

Rhodes reshaping Roaders in transitional season

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BRUNSWICK — When Nicholas Rhodes took over the Brunswick football program in January, the returning Railroader players weren't exactly warm to him yet.

There's always some level of adjustment between a new head coach and his players, but Rhodes and Brunswick needed longer than usual to get acquainted. He's a first-time head coach and is taking over for Jerry Smith, a Brunswick native who was well-liked by his players.

"It was definitely a choppy relationship at first," Roaders senior linebacker Owen Hall said. "Everyone was skeptical about how everything was gonna go."

But a series of high-intensity offseason workouts put to rest any lingering concerns.

That has Brunswick feeling more confident in itself entering a transitional 2025 with numerous key pieces to replace and a new identity to forge.

"It's going good now. Everybody's built a good relationship with him," Hall said. "He's pushing our team hard to make us good."

Rhodes comes over the mountains from Boonsboro High, where his stint as a defensive coordinator helped a stingy Warriors squad knock off the Roaders twice in 2024, including in the playoffs.

Several Brunswick players took note of his unit's discipline and toughness in both losses, and that's something Rhodes has drilled into the



| Brunswick schedule | | |
|--------------------|------------------|------|
| Date | Opponent | Time |
| Sept. 5 | WILLIAMSPORT | 6:30 |
| Sept. 12 | TUSCARORA | 6:30 |
| Sept. 19 | at Boonsboro | 7 |
| Sept. 26 | SMITHSBURG | 6:30 |
| Oct. 2 | at St. James | 4 |
| Oct. 10 | at Middletown | 6:30 |
| Oct. 17 | at South Carroll | 6:30 |
| Oct. 24 | WALKERSVILLE | 6:30 |
| Oct. 31 | at Catoclin | 6:30 |

Roaders in the first few weeks of practice. And it's especially apparent where he's most comfortable coaching.

"We're gonna be a mean defense this year," senior linebacker Quinn Nugent said. "No one's afraid to get dirty and make a tackle and hit somebody. And that means we're definitely gonna beat down people, especially late in games."

In turn, it could make Brunswick's defense something to lean on in a 2025 season that will be a step back on offense.

The Roaders are returning the majority of their defensive starters — led by Hall, Nugent, senior defensive lineman Dorran Charles and senior safety Barima Baffoe — from a unit that allowed 18.5 points per game in 2024, third-fewest among Frederick County public school teams. It gives Rhodes a baseline to install a simplified playbook that led to success at Boonsboro.

His defense will be fast and physical as a result.



Staff photo by Ric Dugan

FACT BOX

Region: Class 1A North. **State championships:** 0. **Coach and record with team:** Nicholas Rhodes, first season. **2024 record:** 7-4. **Returning starters:** 3 offense, 7 defense.

2024 review: Few teams had as tumultuous of a 2024 season as Brunswick, which experienced the highest highs and the lowest lows within the same week. After

the Railroaders stormed out to a 5-1 start, capped by a signature 27-26 victory over Walkersville that was the program's biggest win in years, head coach Jerry Smith

was suspended indefinitely for undisclosed reasons, and he ultimately resigned at the end of the season. Brunswick wasn't quite the same after that.

"If kids are thinking too much, they're going to be slower on the field," Rhodes said. "They're gonna be overthinking it. They're gonna freeze. It's a lot better if you give the kids a base defense to build around, then game by game, week by week, you can give them more direction for what to expect."

Even if that scheme leads to relative defensive success, Rhodes' biggest challenge — and what will likely determine Brunswick's standing — is completely overhauling

the offense.

The Roaders have to replace the majority of their starters. They are getting a new man under center after four-year quarterback Ethan Houck (2,156 passing yards, 1,015 rushing yards, 42 total touchdowns in 2024) graduated as Frederick County's most productive signal caller and headed to Division I Liberty University. Houck's top target in Jake Genos (47 catches, 789 yards, 11 touchdowns in 2024) also graduated.

"It's gonna be different

this year, and I think they all understood it's gonna be different. You can't replace an Ethan Houck," Rhodes said.

Senior Brady Renn and junior Cole Hoffman are battling to take over for Houck, but Rhodes said he's not expecting to name a starting quarterback until shortly before Brunswick's Sept. 5 season opener against William sport.

The Roaders will try to get the ball in shifty, speedy senior Austin Del Balzo's hands as much as possible. He took

snaps at wide receiver and running back last season, and Rhodes intends for him to be a de facto gadget player.

"I think it's fun. I mean, anytime I'm gonna get the ball, I think it's fun," Del Balzo said.

"It's a lot to plan for, and with him lining up everywhere on the field, there's not much you can expect," Nugent said.

Yet the rest of the offense — along with Brunswick at large — remains a work in progress.