



NOELLE HARO-GOMEZ Tri-City Herald

Richland Bombers, from left, Tyler Fishback, Ryan Kriskovich, Josh Mendoza and Ryan Piper are part of the crew that has intercepted 25 passes and returned 11 for touchdowns this season. Richland faces Gonzaga Prep in the 4A State Quarterfinals on Saturday.

HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL 4A STATE QUARTERFINALS

Richland DBs turn picks into points

BY ANNIE FOWLER
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The Richland defense is an offense unto itself. Twenty-five interceptions in 11 games, and 11 of those were returned for touchdowns. Figure the PATs, and the Bombers' defense would have outscored one Mid-Columbia Conference team and come close to a second.

"We have forced a lot of turnovers before, but I can't think — and I have been here for a long time — I can't remember a team that has been this opportunistic," Richland coach Mike Neidhold said. "When the ball is in the air, they get it, and then they score.

It's weird. It's odd.

"It looks so easy, but it's not. These guys are doing the impossible every week by getting an interception, No. 1, but three interceptions in a game, and three pick-sixes in a game? It just doesn't happen. That is a tribute to Kent Kafentzis and D.J. Search. They do a good job with those kids and get them in position to make plays."

The Bombers' secondary, led by seniors Adam Weissenfels, Josh Mendoza and Ryan Piper, may not get much of a chance to partake in a little petty theft Saturday when Richland (11-0) visits Gonzaga Prep (9-2) at 1 p.m. in a Class 4A quarterfinal.

The Bullpups, you see, don't like to throw the ball much.

"Not sure how much we want to throw it against Richland's defense," G-Prep coach David McKenna wrote in an email. "When the ball is in the air, they seem to take it and score. Richland is a very good team with a great tradition. Their coaching staff is outstanding, and they lead a respected program."

But, McKenna noted, "if we need to we will throw it."

While Neidhold likes to see his team ring up points on the scoreboard, he knows each round of the playoffs offers different challenges.

"We have a different plan this week than what we have had the past couple of weeks for teams that threw the ball a lot," he said. "We are kind of back to our Week

1 against Bellevue mentality of having to stop the run. Gonzaga Prep is really good at it. They pose quite the challenge."

Which means the defensive backs will be the last line of defense if the Bullpups get through a Richland defensive line that has given up on average less than 90 yards rushing a game.

"They still have work to do: tackle the guy with the ball," Neidhold said. "(The Bullpups) are going to run the ball. If they are going to have success, they are going to run the ball just like Bellevue did.

"We forced Bellevue into some throwing situations and it worked out for us in that regard. If we are

SEE RICHLAND, 5B

Today's state football games

(2) RICHLAND (11-0, NO. 1 MCC 4A)
AT (9) GONZAGA PREP (9-2, NO. 2 GSL 4A)

When, where: 1 p.m., Bullpup Stadium

Series history: Gonzaga Prep holds 7-4 lead in all-time series. Least meeting was Bullpups' 31-17 victory in 2015 4A semifinals

Key players: Rich—QB Cade Jensen (183-289-10—2,708, 39 TDs); WR/DB Josh Mendoza (19-502, 11 total TDs; 5 INTs); RB Parker McCary (131-755, 10 total TDs); RB Jared Whitby (71-362, 6 TDs); WR/DB/K Adam Weissenfels (39-462, 13 total TDs, 7 XP, 6 INTs); WR/DB Ryan Piper (24-363, 7 TDs); DL Jax Lee; DL Aric Davison; WR/DB Sammy Cervantes (32-413, 5 TDs); LB/RB Casey Perryman; LB Victor Strasser. GP—RB Kasey Anthony; RB Devin Culp; QB Connor Halonen; CB Sam Lockett; DE Caden Townsend; G John Perko.

Last week: Richland def. West Valley (Yakima) 62-28; Gonzaga Prep def. Moses Lake 35-21

Next week: Winner hosts Skyline-Central Valley winner in 4A semifinals

(1) ROYAL (11-0, NO. 1 SCAC EAST)
AT (7) OKANOGAN (10-0, NO. 11 A CARIBOU TRAIL)

When, where: 4 p.m., Apple Bowl (Wenatchee)

Last state meeting: Royal 41, Okanogan 7 (2003 first round)

Key players: Roy—QB Sawyer Jenks; WR/CB Corbin Christensen; RB/MLB Alonso Hernandez; WR/FS Angel Farias; HB/LB CJ Quintero; RB/LB Isaac Ellis; RB/SS Lorenzo Myrick; WR/CB Juan Ojeda. Oka (8 games)—QB Alex Nelson (45-74-2—940, 10 TDs); RB/DL Julian Cates (98-1,006, 14 TDs); HB/DB Martin Grooms (30-317, 10 total TDs; 4 INTs); WR/DB Michael Goetz (14-406, 10 total TDs); WR/DB Jordan Jessee (17-301, 5 total TDs; 3 FF, 2 FR, 1 INT)

Last week: Royal def. Freeman 35-0; Okanogan def. Naches Valley 44-7

Next week: Winner hosts Colville-Newport winner in semifinals

— DUSTIN BRENNAN

FROM PAGE 4B

RICHLAND

lucky enough to get some negative downs on Prep this weekend and make them uncomfortable on offense, we have a fighting chance."

WHEN IT'S FUN, IT'S NOT WORK

Weissenfels, a 5-foot-9, 175-pounder, is the MCC Defensive Player of the Year. He leads the Bombers with six interceptions, and has returned four for touchdowns.

"We know we are ball-hawks," he said with a devious grin. "We are going to make plays. If we can't get those pick-sixes, we can stop the run and force them to throw. That plays into our game plan."

Mendoza, a 5-10, 160-pound senior, is the proud owner of five interceptions and four touchdowns, with four INTs and three pick-sixes in the past two games. For him, it's fun, not work.

"We live off of teams who want to pass on us," he said. "Our run defense does a good job. Having Jax (Lee) back against G-Prep will be huge."

Ryan Kriskovich and Tyler Fishback round out the

secondary.

Lee, the MCC Lineman of the Year, missed last week's game against West Valley with a foot injury, but has been cleared to play and is ready to work.

"Me and the guys up front (Aric Davison, Caleb Chapman, Jacob Stanfield and Braden Powell) do a good job of pass rushing and stopping guys up front," the 6-2, 240-pound Lee said. "If we can't stop them, the DBs are there, and our linebackers (Casey Perryman and Victor Strasser).

"They know they will have to change things; they don't know how to block us."

The Bullpups like to put the ball in the hands of quarterback Connor Halonen (651 yards passing, 993 rushing) and running backs Devin Culp (593) and Kasey Anthony (698).

"We have to do what we have been doing," Lee said. "They have a triple-option scheme. If we can get our job done up front, the DBs can do theirs. This line is a family, and we've come a long way the past three years."

Which makes switching

from attacker to protector that much easier when their teammates pick off the ball and head toward the end zone.

"We have to do what we have to do to put points on the board," Lee said.

The DBs appreciate what the linemen do to make their job easier.

"Jax and Caleb step up and put pressure on the quarterback, and they have to think about getting it off early because our line is coming for them," Weissenfels said. "And we are right there waiting. We are all competing for the next one."

A SPECIAL GROUP OF PLAYERS

Weissenfels, Mendoza and Lee all described the team as a family. Working together and for one another, which leads to success.

That is something Neidhold said he can't coach.

"They are a tremendous group of young men," Neidhold said. "They are funny. They know when to work and when to play, and they play a lot. They are a fun group to be around."

"You have people you work with who are easy to be around. You gravitate toward them. This group is easy to be around. They are the life of our locker room,

kind of the heart and soul of our team. Jax and his crew of knuckleheads — they are just as rowdy a bunch as the DBs. Most of these kids are seniors and they understand the work that goes into something like this and how important the work is and how special our time is together."

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SPORTS

Richland's pick-sixes are a winning jackpot for Bombers 4B

