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RAISING THE BAR: Byrnes High football coach Chris Miller stands in an 8,000-square-foot weight room that's part of the Rebels' new \$2.9-million fieldhouse. Miller, who replaces Bobby Bentley, and the fieldhouse are this year's biggest changes for a Byrnes program that won four state titles in the last five years and has earned a national reputation.

Byrnes begins new era in posh fieldhouse

BY JOHN BRASIER
staff writer

Bobby Bentley wasn't there Monday morning when summer football practice began at Byrnes High.

But a grand monument to the coach's success was there to greet his former players and put a smile on their faces.

Byrnes' new state-of-the-art football fieldhouse, a red, blue and silver shrine to a program that won four straight state titles from 2002-2005, was open.

Rebels players dressed in comfort in the spacious locker room and spent all their off-field time in the facility.

"It's the real deal," said cornerback Cartier Rice, one of a handful of major-college recruits on this year's Rebels. "It's everything you could hope for. It's definitely a great feeling coming in here. It makes you want to work harder, push harder and live up to the hype."

Upstairs, the two-level, 19,000-square-foot facility houses a meeting room with 150 theatre-style seats, a cavernous team room filled with planning boards and flat-screen television screens that doubles as an indoor training facility, and coaches' offices.

Downstairs are the locker room, an 8,000-square-foot weight room, a trainer's room and equipment room.

"It's the best fieldhouse I've ever seen, and I've seen a lot of them," agreed defensive end Everett Dawkins, whose college pursuers include Virginia Tech and

Florida State as well as Clemson and University of South Carolina. "It's way different than anything I've seen."

New coach Chris Miller's second-floor office looks down on the field.

"This is the only fieldhouse like this around that I know of in a high school," Miller said. "It has great facilities for our kids, it's first-class, and that's the way we want it to be. We tell our kids that we're going to try to give them the best equipment, the best facilities, the best coaches."

Built into a hillside behind the north end zone at Nixon Field, the \$2.9-million fieldhouse was completed in about one year, paid for with school district and private funds.

"The community and everyone here, the TD club - everybody is committed to getting the best thing we can for our kids," Miller said.

"It's just awesome how our district cares about our football team so much," sophomore linebacker Creighton Frost said. "It's awesome how they treat us."

Miller, who moved from defensive coordinator to replace Bentley when he left for Presbyterian College after last season, said the facility was just the latest example of Byrnes' commitment to be the top high school football program in the state.

In recent off-seasons, Byrnes added a "Jumbotron" scoreboard, signed an equipment deal with Nike and unveiled a new uniform. They've also played tele-

vised games against national opponents. This year, the Rebels will play teams from Ohio and Florida.

"Each year there's been a little something different," Miller said. "Little things have gone along each time to get these kids more excited about what's going on. And they just want to be a part of it."

Miller said player reaction to the fieldhouse, which was completed in mid-July but not open to the players until Monday, was what he expected.

"They're smiling coming in, smiling here and the players here are ready to come out," he said. "They're ready to get in. Most of them were here Thursday or (Friday) moving themselves into the new locker room."

While the fieldhouse changes were celebrated, Miller, his revamped coaching staff and more than 160 players focused on maintaining the status quo on the field. Miller, a former head coach at Broome High, said he planned no major changes on offense or defense. He said he had a pretty good handle on his team prior to summer practice. He wants the coaching transition to be unnoticeable.

"We want it to be as smooth as possible," he said. "I thought that our summer program went well. In the passing leagues, stuff like that, I thought we resembled ourselves as much as we have in the past, throwing the ball around and doing different things."

Despite an early game against Hartsville on Aug. 17, the Rebels waited until Monday - the first state-allowed practice

date was last Friday - to start practice.

Miller said he knows the Byrnes community is anxious to see how the Rebels fare without Bentley, whose teams won 107 games in 12 seasons.

"I think there's more expectations out there this year just to see the new era, it's a new beginning for everybody," Miller said.

"There's a new coach. 'Is it going to change? Are the Byrnes Rebels going to be like they were before?' I think it's all there in the air. And I think the coaches here and the players here are ready to show there's no change."

One member of the Bentley family expected to have a direct impact on the Rebels' season is sophomore quarterback Chas Dodd, Bentley's stepson. He takes over for heralded Clemson recruit Willy Korn.

So Miller's first team will play several games with Bentley in the stands. And Miller will be in the stands at PC watching his son, Cam, a kicker for the Blue Hose.

"Coach Bentley's definitely going to be here," Miller said. "It's his son, so he's going to be here to watch him. That's great. Me and Coach Bentley go back a long way. We became very close."

Whether Bentley attends games or not, Miller could never escape Bentley's legacy at Byrnes, which now includes a new fieldhouse to go along with 12 years of unmatched on-field success.

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