



SARAH GORDON Tri-City Herald

Richland High School takes on Skyview High School on Saturday in the 4A semifinal football game at Neil F. Lampson Stadium in Kennewick.

PREP FOOTBALL

Inside the headset: Richland's coaching staff key to title runs

“THESE COACHES WORK JUST AS HARD AS US SO IT'S SPECIAL TO BE HERE (PLAYING FOR A CHAMPIONSHIP) WITH THEM.”

Richland senior
Adam Weissenfels

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In the past three years, no 4A football team in the state of Washington has enjoyed as much success as Richland.

The Bombers have won 38 games and three Mid-Columbia Conference titles in that span, reaching the state semifinals in 2015 and the championship game last



D.J. Search

year. On Saturday against Woodinville, they will try to capture the third state title in school history and first since 1999.

While some of the top players in program history have shined on Friday nights at Fran Rish Stadium and other venues around the

state to produce this recent run, Richland's all-star coaching staff deserves plenty of credit as well.

“These coaches work just as hard as us,” Richland senior Adam Weissenfels said, “so it's special to be here (playing for a championship) with them.”

These are the top dogs on the coaching staff of the 13-0 and No. 2-ranked Bombers.

THE HEAD HONCHO

At the forefront is 1977 Richland graduate and former quarterback Mike Neidhold who — in his 10th year as head coach — has accomplished as much as any of his predecessors, sans winning a state title.

Despite his 83-30 lifetime record (including 15-9 in the playoffs) and four league championships, Neidhold is always quick to deflect praise onto those around

him.

“I kind of just try to stay out of the way,” he said at practice Tuesday. “When I walk up to a drill, they (the position coaches) will be like, ‘Hey! Shouldn't you be over there with the receivers?’ So I'll walk over to the receivers, and they'll be like

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‘Shouldn't you be with the O-line guys?’

“I just kind of pinball around here and wait for something to do. Blow my whistle or something. I don't have to do much because those guys are so very competent.”

While always humble and often self-deprecating, his players and assistant coaches paint the picture of a leader who fosters a fun, but productive learning environment on the practice and game fields.

“It's nice in the fact that we get to run things the way we want to run them,” offensive coordinator Josh Jelinek said. “We fly things by him, and he rubber stamps them for the most part. If he likes it, great, and if he doesn't then he'll say, ‘Let's think about this,’ and then we go back to the drawing board.”

“As far as the other stuff, he's a funny guy. He keeps things lively and fun, and light-hearted, even when things are going bad. We all get along, and seem to band together and do things the right way.”

Added defensive coordinator D.J. Search: “He's a big kid himself. And he lets all his assistants, all we have to do really is coach kids. Him and athletic director Mike Edwards do a great job of running the front walls, just so we can do our job. ... It's their hard work that lets us do what we love to do.”

ON OFFENSE, THE PROSSER PIPELINE

If Richland's offense bears resemblance to the scheme Tom Moore's title-contending Prosser Mustang squads of decades past ran, that's by design.

Jelinek, in his eighth year as the Bombers' offensive coordinator, was a lineman for Moore at Prosser (graduating in 1997), and later returned to get his start as an assistant coach under the legend's tutelage. After Moore stepped down as Prosser's coach, Jelinek convinced him to take a job as Richland's quarterbacks coach in 2013, and former Mustangs quarterback Tyler Thomas came along to coach the wide receivers at the same time.

“It's pretty incredible, and it makes my job easy having the support from those guys,” Jelinek said. “Just the wealth of knowledge we have from those guys. And that really goes for the whole staff, if you look around, we've got guys that have been head coaches and coordinators at other programs. ... They contribute to the planning and organization of the whole process.”

Now a seasoned play-caller and overseer of all things offense for the Bombers, this may be Jelinek's best group yet. The team led the MCC this season by averaging more than 394 yards and 45 points in each of its first 10 games.

“He's the brains behind everything we do on offense,” Neidhold said of Jelinek. “He's a tireless worker. His classroom is right across from mine, so we talk three or four times a day, every day. Every week he's got a good plan, and he just doesn't stop working.”

IN SEARCH OF A DOMINANT DEFENSE

With as light as Neidhold likes to keep the atmosphere around his team, Search seems to be the perfect fit as the team's defensive coordinator.

In addition to his football responsibilities, Search — previously an assistant at Pasco, at one time under current Chiawana coach Steve Graff — also serves as the team's disc jockey.

“Of course I've got a lot of Red Hot Chili Peppers in there. Lots of country, lots of classic rock,” Search said. “I tell these kids to stay kids as long as they can, because when they're in their 40s, or get out of high school or college, it's hard to find time to be a kid anymore. And these 2, 2½ hours every day are a great time for me to run around and be a kid.”

With a disarming attitude rivaled only by the Bombers' head coach, it can be easy to forget that Search oversees one of the top ball-hawking and deceptively nasty defenses in the state. During MCC play, Richland held teams to under 180 yards

and just 9 points per contest. And during the playoffs, it had 10 interceptions, six of which were returned for touchdowns, during a two-week span against Mead and West Valley (Yakima).

Despite it being his first year as the coordinator, Search has had a hand in perfecting the Bombers' defensive scheme since 2013, when he was the team's special teams coordinator and defensive back coach.

“It was something like 3 or 4 years ago that (former defensive coordinator) Mitch Davis, Wes Mason (D-line coach) and a couple other guys had their hands involved in it,” Search said. “It's a defense that we designed to stop the run first, and it defends the pass well.”

Now, Search has formed his own collaborative effort with assistants Mason, Jeff Muai (defensive backs), Kent Kafentzis (DBs), Pat Zuniga (linebackers), Jerrell Wills (linebackers) and Pete Zukowski (linebackers), and the results speak for themselves.

“The kids love him (Search). They play hard for him,” Neidhold said. “There's just a tremendous amount of respect for both of our coordinators.”

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