

## 4A STATE FOOTBALL

# For Richland coaching staff, success is in cards

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As the Richland Bombers prepared for their Class 4A championship game this week, several different story lines emerged.

The great coaching staff. One last chance for the talented senior class to win a title. A connection to the now-defunct Tri-Cities Fever, which has brought about some friendly banter on Twitter.

It all started with an innocent tweet about Richland

offensive coordinator Josh Jelinek's Tri-Cities Fever trading card being worth 50 cents.

That led to someone offering 75 cents to whomever had one.

Jelinek then chimed in, wondering why his fellow Richland coaches and former Fever teammates Tyler Thomas and Zach Fife weren't included in the fun.

Turns out, former Fever coach Dan Whitsett has the entire set of the 2005 Fever trading cards, minus Fife. He said he didn't know why Fife didn't have a card, but



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Richland coaches Josh Jelinek and Tyler Thomas were teammates with the Tri-Cities Fever in 2005.

it turns out there is one in existence. The entire set is valued at \$12.

A little sad news for the former Fever players — the cheerleader card in the collection also is worth 50 cents.

Jelinek, Thomas and Fife all played on the Tri-Cities National Indoor League championship team for Whitsett in 2005.

"It's awesome," Whitsett

**SEE COACHES, 4B**

FROM PAGE 3B

## COACHES

said of his former players' success. "When you get to the championship game, that another half a season. It's hard to get there. It's a huge accomplishment."

Whitsett knows whereof he speaks, winning a state title with Tri-Cities Prep in 2009 with Will Hoppes at quarterback.

While Jelinek runs Richland's offense, Thomas is the Bombers' quarterback coach, and Fife works with the offensive line.

Upon hearing the trio of cards was worth \$1.50, Richland coach Mike Neidhold said the men are worth much, much more.

"I am underpaying them," Neidhold said. "I am seriously underpaying them. They are tremendous coaches. They work tirelessly all year round. I don't have enough good things to say about them. That Fever game, when they won the championship, I was sitting in the stands watching the game. Little did I know that three future Richland coaches were on that field playing."

Jelinek was the first to join Neidhold's staff, coming aboard eight years ago. Thomas came in a year later, and Fife joined the group two years ago.

"Looking at Jelinek and Fife, they had coaches minds as players," Whitsett said. "That's why they were as good as they were. I cannot take credit for their football minds."

Jelinek, a Prosser native, joined the Fever after his playing days at Idaho, where he was an offensive lineman. Thomas, a quarterback who played at Prosser with Jelinek, played at Montana State before joining the NIFL team.

Fife, also an offensive

lineman, played at West Valley in Yakima before his college days at Central Washington. He was a backup lineman to Ray Marshall — who blocked for Shaun Alexander at Alabama — and Mac Tuiaea.

By the time the Fever reached the title game, Fife was a regular starter.

"We had a great year," Whitsett said of the Fever. "We were a new franchise and we were trying to figure things out. Looking back, I knew Zach was a better player than Marshall and Tuiaea, but he bided his time and when he did get in, he helped us through the playoffs and to the championship game."

"Josh was always a deep thinker. Conversations on the bus could go from fossil fuels to who knows what. He was passionate about how everyone was doing as a person. Then there was the sarcastic, quirky humor coming in from Zach."

But Thomas was the player who impressed Whitsett the most.

It was the third game of the season, and first as head coach for Whitsett. The Fever was playing in Wyoming and Thomas got hurt.

"Tyler shattered his wrist, but we just taped it up and he finished the game," Whitsett said. "We didn't know how bad it was at the time. He played with a lot of grit and passion. I have a lot of great memories of him."

Jelinek gave his former coach a little love at practice Thursday, having Richland quarterback Cade Jensen wear a Fever jersey.

Who knows? Maybe there's a little Fever magic left in that there jersey.

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