

Sports

PREP FOOTBALL PREVIEW | WEEK 7

Royal, Connell square off in SCAC East

■ **Richland tries to preserve undefeated season against Walla Walla. Kamiakin looks to bounce back from Week 6 loss with matchup against Kennewick.**

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Regardless of classification, Friday's SCAC East matchup between Royal and Connell will be the game of the week in Washington state.

The rivalry has been well publicized, and last season's installments only furthered the tension. Royal beat Connell 27-20 in the third week of the regular season, and then again topped the Eagles 47-7 in the Class 1A state semifinal game en route to another state championship. Those were the only games Connell lost in 2015.

The matchup between the two sides this time around looks to be equally as important. Both teams enter the contest with 6-0 records having faced similar teams with similar results. Both teams knocked off a Class 2A CWAC powerhouse in their openers — Royal beat Ellensburg 21-14 and Connell knocked off Othello 41-16 — and both teams are beating their opponents by about 40 points per game.

Connell coach Wayne Riner acknowledged that his team and Wiley Allred's Knights couldn't be much more evenly matched.

"It's going to be who can stop who, really," Riner said. "Their defense is so good, and their offense is like a machine. They just don't make mistakes, and they're fundamentally sound."

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SQUARE

Three players have primarily driven the Eagles this season — quarterback Brian Hawkins, running back Jaxs Whitby and tight end Steven Kroontje. Hawkins has been a dynamic run-pass threat, with seven rushing scores and 19 touchdown passes, nine of which have gone to Kroontje. Whitby has scored ten total touchdowns.

"If you watch college football, you know that it's fun to have that kind of kid that can run and throw," Riner said of Hawkins. "It's scary for defensive coordinators. He makes things scary because you think you've got everything covered, and then you get a kid like that that just takes off and he can flat out hurt you. He's an extra running back back there."

While Connell may have the more balanced attack, the top player on the field will almost certainly be Royal's Kaden Jenks, the reigning Class 1A all-state quarterback. With Royal leading most of its games by three or more touchdowns at halftime this season, Jenks looked to be — statistically — having a down year after his 45-touchdown 2015 season. But he's come on strong in the past couple weeks, bumping his season total up to 14 touchdown passes.

Corbin Christensen has emerged as a dominant force at wide receiver, catching six touchdown passes over the past two weeks against Wahluke and Kiona-Benton.

In both points scored and allowed, Royal (average score 47-8.6) and Connell (51-11) are clearly the top two teams in the SCAC East, but the rivalry between the two schools will likely be what makes the atmosphere electric.

"Royal will bring the whole town. It'll be a fun one," Riner said.

Kickoff is scheduled for 7 p.m. at Connell High School.

AROUND THE MCC WALLA WALLA AT RICHLAND: After getting pushed to the limit by Kamiakin a week ago, the Bombers (6-0, 4-0 Mid-Columbia Conference) will face another big-time offense when they come up against Mitch Lesmeister and the Blue Devils (3-3, 2-2).

Much to coach Mike Neidhold's delight, Richland found its way in the running game last week in its 21-20 overtime victory over Kamiakin, as Parker McCary and Ben Stanfield combined for more than 200 yards and quarterback Paxton Stevens rushed 10 times for 44 yards.

Lesmeister is coming off a monster performance against Pasco where he had 276 combined rushing and passing yards with five total touchdowns in the Blue Devils' 42-8 win.

If the Bombers survive this matchup against the Blue Devils, they will likely be playing for the MCC championship next week against Chiawana. **KAMIAKIN AT KENNEWICK:** Coming off a loss to Richland, the Braves (4-2, 2-2) need a victory over the Lions (2-4, 1-3) to guarantee they at least stay tied atop the Class 3A schools in the MCC.

The explosive Kamiakin offense, led by quarterback Zach Borisch and receivers Benson Smith, Darreon Moore and Isaiah Brimmer — who had two touchdowns against Richland last week — appears to match up well against Kennewick, which is allowing 6.2 yards per play, the second highest total in the league.

The Lions will likely try to play keep-away from the Braves, which means the rushing combination of quarterback AJ Templeton and running back Ronny Loomis must be in top form. **CHIAWANA AT PASCO:** Andrew Vargas is on pace to rush for more than 3,800 yards and score 60 touch-downs if the Riverhawks (6-0, 4-0) make it to the state championship, and the Chiawana senior back figures to have another monster game against Pasco (0-6, 0-6), which is allowing a league-high 206.5 yards per game on the ground.

Pasco has yet to beat Chiawana in the five meetings between the two teams.

Other local matchups include Othello at Wapato, Prosser at Ephrata, Toppenish at Grandview, River View at Columbia-Burbank, Warden at Wahluke, College Place at Kiona-Benton, Touchet at Pomeroy, Desales at Tri-Cities Prep (at Chiawana High School), Lyle-Wishram at Liberty Christian (at Hanford High School), White Swan at Dayton-Waitsburg and Hermiston at Bend.

Hanford visited Southridge on Thursday night in a battle of teams on the MCC playoff bubble.

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PREP STANDINGS

MCC	Lg	All
Chiawana	4-0	6-0
Richland	4-0	6-0
Kamiakin	2-2	4-2
Southridge	2-2	3-3
Walla Walla	2-2	3-3
Hanford	1-3	3-3
Kennewick	1-3	2-4
Pasco	0-4	0-6
Thursday		
Hanford at Southridge		
Friday		
Chiawana at Pasco, 7 p.m.		
Kamiakin at Kennewick, 7 p.m.		
Walla Walla at Richland, 7 p.m.		