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PREP FOOTBALL PREVIEW

Bombers ready for next test

Richland pits stout 'D' against versatile LC

JACK MILLIKIN
TRI-CITY HERALD

Richland football coach Mike Neidhold wasn't too pleased with his defense in 2014 after watching the Bombers give up over 23 points and 330 yards a game.

Still, he recognized potential greatness within. And with players like Lakota Wills, Brecken Galliher, Griffey

March, Alex Chapman and John Hardy returning in 2015, he sought advice from a rival coach but a close friend to help form a plan for 2015.

"We knew the pieces we had. I knew if we could get them in the right places and just let them play and not overcomplicate things, that would be good for us. So I talked with (Chiawana coach) Steve Graff and told him I

needed some help," Neidhold said. "Steve had success at Pasco running a simple defense, and that's a moment of clarity that I had. We simplified everything and told (the players) to just go play football and act like a high school kid. But with that comes great responsibility."

It's a responsibility that Bombers defensive players took to heart and put into action. So far, Richland is giving up just 214.7 yards and 8.4 points a game, the smallest

points-allowed ratio in the four-year history of the Mid-Columbia Conference. Richland (8-1) will play host to Lewis & Clark (5-4) at 7 p.m. today at Fran Rish Stadium.

Neidhold, a 1977 Richland graduate, will let history judge just where they rank among the program's top defensive teams, but he believes they aren't quite done yet.

"They are a special group, and they love to play

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Sarah Gordon Tri-City Herald

Richland defenders John Hardy (59), Brigham Whitby (74) and Lakota Wills (45) have helped turn the Bombers into one of the most talented and opportunistic defensive units in the state.

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defense," he said. "They're pretty good. We'll just wait and see."

But Neidhold is just as proud of the offense, which has emerged as one of the most consistent and explosive in the MCC. Quarterback Paxton Stevens got off to a slow start after healing from a back injury that kept him out of spring practice and off-season camps. But he is now the top-ranked passer in the league, leading the MCC in completions (120) and passing yards (1,552) while ranking second in completion percentage (54.1).

"His first day of practice was August 20. Fourteen practices later, he's lining up against Gonzaga Prep," Neidhold said. "It's been baby steps with the offense. (Quarterbacks) coach (Tom) Moore gives him a little bit more to look at each week. Pax has done a good job getting us in the right play and throwing to the right guy most of the time."

Against Lewis & Clark, the sixth-ranked Bombers will face a team that plays strong against the run and features a balanced offense that could break big plays at any time.