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## MCC FOOTBALL

# Bombers' strength of Wills

Air Force bound DE/TE  
serves a number of roles

JACK MILLIKIN  
TRI-CITY HERALD

When Lakota Wills first arrived at Richland High School as a sophomore in 2013, the initial plan was to let the Class 2A transfer from Cedar Crest High School play out the football season on junior varsity.

### TODAY

Richland vs.  
Hanford,  
Fran Rish, 7 p.m.

He certainly didn't stay there long. After seeing Wills' first few plays in a Bombers uniform at

the Boise State football camp, Richland coach Mike Neidhold couldn't wait to see what he could do on a bigger stage.

"We went out, and on that first play against Eisenhower I ended up (blocking) this kid all the way to the end zone as a tight end," Wills said. "That's really where it started for me."

But Wills' arrival on the scene was more than just another jersey filling out the roster or another kid walking the halls. Bomber players and coaches — even the Boise State coaching staff — could see they had something special.



Bob Brawdy Tri-City Herald

Richland senior Lakota Wills (45) is not only one of the state's best defensive players, but lately he's emerging as a scoring threat at running back. That spells bad news for Bombers opponents.

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## WILLS | Was pursued by UW, WSU, OSU, BSU and Missouri

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"I'm not very smart, but I looked at him and thought, 'He's got to be in a green (varsity) jersey.' Three plays later, he was," Neidhold said. "All of a sudden, the Boise State coaches were coming around asking, 'Who's that guy?'"

"Even our guys were going, 'Who's that guy? Where's he from?' Never mind, he's at Richland. 'What position does he play?' Anything you want."

Since then, Wills has only worked harder to make himself the best player and best person he can be. As a junior linebacker, his numbers spoke for themselves — 120 tackles, 15 tackles for

loss, six sacks and one interception — and earned him a spot on the All-Mid-Columbia Conference first team. As a person and a senior leader, his presence goes beyond numbers.

"He cares about people around him," fellow senior linebacker Brecken Galliher said. "I love watching him because he plays 100 percent. He doesn't care if we're losing by 30 or winning by 30. He'll do his best to help our team win."

Lately, he's been getting some different looks on offense and defense. He still plays tight end but has gotten quite a few reps at running back this season, scoring three touchdowns in the last two games. Wills also

got to try his hand at defensive end, where he recorded two sacks, a tackle for loss and a forced fumble during last Friday's 28-7 home win over Chiawana.

"I've always played the same way. Play every play like it's going to be your last. That's how everybody should play football," Wills said. "There are plenty of examples of kids who would give anything to play football again, so I play for those kids who can't play anymore."

Having the 6-foot-4, 240-pound specimen to work with is like a fancy new tool in the shed for Bombers offensive coordinator Josh Jelinek.

"We could hand the ball to

him 40 times for 250 yards and have no problems winning every single game from here on out, but how long can that last? Right now, it's about managing games and his reps," Jelinek said. "It's probably confusing for him because we ask so much of him. We had to take a time out (against Chiawana) because we sent him in and he thought he was going in as a tight end. He lined up, and next thing you know we don't have a running back."

Less than two weeks ago, Wills completed an arduous recruiting process, committing to the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colo., where he hopes to study engineering (either civil or aerospace). Before

that, he received interest from Washington, Washington State, Oregon State, Utah, Boise State, Portland State, Montana State and Missouri.

"I remember March 14. (Air Force) Offensive Coordinator Mike Thiessen followed me on Twitter. The next day, (Air Force) offered me a full-ride scholarship," said Wills, an honors student with a 3.75 GPA. "The recruiting process is real stressful because you never know if somebody wants you. But hard work definitely pays off."

Wills credits his family — his father Jerrel, his mother Jamie and his brother Elliott — for instilling a strong work ethic and teaching him the value of character. Neidhold believes it's these things, more than his athletic

ability alone, that destines Wills for a fulfilling and rewarding life.

"To be an academy kid — Air Force, Annapolis, West Point — there's a certain amount of discipline that goes with them, a certain work ethic that's bar none. You don't get tired in academy schools. There's just no room for it," Neidhold said. "You know what your job looks like, and you take it all the way to the end. And there's no excuses. That's how Lakota attacks his schoolwork and his relationships with his peers and coaches."

"There's no room for anything except his best effort."

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