

FOOTBALL

UA focuses on Raiders, not playoffs

Thursday, October 25, 2007

PATRICK DOLAN

ThisWeek Staff Writer

In all likelihood, all that stands between the Upper Arlington High School football team and a berth in the Division I playoffs is a victory Friday over visiting OCC-Buckeye Division-rival Reynoldsburg.

The Golden Bears beat Grove City 42-0 last Friday and are 7-2 overall and 3-1 in the OCC-Buckeye.

They are eighth in the Region 3 computer standings with 15.7667 points, holding a slim lead over ninth-place Worthington Kilbourne (15.1444).

The top eight teams in each region qualify for the playoffs, so the Bears are aware of what will be at stake when they take the field against the Raiders, who lost to Dublin Coffman 36-0 last Friday to drop to 3-6 and 2-2.

"It's very important that we get this last win under our belt and get to the playoffs," Bears offensive lineman Brennan Kurfees said. "It's pretty crucial that we win this last game."

But a win will not guarantee Upper Arlington a playoff berth for the third consecutive season. It is possible that Kilbourne could jump over the Bears in the computer standings and earn the final playoff berth.

Upper Arlington coach Mike Golden doesn't want his team worrying about what Kilbourne is doing in its game against Olentangy on Friday. He wants the Bears focused on what they can control, and that's their game against Reynoldsburg. The matchup features the Bears' run-oriented wing-T offense, which is averaging 34.9 points per game, against Reynoldsburg's 4-3 defense, which includes end Matt Cook, tackle Roosevelt Nix, linebacker Huss Trowery and cornerback Chris Elledge.

The Raiders are allowing an average of 20.1 points per game.



BY JIM
METZENDORF/THISWEEK
Upper Arlington's Anthony Finissi looks to get past Grove City's Derek Holt last Friday after making an interception during their OCC-Buckeye Division game.

Next game

UA vs. REYNOLDSBURG

When: 7:30 p.m. Friday

Last meeting: 2006, UA 13-7 (OT)

Reynoldsburg (3-6, 2-2 OCC-Buckeye) to date: Lost to Pickerington Central 14-7; defeated Toledo Scott 45-8; lost to Dublin Jerome 37-0; lost to Gahanna 17-0; lost to Groveport 20-3; def. Westerville North 17-16; lost to Hilliard Davidson 21-0; def. Grove City 17-12; lost to Dublin Coffman 36-0

Top Raiders: Matt Cook, Chris Elledge, Roosevelt Nix, Matt Perkins, Rodney Smith, Jay R. Taylor and Huss Trowery

Of note: The Bears lead the all-time series 12-2.

"They're very solid on defense," said Golden, whose team defeated Reynoldsburg 13-7 in overtime last season and is 12-2 all-time against the Raiders. "We're going to have to be able to move the ball and be patient."

Patience seemed to pay off for the Shamrocks' offense last Friday.

"Their defense is really athletic, and we just had to find the holes," Coffman wide receiver Neil Bittel said. "They have a strong side and a weak side and we just tried throwing to the weak side, and it really worked (last Friday)."

Cook knows that the key to containing UA's offense is to slow down its running game. Fullback Tommy Farwick leads the Bears with 967 yards on 135 carries and 18 touchdowns and running back Alex Drake has 642 yards on 101 carries and six touchdowns.

"We're a stopping-the-run kind of defense," Cook said.

"I think if we stop their bread and butter, we'll have a fighting chance."

Upper Arlington's defense has posted two consecutive shutouts, also beating Westerville North 49-0 on Oct. 12. The Golden Bears have four shutouts overall and are allowing an average of 9.7 points per game.

Key defensive personnel include ends Mikel Berry and Andrew Colosimo, linebackers Mark Crawford, Nolan Kleinhenz and Colin McClain, strong safety Anthony Finissi and cornerback Adam Donahue.

Crawford leads the team with 82 tackles, including 45 solo. Berry leads the team with eight sacks and Finissi leads the team with three interceptions.

Reynoldsburg's offense has struggled and likely will have a difficult time moving the ball against the Golden Bears' defense.

The Raiders have been shut out four times and are averaging 9.9 points per game. Their scoring average is inflated by a 45-8 win over Toledo Scott on Aug. 31, as they have combined to score just 44 points in their other eight games -- an average of 5.5 points.

"Our defense is working hard, but our offense is still having a tough time sustaining drives," Cook said. "I hate to say this, but (the defense carries) the team. The problem is we get worn down a lot from being on the field too long."

Cook also sees action on offense as a backup fullback and tight end and he does not shy away from taking responsibility for part of the team's offensive woes.

"I will take some of the blame," he said. "I've missed blocks this year."

Injuries have contributed to the Raiders' poor offensive production. Starting running back Jay R. Taylor, who rushed for 1,251 yards last season, has missed most of the season because of an ankle injury, and his backup, Rodney Smith, also has been sidelined with an injury.

If neither Taylor nor Smith can play Friday, look for Elledge and Antwonnie White to share time at running back behind quarterback Matt Perkins. Fullback D'Angelo Brundage also could get some carries.

"It's a really hard game for us, but we want to end the season with a win," Cook said.