

FOOTBALL

Bears set for rematch with Panthers

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ThisWeek Staff Writer The Hilliard Darby High School football team stumbled in the final game of the regular season, missing an opportunity to win the OCC-Ohio Division championship outright and finish the regular season undefeated for the first time.

But coach Paul Jenne expects the Panthers to perform at a much higher level than they did in their 34-17 loss to Groveport last Friday when they play host to Upper Arlington at 7 p.m. Saturday in the first round of the Division I playoffs.

Darby, which finished the regular season 9-1 overall and 4-1 in the OCC-Ohio to tie Lancaster for the league title, is the top seed in Region 3 and is making its postseason debut. UA, which is making its third consecutive playoff appearance, secured the eighth and final state-qualifying berth in the region.

The winner will play fourth-seeded Brookhaven or fifth-seeded Groveport in a regional semifinal Nov. 10 at a neutral site.

"It's just one of those things where it snowballed on us," Jenne said of the loss to Groveport. "I think our seniors will do a good job to get ready."

Darby turned the ball over eight times against Groveport. Quarterback Jeremy Ebert threw five interceptions after throwing just two through nine games. He also lost a fumble.

Running back Jordan Richeson, who had 1,154 yards rushing on 164 carries (7.0 yards per carry) through nine games, was held to 29 yards on 11 carries.

UA coach Mike Golden, whose team defeated Reynoldsburg 28-0 last Friday to improve to 8-2 overall and finish second in the OCC-Buckeye at 4-1 behind Dublin Coffman (5-0), considers Darby's performance against Groveport to be an



BY PAUL VERNON/THISWEEK

Upper Arlington's Kyle Sauter (left) and Eric Rieser combine to tackle Reynoldsburg's Antwonne White last Friday during their OCC-Buckeye Division game.

At a glance

UA at HILLIARD DARBY

When: 7 p.m. Saturday

Last meeting: Sept. 21, Darby 22-7

Darby (9-1) to date: Defeated Hilliard Davidson 21-10; def. Toledo Central Catholic 31-7; def. Briggs 62-0; def. Cincinnati Anderson 39-38 (OT); def. Upper Arlington 22-7; def. Newark 45-7; def. Lancaster 40-15; def. Gahanna 34-23; def. Westland 69-0; lost to Groveport 34-17

Top Panthers: Robbie Anzuini, Jeremy Ball, Austin Brown, Tim Carrier, Ty Cobb, Jeremy Ebert, B.J. Machen, Evan Morrissey, Jordan Richeson, Nazar Soroka and Stephen Wells

Of note: The Bears lead the all-time series 7-2.

aberration.

"They had a lot of bad luck," he said. "They're really an outstanding football team. I'm sure they'll re-focus this week and will be ready to play."

Golden Bears linebacker Colin McClain also does not believe the Panthers will dwell on their loss to Groveport.

"They're a really veteran team," he said. "Coming off that kind of loss, some teams would get caught up on it, but they have a lot of seniors. They'll be focused and will use (the loss) as motivation."

Jenne, however, does not believe the loss will provide extra motivation for his team.

"I don't know if that's a motivating factor," he said.

"You have to play well or you're done. That should be motivation enough."

Darby did not make nearly as many mistakes in its 22-7 win over UA on Sept. 21 as it did against Groveport. The Panthers scored on their first two possessions to take a 15-0 lead in the first quarter.

Ebert scored the first touchdown on a 7-yard run and Richeson followed with a 1-yard scoring run. After the second touchdown, wide receiver and holder Robbie Anzuini ran for the two-point conversion after bobbling the snap on the extra-point attempt.

UA cut the deficit to 15-7 early in the second quarter with a 1-yard touchdown run by running back Gabe Krimm, but the Panthers answered on the ensuing possession with an 83-yard, 14-play drive that culminated with a 1-yard touchdown run by Richeson to extend their lead back to 15 points.

"They really jumped on us early last time," McClain said. "We can't let them do that this time."

The Panthers had 360 yards on offense, but only 95 came in the second half.

"We'd love to duplicate what we did offensively in the first half," Jenne said. "We'd like to duplicate what we did defensively in the second half, but not offensively. We didn't execute in the second half."

Ebert completed 15 of 20 passes for 165 yards and ran for 80 yards and a touchdown on 17 carries to lead the Panthers, who overcame two turnovers, including an interception thrown by Ebert.

"He really makes them go," Golden said of Ebert, a Northwestern recruit. "He's an X-factor type player."

Richeson rushed for 109 yards and two touchdowns on 28 carries and Anzuini had seven receptions for 74 yards.

"We have a better idea about what they're all about and what they're going to try to do and they know what we're all about and what we're going to try to do," McClain said.

"I think it's going to come down to whoever executes their plays better this week."

The Bears enter the game having posted three consecutive shutouts, also defeating Westerville North 49-0 on Oct. 12 and Grove City 42-0 on Oct. 19.

Linebacker Mark Crawford has 90 tackles to lead the Bears' defense, which has posted five shutouts overall and is allowing just 8.7 points per game. Strong safety Anthony Finissi is second on the team with 73 tackles and McClain and end Mikel Berry are tied for third with 69.

Berry leads the team with 10 sacks and Finissi has a team-high three interceptions, including one against Ebert.

Darby's defense, which is led by linebacker and Georgia Tech recruit B.J. Machen, end Ty Cobb and backs Chase Walton and Stephen Wells, is allowing 14.1 points per game.

The Panthers had been allowing 11.9 points per game before playing Groveport.

Darby limited UA's wing-T offense to 177 total yards in the first meeting. Fullback Tommy Farwick, who leads the Bears with 1,020 yards on 149 carries (6.8 yards per carry) and has scored 19 touchdowns, was held to 51 yards on 13 carries. Quarterback Braden Layer completed four of 14 passes for 68 yards.

"We hurt ourselves with penalties in that game," Golden said. "We just need to execute better and throw the ball better. I think we're throwing the ball better than we were at that time. We're using our passing game more effectively."

Layer turned in his best performance of the season against Reynoldsburg, completing 11 of 21 passes for 183 yards and two touchdowns.

But Jenne expects the Bears to focus on what they do best -- run the football.

"The first thing we have to do is stop the run," he said.

UA essentially played without its second-leading rusher in the first meeting with the Panthers. Alex Drake suffered bruised ribs on the opening kickoff and carried the ball once for two yards before leaving the game. He returned to the lineup the next game and has been in the lineup since.

"That hurt us," Golden said of not having Drake, who has rushed for 668 yards on 107 carries (6.2 yards per carry) and has scored six touchdowns. "Not only can he run, but he can come out of the backfield as a receiver."

The Bears know they are considered the underdog, but they don't mind.

"Obviously, they'll be favored since they won the last time, but anyone can beat any other team in the playoffs," McClain said. "Coach tells us if you're good enough to make the playoffs, you're good enough to win in the playoffs."