

Sports



BOB BRAWDY Tri-City Herald

Richland High School quarterback Paxton Stevens, attempting to break a tackle against Gonzaga Prep during a 2015 Class 4A state semifinal game at Edgar Brown Stadium in Pasco, will lead the Bombers offense again in his senior season. Stevens threw for nearly 1,800 yards with 13 touchdowns last year and was named the first team All-Mid-Columbia Conference quarterback.

PREP FOOTBALL PREVIEW | RICHLAND BOMBERS

Bombers eye another run

■ **Led by the MCC's top passer, Richland is looking to settle some unfinished business after losing in the 2015 state semifinals.**

BY DUSTIN BRENNAN
dbrennan@tricityherald.com

Losing in the 2015 Class 4A state semifinals was bittersweet for the Richland High School football team.

On one hand, it was the deepest the Bombers had

gone in the state playoffs since winning it all in 1999 under Lonnie Pierson. On the other hand, they still lost their last game of the season to the eventual state champion Gonzaga Prep Bullpups.

"When we lost that semifinal game, it hurt," senior quarterback Paxton Stevens said. "That just made us want to fight more to get to where we could be next year. We're looking to go all the way this year."

COMING UP

This story is part of a series of previews leading to the high school football season.

In his second season as the signal caller for Richland, Stevens is again expected to lead one of the Mid-Columbia Conference's top passing attacks. Coach Mike Neidhold said having the 6-foot-3, 170-pound QB under center for a second season could take the Bom-

Break it down

2015 Record: 7-0 MCC (1st), 11-2 overall.

MCC Rankings: Fourth in offense (343.7 yards per game); first in defense (219.9).

Returning leaders: Passing — Paxton Stevens 141-257-10—1,788, 13 TDs. Rushing — Paxton Stevens 41-85, 3 TDs. Receiving — Alex Chapman 24-443, 8 TDs; Ryan Piper 11-82. Interceptions — Alex Chapman 5; Ryan Piper 3.

Key games: Sept. 2, vs. Skyline; Oct. 7, at Kamiakin; Oct. 28, vs. Hanford.

bers' offense to new heights. "It sets up some leadership, it sets up some credibility with the players

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BOMBERS

that he's been in the heat of the battle," said Neidhold, who is in his ninth season as Richland's head coach.

"He's faced some really good defenses, our league is full of great defenses, and Pax had to stand in there against them and perform at a high level. And he did."

Stevens led the conference in passing last year, throwing for 1,788 yards and 13 touchdowns, and was named the first-team all-MCC quarterback. Neidhold said Stevens's athleticism and play-making ability set him apart from most high school quarterbacks.

"He's able to get out of trouble when things go wrong," Neidhold said. "He's able to improvise and buy a little bit more time

back there. He's a real good thinker — he doesn't panic."

First team all-MCC defensive back and honorable mention wide receiver Alex Chapman (senior) figures to be Stevens' top target, replacing graduated senior Griffey March, the 2015 all-MCC all-purpose player of the year. Chapman also figures to be the lock-down cornerback on a Bombers defense that was tops in the conference last season.

"I don't want to say he shuts down an entire side of the field, but it sure makes that guy on the other team know that if he's going to throw the ball over there, No. 8 might get it," Neidhold said.

Chapman was second in the conference with five

interceptions last year.

TAKING NOTHING FOR GRANTED

Senior lineman Brigham Whitby is set to lead the Bombers in the trenches, an opportunity he's been looking forward to for a long time.

On the third play of the 2015 season opener against Gonzaga Prep, the 6-foot, 275-pound Whitby broke his foot and was sidelined until the state playoffs. When he came back for Richland's last few games of the year, he admitted he was playing at about 80 percent.

"I'm really grateful to have the chance to be able to play again," Whitby said. "I'm looking forward to it a lot. Just being a leader for these guys and being someone they can count on."

Now that Whitby is fully healthy, Neidhold thinks his blend of talent and experience will make him valuable as a leader on the Bombers' veteran front lines.

"He knows what it's like to have a season taken away from him, and that gives him a unique perspective," Neidhold said. "And he plays like that. He's not going to leave anything out there, in practice or in

games."

NOTES

Gonzaga Prep was the only team to beat Richland in 2015, beginning and ending Richland's season with defeats. The Bombers and Bullpups were supposed to play each other in their opener again this year, but a scheduling issue caused the game to fall through. Richland instead will open its season against the Skyline Spartans, who lost to Gonzaga Prep in the 2015 state final. ... Richland was ranked No. 5 in the Seattle Times Class 4A preseason power rankings. Gonzaga Prep and Skyline claimed the top two spots.

Dustin Brennan:
509-582-1413,
@Tweet_By_Dustin

Mid-Columbia Conference 2015

	Lg	All
Richland	7-0	11-2
Kamiakin	6-1	8-3
Chiawana	5-2	6-4
Kennewick	3-4	6-6
Hanford	2-5	4-6
Southridge	2-5	4-6
Walla Walla	2-5	3-7
Pasco	1-6	1-9

MID-COLUMBIA REPLAY

On this day in ...

1951: Coach Francis Rish had his first look at his Richland squad and it was a double take — the Bombers, who had lost all but four of

their starters from the 1950 season — including all-state linemen Clarence Fulcher and Jerry Marzyck — were undertaking drills morning and afternoon.