Junior running back Marice Whitlock takes on an expanded role on South Pointe High School’s varsity football team this season.

Whitlock seeks to replace last year’s starter Voshon St. Hill, affectionately called Pooh Bear, who rushed for 1,201 yards and led South Pointe to their third straight state championship. And the Stallions are on the hunt for four in a row.

The starting spot won’t be handed to him, though, because Joe Ervin, another junior running back, is also chasing the starting position.

The styles both backs possess have made the decision to name a number one runner difficult for South Pointe’s coaching staff. So far in this season there is no definite starter.

When asked why there isn’t a leading back, running back coach Robert Beckler said, “We have co- starters; Marice Whitlock and Joe Ervin.”

This statement was also confirmed by head varsity football coach Strait Herron, who explained, “Both of the guys are so equal in talent it’s just a week to week basis on who’s going to start.”

Some feel there will never be a back as great as Pooh Bear, but Whitlock feels no pressure. Whitlock however, praises Pooh Bear for mentoring him into a more polished back. “Last season we got a lot of reps and Pooh Bear really taught us a lot of different ways to be a great running back, so it wasn’t really that hard. We just stepped up and played our role,” Whitlock said.

Last season, Whitlock rushed for 157 yards on 35 carries while tagging on two touchdowns. With an increased role and an expanded arsenal this season, his numbers are sure to go up.

“Last year I was more of a jet sweep, get to the edge type of guy and get as much as I can. This year it’ll be much different; skill wise i haven’t added anything new but physically i’ve tagged on 10 more pounds of body weight.”

How will Whitlock’s role be different this year than last year?

“Marice and Joe’s role won’t be different at all,” Coach Herron said. “Last year they had to backup Pooh Bear but this year they’ll be backing each other up. They’ll get more carries, touches and carry more of the load this year. But really they’re doing the exact same thing they did last year.”

Through the week of Sept. 20, Whitlock carried the ball 33 times for 198 yards in four games. As of that date, his three touchdowns led the backs for the season. His six yards per hand-off are an improvement from last year’s average of 4.5 yards per rush.

Grasping another state championship is the ideal objective for Whitlock, but he has also set lofty personal goals.

“My goal for this season is to win state again, but also to get more rushing yards and touchdowns than Voshon St. Hill.”

Whitlock is aware of St. Hill’s 1,201 rushing yards and 23 touchdowns, but is determined to surpass those numbers.

Whitlock described himself as a “cut guy” as opposed to a downhill runner like teammate Ervin.

According to Coach Herron, Whitlock’s strength is his quickness.

“Marice’s speed is definitely his best attribute, he can fly and turn it on real quick,” Herron said.

Despite the fact that both the backs are competing for the starting spot, their friendship, which predates high school, remains strong.

“This is more like family, we’ve grown up with each other since second grade. So when Joe scores a touchdown I’m running right into the end zone to celebrate with him,” Whitlock said.

Although Ervin hopes to earn the starting job and become the next hero in the South Pointe backfield, and although he’s following in the footsteps of South Pointe standout St. Hill, the junior running back feels no pressure. In fact, the new season has only heightened his self-assurance.

Ervin is unperturbed and focused on living up to the immense expectations that have been set for South Pointe, as the club seeks its fourth straight state title. He spoke very highly of his predecessor St. Hill, acknowledging the impact St. Hill had on his development as a runner.

Whitlock and Ervin’s relationship contains no animosity. In fact, they consider themselves like brothers. They share similar backgrounds, lived across the street from each other, are separated by only a month (Ervin is older) and finish each other’s sentences when they’re together.  The two junior running backs have been playing together since elementary school and learn from each other even now.

“I’m able to get a lot from my partner, Marice. He’s more of a shaky back, and he’s good at making defenders miss,” Ervin said.

Whitlock analyzed Ervin’ running style.

“I’m able to get a lot of different running styles from Joe. He’s more of a downhill, outrun you type of guy,” Whitlock said.

Ervin admires Nick McCloud, a sophomore defensive back at N.C. State and the brother of current South Pointe wide receiver Nakia McCloud.

“I look up to Nick McCloud because he’s a good leader and he has a great work ethic,” Ervin added.

Like many athletes, Ervin has specific people and things that impel him to be the best he can be.

Additionally, Ervin draws strength and encouragement from his family.

“I play for my family, they’re my number one fans,” Ervin said.