

Sports



SARAH GORDON Tri-City Herald

The defensive front of the Richland football team is likely to get its stiffest test yet this season. Clockwise from upper center are Garrett Guffey, Victor Strasser, Brigham Whitby, William Harshaw, Braden Powell, Jake Stanfield, Josh Mendoza and Jax Lee. The Bombers play Chiawana on Friday at Edgar Brown Stadium in Pasco.

HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL

Richland 'D' looks to contain Vargas

Stingy Bombers defense has allowed less than 200 yards of offense a game. But they face a tall task Friday against Chiawana's ground game, with star back Andrew Vargas averaging 265 yards a game.

BY ANNIE FOWLER
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Richland vs. Chiawana. It's the Mid-Columbia Conference football game fans have been waiting for this season.

Seemingly unstoppable Riverhawks running back Andrew Vargas pitted against the stout defense of

the Bombers, allowing 11.8 points and less than 200 yards of offense per game.

Throw in that Chiawana offensive line, which averages 6-foot-2 and 255 pounds from end to end and opens truck lanes for Vargas, and Friday night at Edgar Brown Stadium will be the place to be.

With Richland (7-0, 5-0 MCC) ranked No. 2 in the state poll, and Chiawana

COMING UP

Chiawana's offensive line is paving the way for Vargas' marvelous season | Friday

(7-0, 5-0) No. 4, there are also some bragging rights at stake.

"We hold ourselves to a pretty high standard," Richland coach Mike Neidhold said. "Defense is where we excel. Good teams are built around a good defense and offensive line — Chiawana has both. That is why they are having success — that O-line and that little rascal

“GOOD TEAMS ARE BUILT AROUND A GOOD DEFENSE AND OFFENSIVE LINE — CHIAWANA HAS BOTH. ... THAT O-LINE AND THAT LITTLE RASCAL (ANDREW VARGAS) ARE THE PERFECT STORM.”

Richland coach Mike Neidhold

(Vargas) are the perfect storm.”

A storm Richland hopes keep to a fall shower instead

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RICHLAND

of a hurricane.

The Bombers have been solid up front all season with tackles Brigham Whitby (sr., 6-0, 275) and Jax Lee (jr., 6-1, 215), and defensive ends Braden Powell (jr., 6-3, 200) and Jake Stanfield (jr., 6-1, 210). The second line of defense has junior Victor Strasser (5-11, 180) and senior Garrett Guffey (5-9, 180) at middle linebacker, with junior Josh Mendoza (5-10, 150) and senior William Harshaw (6-0, 175) containing the edges.

Neidhold said defensive coaches Mitch Davis, D.J. Search, Wes Mason, Jeff Muai, Kent Kafentzis and Pete Zukowski “work tirelessly to put together a plan the kids can do and pull off. We just have to be us. We are going to be who we are. It should be an exciting game.”

Neidhold knows the Bombers won't be able to shut Vargas down completely, but would like to keep his numbers out of the stratosphere. Vargas torched Kamiakin for 417 yards, rolled

up 254 against Kennewick and tacked on 215 against Pasco. He leads the MCC in rushing with 1,858 yards on 181 carries and 32 touchdowns. He averages 10.3 yards every time he touches the ball, and 265.4 yards a game.

“It demoralizes you when you know No. 14 will get the ball when it's second-and-2 and he just ran for 8 yards,” Neidhold said. “We have to make sure that doesn't happen Friday night. We hope he's tired. He is a tremendous talent. I don't know if you can coach a kid to do that. He is fun to watch on film.”

Neidhold trusts that his defensive line will be up to the task. Whitby is the cog in the middle of the action.

“He is a quiet leader,” Neidhold said. “He just works. He never quits. Kids feed off that. He is that way in practice, and it carries over into the game. He likes to roll around in the dirt, and we like that about him. He is low to the ground, has good leverage and is hard to

block.”

The Bombers occasionally beef up their defensive line with Dontae Powell (6-5, 300) and Aric Davison (6-3, 275), but being valued members of the offensive line, their defensive play is purposely limited.

Whitby wasn't quite licking his chops at the chance to stack up against Vargas, but there was a look in his eyes that was all business.

“You have to go out and do your job and have a bead on him every play,” Whitby said. “We are looking to get a chance to get in the backfield and get tackles for loss. I'm not scared or nervous — they are just another team we have to play. It's a big game. It would be really nice not to allow him to do anything, but we won't be surprised if he pops one off. He is good enough to do it.”

Whitby has seen enough film of the Riverhawks to notice a flaw or two in their offensive line, but he left it at that.

“I will watch the line, see how they block and find the faults in their blocking,” he said. “You have to do what you can to stop (Vargas) from running.”

Should Vargas find a gap

and get through the Bombers' front line, Strasser and his group will be waiting.

“Eyes to the thighs, wrap up and squeeze,” Strasser said of the key to slowing up Vargas. “He is definitely one of the best players we have seen, but if our D-line does its job, their O-line won't be a problem, and neither will Vargas. We have to be disciplined and fill the gaps.”

It should come as no surprise that Chiawana is at the top of the food chain in the MCC. It hates to lose.

After playing in the state title game two years in a row, the Riverhawks missed out on the playoffs last year.

“This all started last winter,” Neidhold said. “They are used to having success, and they had a down year. They had to watch us make a run (to the state semifinals). I guarantee they had a chip on their shoulder, and they are taking it out on people. Their offensive line lifted all winter and summer. They recalibrated themselves. We have a lot of respect for them and the work they put in.”

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