

Sports



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Richland football coach Mike Neidhold and quarterback Paxton Stevens (17) congratulate lineman Noah Sprenkle (64) and tight end/linebacker Jacob Stanfield (91) as they head back to the sideline while facing Skyview in a Class 4A state semifinal game Nov. 26 at Lampson Stadium. Like Stevens, Neidhold played quarterback for the Bombers, and in 1975 led them to their first state championship appearance. Richland lost to Foss 17-7 in that title game.

REFLECTING ON RICHLAND'S 13-1 FOOTBALL SEASON

Neidhold happy to get 14 Mondays

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With the Richland High School football team coming off its first state semifinal appearance under ninth-year coach Mike Neidhold, public expectations for the team were sky-high, but the goal for the Bombers remained the same as it has every season — get 14 Mondays.

That's exactly what the Bombers did, starting out 13-0 to advance to their first

state championship game since 1999.

Richland lost to Camas 24-14 in Saturday night's Class 4A title game in Tacoma, but Neidhold still considers the season a huge success.

"All we want around here is time with the kids, and if you can get 14 weeks with them, that means that you got every single Monday out of it," Neidhold said. "We got 'em all, and that's a win right there. It's pretty gratifying to spend all that time with this great group of kids, and coaches, knowing that you

got every single one of 'em."

It was the first time Neidhold made it to a title game as Richland's head coach, but it was hardly his first time being under the state's brightest lights.

Neidhold graduated from Richland — then Columbia — in 1977 and played quarterback on the varsity football team for two years. He was on the 1975 team that lost in the state championship game to Foss in the Bombers' first playoff appearance.

That was painful, Neidhold said, but the emotions felt after losing or winning a

state championship as a coach are much stronger.

"I think as a player, you're kind of oblivious to how much work the coaches do," Neidhold said. "I could never figure out why coach (J.D.) Covington's truck was always at the stadium. ... Now as a coach, I can understand why his truck was always at the stadium, because there's always work to be done.

"After being on both sides of the coin, I'd say it's more gratifying to be on the coaching end of it. And it's on both sides. It's worse as a coach when you lose, and it's better as a coach when you win."

A decade after graduating from Richland, Neidhold ran into then-Richland coach Lonnie Pierson at a practice and learned the depth of a coach's commitment firsthand.

SEE RICHLAND, 7B

"He said, 'Hey, we're heading out to practice, you want to hang around?' I said, 'Sure,' and the next thing I know, I'm on staff," Neidhold said.

Neidhold served as the offensive line coach on the 1996 team that lost to Curtis in the state championship game and on the '99 squad that beat Kentwood for the Bombers' second and most recent title.

Those seasons provided perspective and invaluable experience for Neidhold, but the 2016 campaign was a lot different than his first three trips to the title game.

"It's a completely different set of circumstances," he said. "I was the O-line coach in '96 and '99, and I just had my group of guys to worry about and getting them ready to play. This time around, we had 90 players and the coaches, and if something goes wrong, it falls on my shoulders. There's a lot more to think about."

What made the 14-week season even more gratifying for Neidhold and the coaching staff was the quality of the senior class — both as football players and people — that won at least two state playoff games in consecutive seasons for the first time since 1980-81.

While seniors such as two-year starting quarterback Paxton Stevens, lineman Brigham Whitby, wide receiver/cornerback Alex Chapman and running back Ben Stanfield made headlines and will leave a lasting legacy on the Richland football program, Neidhold said he would equally miss the players that might not have contributed as much on the field, but helped create the character and culture of the team.

"You'll talk about (wide receiver/defensive back) Nathan Schrecengost, (linebacker) Garrett Guffey, (de-

fensive back) William Harshaw, (lineman) Tyler Simpson — you know, the kids you guys have never heard of," Neidhold said. "Like (tight end/linebacker) Isaac Lovato, the dancer, there's just so many characters — (wide receiver) Cody Kjarmo — kids that don't get in the newspaper, but you talk to them every day, you're with them in the locker room. I'll miss those guys. This whole senior class has been great."

Even after stringing together two of the top seasons in school history, Neidhold said the goal for the Bombers in coming years will remain the same, and it's not to win Richland's third state title.

"Our whole deal will be about just getting another Monday, and hopefully we can rip off 14 more," Neidhold said. "But our goal is not to win a state championship like some might think. Our goal is to spend time together and make it worthwhile, and if you can get 14 weeks, you give yourself a big, fat win."

A LITTLE HELP FROM A LOCAL LEGEND

Like most successful high school football coaches, Neidhold raves about the tireless work ethic and talent of his assistants, but his quarterbacks coach has a bit higher pedigree than the rest of the staff.

Tom Moore won four state championships in his 23 seasons as Prusser's head coach, but he hung up the whistle in 2009 so he could spend more time watching his sons, Kirby and Kellen, play football at Boise State.

He wasn't able to stay away from the sideline for long.

When Nate Holdren stepped down as the Bombers' offensive coordinator, Richland assistant Josh Jelinek, who had gotten his coaching start as one of

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Moore's assistants, was almost immediately in contact with the recently retired coach.

Moore started as Richland's offensive coordinator in 2011, but he has since moved to quarterbacks coach.

"He's got a lot of wisdom," Neidhold said. "That guy's been around a long time, and he's won a lot of games. He knows a lot, he knows how to talk to kids and we're real fortunate to have a guy like Tom on our staff. He loves Richland, he loves the Richland kids and we have a real positive work relationship."

"We make each other laugh about five, six times a day. And I guess we're the two old guys on staff."

Moore's most recent product, Stevens, was arguably at the top of a strong class of Mid-Columbia Conference quarterbacks. He threw for 2,894 yards and 32 touchdowns against 12 interceptions, and was named the second-team all-MCC quarterback.

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