What we do offensively, he's a great fit. We need a running quarterback who's going to run around quite a bit, but he's really developed an understanding of where to throw and when to throw. His leadership has definitely improved. You combine that with his athleticism, it makes for a dangerous player."

Junior Luke Zech and senior Deandre Walker are other capable options to run the ball, with senior Hayden Cargo (seven catches for 146 yards, two touchdowns in 2017), Cunningham and junior Kamryn Rome set to fill spots at receiver.

Aside from Brown, the Eagles' greatest strength on offense rests with the offensive line. Seniors Corbin Lantis and Andy Vazquez, along with juniors Sam Paiz and Noah Sellers are veterans expected to contribute up front.

"It's beneficial to our team," Cunningham said. "You need some people who have been here a while and know what they're doing. Those guys do."

Defensively, Rantoul struggled last season, giving up an average of 39.2 points. Needless to say, those numbers have to improve, with senior Nathan Lord and Lantis expected to anchor the linebackers and safety Joe Swinney serving as the captain of the defense.

Going up against the rigors that the IPC presents in perennial powers like Unity, Monticello, St. Joseph-Ogden and Bloomington Central Catholic offers up its own challenges.

"You've got three or four Hall of Fame coaches and programs with great tradition and culture," Hess said. "We really want to emulate some of that or learn from them. We've learned how we want to make our own culture unique here for Rantoul, but we're looking forward to those games and the challenges they bring."

'He loved playing football'

Still, a lot has to go right for the Eagles if they want to surprise people around the area and reach the five-win plateau needed to become eligible for the playoffs. The last time they reached the postseason, Facebook was in its infancy stages only at college campuses, Twitter was a year away from launching and Instagram and Snapchat were far from becoming the social media staples they are today for high school students.

That doesn't diminish Brown's enthusiasm or expectations for what Rantoul could accomplish this season.

"I've been taught to be a leader," he said. "It's not a lot of pressure on me, but I know I have a lot to do and get my other teammates to be leaders on and off the field. Our hope is to go to the playoffs. It would be exciting to everybody."

Cunningham echoes his fellow senior's sentiments.

"I feel like a lot more people would come to watch us and a lot more people would join football if we start to have success," Cunningham said. "A lot of people don't want to join because we haven't been a very successful program."

That's on Hess and his staff, which includes former Fisher coach Matt Leng as an assistant coach, to help create.

"We want to put up a great fight against those great teams on our schedule," Hess said. "We may or may not win, but what we're looking for is that we're playing our best. We can't really control our opponents. We know we have some quality opponents, but it's all about us taking care of us."

And remembering Robertson. That goes without saying for those in the Rantoul program.

"He loved playing football with us," Cunningham said. "I feel he would have really wanted us to keep playing hard, keep working and have a memorable year."

RANTOUL'S 2018 SCHEDULE

DATE OPPONENT TIME

Aug. 24 vs. Prairie Central 7 p.m.

Aug. 31 at St. Joseph-Ogden 7 p.m.

Sept. 7 vs. Olympia 7 p.m.

Sept. 14 at Monticello 7 p.m.

Sept. 22 vs. St. Thomas More* 7 p.m.

Sept. 28 vs. Chillicothe IVC 7 p.m.

Oct. 5 at Bloomington CC 7 p.m.

Oct. 12 vs. Unity 7 p.m.

Oct. 19 at Pontiac 7 p.m.*At Memorial Stadium, Champaign

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