

# NO MONKEYING AROUND

Merkle sheds gorilla suit for a spot on Richland's O-line

JACK MILLIKIN  
HERALD STAFF WRITER

Funny thing happened to Richland football coach Mike Neidhold early this season.

During a Mid-Columbia Conference visit to Borleske Stadium in Walla Walla, Neidhold looked up into the stands into a rabid student section celebrating Richland's 26-20 Week 2 victory. Somewhere between the guy dressed up as a banana and the guy dressed up as a hot dog, he noticed a guy in a gorilla suit.

"He takes off his hat, and it's Hunter Merkle. I said, 'What are you doing?' He said, 'I'm having a great time,'" Neidhold said of Merkle, a once-promising lineman who tore cartilage in his knee before his sophomore season and missed out on two years of playing in the trenches. "I told him, 'You should come out.'"

"Then I wondered why a guy in a gorilla suit would come out this late for football.

By Week 5, that guy in a gorilla suit turned out to be his starting right tackle.

"I was just watching the game and missed it all," said Merkle, a 5-foot-8, 200-pound



Richard Dickin | rdickin@tricityherald.com

"We have to carry him anyway," joked the Richland High School offensive line from left, Matt McCranie, Derek Matheson, Will Fisher and Clayton Simundson, as they hoisted Hunter Merkle above their heads. Merkle used to dress in a gorilla suit in the fan section of the stands before he decided to turn out for the team after the season started.

bundle of fire and fight. "I've been playing since I was 6. It just kind of clicked, and I realized I needed to be out there."

Merkle will be a part of the Bombers' starting offensive line when Richland (5-3) faces Mead (8-1) at 7 p.m. Friday at Fran Rish Stadium in the 4A Eastern Regional playoffs.

Merkle's decision to come

out couldn't have come at a better time for Neidhold and offensive coordinator Josh Jelinek, who doubles as Richland's offensive line coach.

Since the Bombers broke summer camp in Boise, they gone through more changes than a werewolf under a full moon. In fact, they've had a

different starting offensive line for each of the last nine games, with as many as seven players taking a spot in the rotation, and at different positions.

That hasn't been easy for Jelinek, a one-time Prosser football star who went on to play at the University of Idaho. In the first week of the

season, he lost Derek Matheson, a senior center and returning starter, to a high ankle sprain. The next week, it was right guard Matt McCranie, who went down with a knee injury. That alone accounted for two of his most dependable linemen.

See **MONKEYING** | Page C2

## MONKEYING | Jelinek has had to adjust in wake of injuries

FROM PAGE C1

The Bombers had other key injuries, too, including receiver Deric Samples (broken wrist), defensive lineman Jake Ellis (tailbone) and running back Cameron Simpson (ankle sprain).

But Jelinek, a former all-state lineman, has kept his head and found a way to manage, even under the most stressful of situations.

During a recent game, Merkle and Matheson came off the field on the same play — Merkle was having trouble breathing after taking a whack to his throat, and Matheson had a helmet malfunction — and Jelinek was forced to make some quick decisions.

"A lot of times, stuff happens so fast, you just have to do it and hope for the best," Jelinek said. "When those two guys came running off, it was like: 'Ellis, you're in. Have McCranie move down inside.' At the same time, we're going from a four-receiver package to a tight-end-and-three-receiver package. So eight guys — four-and-four — are going this way, and two hurt offensive linemen are coming out."

"I've got to call the play,

switch linemen and change personnel."

According to senior offensive tackle Clayton Simundson, all is going as well as it can, considering the circumstances.

"It's been pretty crazy, a lot of bad luck, but we've had a lot of guys ready to go," Simundson said. "We're doing a really good job as a unit. It really helps when you can trust a No. 2 guy as much as you can trust a No. 1, because they've been through everything with you in the winter and summer."

Even though Merkle didn't go through summer camp with the rest of the line — he was busy playing baseball with the Richland Knights Junior American Legion team — Neidhold said he has built up plenty of trust with his team-first attitude and willingness to battle.

"He's the tough guy in a street fight. You've got to keep your eye on those guys, because there's a reason he's in there," Neidhold said. "Hunter's a guy you look at and think, 'That guy should be in a gorilla suit.'"

But the Bombers sure are glad to have him fighting with them in the trenches.

► Jack Millikin; 582-1406;  
jmillikin@tricityherald.com

**Mead (8-1) at Richland (5-3), 7 p.m. today, Fran Rish Stadium:**

The Bombers ended the Panthers' season in 2010, in a memorable victory against the Bishop Sankey (University of Washington) led squad.

This is a much different year, though, as the Mead defense likely will give Richland fits.

The Panthers have allowed just 979 rushing yards and 997 passing yards on the season, astounding numbers in a strong Greater Spokane League. Mead has struggled with penalties and turnovers, though, so if the Bombers can force some miscues there is no reason Richland can't knock off the visitors.