

MCCRACKEN: Opelika's head coach will retire at the end of the season

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a post he's held since 1995.

But McCracken, who has a 122-32 record at Opelika, said there's been no trouble getting his squad to focus on the season at hand instead of the attention that will be placed on its head coach.

"Nope," McCracken said with a slight chuckle when asked if he had run into any trouble getting his team to focus on the season itself. "I haven't even brought it up.

"We haven't even talked about it — it's all about our football team. It's going to be the 2008 football season and we're ready to get it started."

While McCracken may not be talking about it, others are.

The talk leading up to the 2008 season as been about the many "last times" McCracken will face.

In fact, Opelika's opening game of the year will mark a big last for McCracken.

The Bulldogs open the year in

*'He'll be missed when he leaves.
And I hope they win every game they
play this year, except the one against us.'*

Ron Nelson

Central-Phenix City head football coach

Montgomery's Cramton Bowl against Sidney Lanier.

It was in that stadium where McCracken had some of his biggest successes as head coach of Robert E. Lee from 1984 to 1994.

In 1986, he led the Rebels to the state title and a No. 2 ranking in the USA Today National poll. He also captured state titles at Lee in 1991 and 1992.

McCracken himself, despite all his attempts to deflect attention

away from his last season, even mentioned the fact the season opener could well be the last time he coaches at the Cramton Bowl.

But the season will have many other "final times."

One big one will come on Oct. 3, when Opelika hosts Central. Not only is that game expected to be a clash of Region 3's top two teams, it will be the last time McCracken faces off with another longtime head coach — Central's Ron Nel-

son, who has been with the Red Devils since 1999.

"Spence retiring is going to be a loss to high school football," Nelson said following McCracken's retirement announcement in March. "He'll be missed when he leaves. And I hope they win every game they play this year, except the one against us."

McCracken's last regular-season home game will come Oct. 17 against Smiths Station before the biggest finale of them all.

On Oct. 24, McCracken will coach his final regular season game at Opelika against the Bulldogs' biggest rival, Auburn — a team he's lost to only twice since arriving at Opelika.

"I feel so blessed to have a community like this to coach in," McCracken said. "The support of the people in Opelika is wonderful and I thank all of them for all they've done for me."

tpeavy@oanow.com | 737-2568

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