

WEEK 1 PREP FOOTBALL PREVIEW

Upsets can happen any given Friday in MCC

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Four teams reaching the state playoffs, two of them playing for a title at the Tacoma Dome and one adding a championship banner to

the trophy case.

Some of the best football in the Pacific Northwest was played in the Mid-Columbia Conference last year, and the Tri-City and Walla Walla high schools took pride in putting the rest of the state on notice.

“In our community, the kids at Richland and Hanford, Kennewick, Kamiakin and Southridge, Pasco and Chiawana, Walla Walla,” Richland coach Mike Neidhold said, “they all take pride in their school. And every one of those schools somewhere has a

football history that’s really good.

“You have that everywhere, so that just makes the league that much tougher. I think our league is going to be really strong. I know we have to prepare every week for who we’re playing, and if you don’t, you’re gonna get beat. It’s that simple.”

Neidhold and the Bombers can certainly attest to how tough the league is. Last year, they rolled into their Week 4 matchup against Southridge — a team that went 4-6 in 2015 — having outscored their first three opponents by a combined 118-39 to earn the state’s top ranking, thanks in part to a 38-27 Week 1 victory over perennial powerhouse Skyline.

But the upset-minded Suns led early after a 42-yard Hunter Spiva field goal in the first quarter, and trailed by just 10 points at half-time, prompting this gem of a response from Neidhold in a post-game interview: “We were playing Southridge tonight, and Richland. Richland is not on our schedule.”

The Bombers rallied for an unexpectedly gutsy 26-10 victory in the middle of a 13-game win streak to start the season that ended with a 24-14 loss to Camas in the state championship game. Southridge went on to finish the regular season with a 5-4 record, then beat Shadle Park on Nov. 1 and Juanita

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SARAH GORDON Herald file

Southridge gave top-ranked and eventual MCC champ Richland a scare in Week 4 last season before falling 26-10.

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four days later to advance to its first state playoff game since 2011, but lost to Lakes 34-17 in the first round.

While the possibility of an upset exists on any given Friday in the MCC, the parity at the top of the league has been and should continue to be rampant. Before going on to win its first state championship in school history, Kamiakin lost two conference games: a 35-13 drubbing by Chiawana — where running back Andrew Vargas racked up 417 yards and four touchdowns on the ground — and a 21-20 overtime loss to Richland that was the game of the year in the Mid-Columbia.

“If you look ahead or you look past someone in this league, you’re in trouble,” Kamiakin coach Scott Biglin said. “It’s a tough league, and every team brings it. There’s such good coaching staffs out there, and it’s a grind for three months as any coach will tell you.”

The Braves will get chances for revenge when they host Chiawana on Sept. 15 (the MCC opener) and play Richland on Oct. 6 at Fran Rish Stadium. Richland and Chiawana will meet

Oct. 20 at Fran Rish in the penultimate game of the MCC slate.

WEEK 1 MATCHUPS
PROSSER AT KENNEWICK: In their first game of the post-Tanner Bolt era, the Mustangs — surprise — have another star quarterback in the making in junior Will Weinmann, who will try to lead Prosser to a second straight, season-opening win against the Lions (28-7 last year).

For Kennewick, 2016 quarterback AJ Templeton will take his first snaps at running back. He and first-year QB Tim Gee will look to get something going against a Prosser defense that only allowed more than 28 points twice last season.
MOSES LAKE AT CHIAWANA: Vargas ran for 234 yards and three touchdowns in the Riverhawks’ 50-6 win over the Chiefs to open last season on the road. With four returning starters on the line, Chiawana running backs Ethan Garcia, Tayden Jenkins and Gabe Schilz will hope to feast on a Moses Lake defense that allowed just 118.3 yards per game on the ground last season, second-best in the Big 9.

DAVIS AT HANFORD:

Quarterback Garrett Horner and the Falcons’ passing attack will try to pick apart a Pirates’ defense that allowed a Big 9-worst 209.7 yards per game through the air last season. Hanford beat Davis 35-6 in last year’s opener, and Horner completed 26 of 40 passes for 346 yards and three touchdowns.

RICHLAND AT BELLEVUE: The reigning MCC champs get one of the most interesting games in the state to open the season.

Bellevue won six consecutive 3A state titles from 2008-14, and lost to Eastside Catholic in the championship in 2014 and 2015. But the Wolverines are on a postseason ban after an investigation yielded evidence of recruiting and other violations, and legendary coach Butch Goncharoff — after a two-year hiring ban imposed by the school district was ruled a violation of union rights — is now coaching at Class 1A Cedar Park Christian in Bothell.

Bellevue went 5-0 last year under first-year coach Mark Landes, only allowed to play KingCo 3A competition. Neidhold said he wasn’t sure what to expect as Bellevue’s first nonconference opponent since 2015, but that he was hoping to get a good game.

Other local games include Kamiakin at Eastmont, Southridge at Wenatchee, Lewiston at Walla Walla, Eisenhower at Pasco; Royal at Ellensburg, Othello at Connell, Grandview at Kiona-Benton, DeSales at LaSalle, Highland at College Place, Okanogan at Warden, Omak at River View, Hermiston at Union (Vancouver), Umatilla at Union (Ore.), and Tri-Cities Prep at Lake Roosevelt. All games start at 7 p.m.

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SPORTS

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