

Confident Golden Bears focusing on Panthers

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Nine weeks into the high school football season, Upper Arlington held the eighth -- and final -- Division I Region 3 playoff spot.

After the Golden Bears blanked visiting Reynoldsburg 28-0 Friday, Oct. 26 (their third-straight shutout and fifth overall), playing in the postseason seemed like a slam dunk -- or was it?

With the fairly complex Ohio High School Athletic Association computer rankings deciding which teams make the cut, UA held its collective breath as No. 7 Groveport Madison upset No. 1 Hilliard Darby Oct. 26.

It wasn't until then-No. 14 Olentangy beat No. 10 Worthington Kilbourne the Bears could breathe a sigh of relief.

"We were pretty nervous because we didn't know if we'd even be in the playoffs," co-captain Thomas Sauter said. "Or if we made it, where we'd be seeded."

The No. 8 Bears play at No. 1 Darby at 7 p.m. Saturday, Nov. 3.

Although the teams exchanged three game films to prepare for the regional quarterfinal matchup, it won't take watching film to get the teams acquainted.

Darby (9-1) handed UA (8-2) its first loss of the season in Week 5, a 22-7 drubbing Sept. 21. All the points in that game were scored in the first half and Panthers quarterback Jeremy Ebert was nearly perfect passing the football -- 11 of 13 in the first half -- and ran for one of their three touchdowns.

"They beat us pretty bad the first time, but I think this is going to be a lot closer," co-captain Andrew Colosimo said. "We're going to be fighting right there with them."

So what's changed since the Bears headed to Hilliard five weeks ago?

"We've gotten more confident in our ability to make big plays and play more consistently," Sauter said. "We'll hang right with them and show them a thing or two about playing playoff football."

UA quarterback Braden Layer threw a season-high 22 passes against the Raiders. Although that was done by design -- the Raiders typically put nine players in the box to stuff the run -- UA has worked hard to balance effective passing with its smash-mouth running game.

"Reynoldsburg was selling out so much for the run -- when you put nine guys up there, it makes it tough running," Bears coach Mike Golden said. "Braden's worked hard at improving his passes -- we need to be able to execute our passing game to beat Darby."

"Their quarterback, (Jeremy) Ebert is an X-factor kid. He can make a play out of a broken play -- that's a rare thing in high school. It's hard to practice against a kid like that."

Although Golden calls Ebert the game's X-factor, others might say the same about the veteran coach.

This is the 15th team Golden has taken to the playoffs -- his third straight appearance with the Bears.

He's compiled a 162-54 record in 18 years as head coach and led Watterson to a Division III

state championship in 2002.

Saturday will be Darby's first-ever playoff appearance.

"We have great confidence knowing what we run wins games," co-captain Colin McClain said. "He's had as much success as any coach in Central Ohio -- having that behind us definitely makes us more confident."

Junior fullback Tommy Farwick finished the regular season as the squad's top rusher, gaining 1,024 yards on 149 attempts (6.6 yards-per carry) and scoring 19 TDs.

Junior tailback Alex Drake added 689 yards (6.2 avg.) and six TDs

Layer is 59 of 92 (64.1 completion percentage) for 863 yards, six touchdowns and one interception.

Farwick was Layer's favorite receiver (13 receptions/213 yards), but wide receiver Blake Annen was the biggest threat. He caught just five passes (191 yards), but three went for touchdowns.

Defensively, linebackers Mark Crawford and Colin McClain and safety Anthony Finissi were the leaders in tackles. Crawford tallied 49 solo tackles and 38 assists; followed by Finissi (41/30) and McClain (36/30).

Finissi also led the team in interceptions (three), but Brandon Von Voight returned the team's only interception for a TD.

Defensive end Mikel Berry was tops with 10 sacks.

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