

# Sports

## PREP FOOTBALL PREVIEW

# Bombers prep for powerful Skyline

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WIN, LOSE OR DRAW, ON FRIDAY WE'RE GOING TO GET TESTED BY A GREAT TEAM.

*Richland football coach Mike Neidhold*

■ **The Bombers open their season against the Division I football factory Spartans, who lost to Gonzaga Prep in the 2015 Class 4A state final. Defending 2A state champ Prosser begins its title defense against Kennewick.**

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Coming off a trip to the Class 4A state semifinals, the Richland High School football team will host the

perennial powerhouse Skyline Spartans in their season opener Friday.

The Week 1 contest will be the first time the teams meet, though they nearly played each other for the 2015 state championship.

Gonzaga Prep kept that matchup from taking place, eliminating Richland in the semifinal, 31-17, and then beating Skyline for the state title, 34-16.

Denied of winning their eighth state championship in 19 seasons as a varsity program, the Spartans should be plenty fired up after making the trip from Sammamish to Fran Rish

Stadium, Richland coach Mike Neidhold said.

“They got thundered last year in the state final game by Gonzaga,” Neidhold said. “I would imagine they’re a little fussy. They gave up a ton of yards rushing in that game last year, so I would guess they’re going to come down here and play a little

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bit angry. We have to be ready for that.”

The Bombers went 11-2 in 2015, their best campaign in Neidhold’s eight years at the helm.

First-team all-Mid-Columbia Conference quarterback Paxton Stevens will again look to drive the Richland offense after a stellar junior year in which he led the league in passing with 1,788 yards and 13 touchdowns. Senior Alex Chapman will likely be the Bombers’ best all-around athlete on both sides of the ball as the team’s top returner in receiving (24 catches for 443 yards, eight touchdowns) and interceptions (five).

Ranked as the No. 2 Class 4A team in the state in The Seattle Times preseason poll, Skyline has some question marks on the roster headed into Week 1 after graduating its No. 1 quarterback, running back and wide receiver. But the Spartans have displayed an uncanny ability to reload in their short but prosperous history, and a stable of potential Division I linemen — led by 6-4, 285-pound junior Matthew Cindric (received an offer from Washington State) and 6-6, 290 senior Henry Bainivalu (offers from nine Pac-12 schools) — will give them a chance to beat anyone.

“We only want to play teams that will make us better,” Neidhold said. “We want to play teams that are going to challenge us. We want to play teams that we have to prepare for and that we have to keep our eye on the ball for 48 minutes against, or we’re going to get run out. And Skyline is all that for us. Win, lose or

draw, on Friday we’re going to get tested by a great team.”

Kickoff is scheduled for 7 p.m. (all games begin at 7 p.m. unless otherwise noted).

**Kennewick at Prosser:** Reigning Class 2A state champion Prosser will host an upstart Kennewick Lions team that made a bit of a surprising run into the 3A quarterfinals a year ago.

The Lions return a lot of talent to their line and backfield, with 2015 leading rushers Ronny Loomis (6-2, 186, senior) and Isaac Ruiz (5-8, 175, junior) highlighting the offensive attack behind an offensive line with three returning starters and a senior transfer from Sumner High School.

The Mustangs allowed an average of one touchdown per game last season, and with a defense led by 6-0, 190 senior linebacker Kolby Swift — second-team all-CWAC at OLB — Prosser should provide Kennewick with a stern test in the box.

“Whenever you’re playing defending state champs, you know you better bring your ‘A’ game,” Kennewick coach Bill Templeton said. “It’s an old coaches saying that the most improvement comes between Weeks 1 and 2. Hopefully we improve between one and two, and hopefully we go out there and play a quality ball game, don’t make a ton of dumb mistakes.”

First-team all-CWAC running back and second-team cornerback Michael Kernan is Prosser’s most dangerous weapon, and the senior will move out to wide receiver to become the top target for the 2015 2A Player

of the Year, quarterback Tanner Bolt.

Bolt is looking to build on a junior season in which he blew away opposing defenses, throwing for 3,294 yards and 43 touchdowns.

Senior Jared Gray, a three-year starter at free safety for the Lions, will lead a veteran group of Kennewick defensive backs trying to slow down Prosser’s dynamic passing attack.

**Around the MCC:** Chiawana opens what it hopes will be a bounce-back season by visiting the Moses Lake Chiefs. The Riverhawks went 6-4 and missed the state playoffs last season after winning it all in 2013 and losing in the Class 4A state final to Bothell in 2014.

The Walla Walla Blue Devils will travel to Lewiston to take on the Bengals, who made it to the quarterfinals of the Idaho Class 5A state playoffs last year.

Led by senior quarterback Zach Borisch, the Kamiakin Braves will try to return to the state playoffs in a campaign that begins with a home game against the Eastmont Wildcats.

Flush with talent in the skill positions, the Hanford Falcons head to Yakima for a late 7:30 p.m. kickoff against the Davis Pirates.

Pasco will open its season at home against the Eisenhower Cadets. The Bulldogs are looking to improve on a 2015 campaign in which they went 1-9 but lost four games by eight points or

fewer.

**Small schools:** Defending Class 1A state champion Royal begins its title defense at home against the perennial Class 2A powerhouse Ellensburg Bulldogs. First-team all-state quarterback Kaden Jenks leads the charge for the Knights, who went undefeated last season.

Hoping to spoil Royal’s bid for another state title is Connell, which opens its season on the road against the Othello Huskies. The Eagles went 10-2 last season and lost to the Knights in the semifinals of the state tournament.

The College Place Hawks will play their first varsity game in school history when they host the Highland Scot-ties.

Other local matchups include Kiona-Benton at Grandview, Warden at Okanogan, Granger at Mabton, Zillah at Wahluke, Riverside at Tri-Cities Prep (at Chiawana High School), and DeSales at La Salle.

Back playing 11-man football after moving up to the 2B classification, Liberty Christian had its Week 1 nonconference game fall through. The Patriots won’t take the field until a Week 2 matchup with the Hanford junior varsity squad.

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