

# Sports

CLASS 4A STATE FOOTBALL CHAMPIONSHIP | 7:30 P.M. SATURDAY, TACOMA DOME (ROOT)

## QB pilots journey to Tacoma



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■ Richland's Paxton Stevens and the Bombers will face Camas in the 4A state title game Saturday night.

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When looking for a starting quarterback, most high school football coaches seek out a kid who is tall, has a big arm and, above all else, is a fearless leader.

Paxton Stevens fits that bill for Richland coach Mike Neidhold and the Bombers. The 6-foot-4, 170-pound senior signal caller has led the green and gold to a 13-0 record and the Bombers' first state championship game appearance since 1999. They will face Camas (13-0) at 7:30 p.m. Saturday at the Tacoma Dome.

"It's probably how high school football should be — your quarterback should be your guy," Neidhold said. "And Pax certainly is."

In his second year as Richland's starting QB, Stevens has shown an acute attention to detail and understanding of quarterbacks coach Tom Moore's plan of attack.

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### STEVENS

"I'm more comfortable with the offense, reading the defenses," Stevens said. "I'm getting good chemistry with my receivers, the running backs, O-linemen. It's just an awesome opportunity to build friendships. It's great."

Stevens has thrown for 2,716 yards and 32 touchdowns this season, and he has run in a couple more scores. But perhaps the most important stats this year for Stevens came in the past two games. He threw for four touchdowns with no interceptions against Bothell and Skyview in the state quarterfinal and semifinal rounds.

"Ball security, it's a big thing," Stevens said. "You never want to give the other team another opportunity to score. So making smart decisions is always a good thing. That's one of my key points before games, talking to myself, saying, 'Make good decisions, no throwing stupid passes, hold on to the ball if I run it.'"

Stevens doesn't fit the bill of a kid who grew up wanting to be the Richland High quarterback. He lived in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, before moving to the Tri-Cities in 2012. But he grew up playing youth football and said it was always his favorite sport. Playing for a state championship, and possibly leading his high school team to its first undefeated season in the modern era, is something Stevens has been waiting for "my whole life," he said.

Stevens' passions for football and winning are apparent, and Neidhold said he brings that fire to his teammates.

"Pax is a fiery guy, and all of this matters to him," Neidhold said. "He's a really smart football player and an incredible athlete. I just think the world of the kid, and he's the leader of our team, and he's done some things this year that have been very special."

As many compliments as the coach pays his star quarterback, Neidhold, who played quarterback at Richland in the 1970s, will often jokingly remind Stevens he is only the second-best QB to play for the Bombers.

The lighthearted relationship Stevens has with Neid-

### RICHLAND BOMBERS (13-0) VS. CAMAS PAPERMAKERS (13-0)

When, where: 7:30 p.m. Saturday, Tacoma Dome.

**Road to 4A final:** Richland — def. Sunnyside 41-0, def. Bothell 49-28, def. Skyview 35-7. Camas — def. Graham-Kapowsin 55-6, def. Skyline 28-14, def. Sumner 45-21.

**2015 state playoff finish:** Richland lost to Gonzaga Prep 31-17 in the semifinals. Camas lost to Skyline 35-10 in the quarterfinals.

**State playoff history:** Richland is 27-15 in 18 appearances (two titles: 1981 AAA championship, beat Kentridge 7-6; 1999 4A championship, beat Kentwood 21-18). Camas is 12-10 in 11 appearances (titles: none).

**Top players:** Richland — QB Paxton Stevens (180-343-10—2,716 pass, 32 TDs); RB Ben Stanfield (158-1,037 rush, 11 TDs; 12-201 rec., 3 TDs); RB Parker McCary (148-790 rush, 14 TDs); WR/DB/K Adam Weissenfels (34-503 rec., 8 TDs; 7 INTs; 51-62 XP); WR/DB Alex Chapman (34-787, 14 TDs; 5 INTs); WR/DB Ryan Piper (25-296 rec., 2 TDs; 5 INTs); OL/DL Brigham Whitby; LB Victor Strasser. Camas — QB Jack Colletto (177-284—2,662 pass, 26 TDs; 146-1,165 rush, 20 TDs); RB/LB Michael Matthews (118-675 rush, 17 TDs); WR/SS Cooper McNatt (47-899 rec., 9 TDs); WR Drake Owen (47-717 rec., 7 TDs).

**Quick facts:** Richland is playing for its first state championship since beating Kentwood in the 1999 title game. ... This is Camas' second championship game appearance. The Papermakers lost to Chiawana in the 2013 title game, squandering a 13-point lead in the final minute. ... This is the first meeting between the Bombers and Papermakers.

Richland senior quarterback Paxton Stevens has thrown for 2,716 yards and 32 touchdowns to help the Bombers reach their first state title game since 1999. Richland, which seeks its third state championship, will face fellow 13-0 team Camas in Saturday night's Class 4A final.



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QBs key to Braves' and Bombers' journeys to title games Page 7B



hold doesn't just extend to his teammates, but to almost anyone he meets.

"Even at school, he's pretty cheerful, pretty friendly to everyone," junior wide receiver/defensive back Adam Weissenfels said. "And he's a nice person to have around, because he's nice to everyone."

Over his two years as a starter, Stevens has worked to build relationships on and off the field with his receivers, and the chemistry has paid off on Friday and Saturday nights.

"We figured out the tendencies that we each have," Weissenfels said. "I know exactly when Paxton is gonna throw it to me, and I know pretty much exactly what he's thinking every single play and what he's gonna do with it before the ball is snapped."

Stevens has connected with Weissenfels 34 times this season for 503 yards and eight touchdowns.

#### ON TO CAMAS

Even though the Bombers have beaten their three state playoff foes by an average of 30 points, they still have quite a mountain to climb to win their third state championship.

Over the last decade, the Camas Papermakers might be the best team in the state that hasn't won a championship. They're making their seventh consecutive appearance in the state playoffs and have amassed an 81-7 record since 2010.

Camas looked to have its first state title wrapped up in 2013, when it led Chiawana by 13 points with a minute to play in its championship game debut. But, as the Riverhawk faithful are well aware, plans quickly went awry for the Papermakers when Chiawana scored 14 points in 55 seconds to pull off the 27-26 comeback win.

The hunger created by that defeat, coupled with an extremely talented team, will make Camas a tough out, Neidhold said.

"We've got our hands full — they are great," Neidhold said. "They're a great, dynamic offensive team, they're a very, very good defensive team, and they play great special teams. We're going to have to play our best game, and we'd like to think that they will too."

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