

Football previews

5 things to know about the Mid-Willamette Conference

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The Mid-Willamette Conference was as competitive in football as any league in the state last season, regardless of classification.

Three teams from the conference — Lebanon, Central and Dallas — were among the four teams that made it to the OSAA Class 5A state semifinals. A fourth team, Silverton, was the No. 3 seed in the playoffs and finished 7-3 overall.

Lebanon also won the conference title, and the state championship.

There are a number of changes in the league this season, but it should remain highly competitive.

"I think maybe it's going to be a repeat of last year. You start looking around, and you've got some really good talent," Central coach Shane Hedrick said. "The team that will surprise a lot of people is Corvallis. They were 0-6 in conference last year, but they've got a boatload of talent coming back. If they can stay healthy, to me, they will be the surprise of the conference."

Here are five things to know about the Mid-Willamette Conference this football season:

1. A new coach, a new era of Silverton football

First-year Silverton High School football coach Josh Craig has big shoes to fill, but he has continuity working in his favor.

Craig replaces John Mannion, who resigned in April to take the same position at the new Mountainside High School in Beaverton. He compiled a 57-20 mark in seven seasons at Silverton, which included three state semifinal appearances and a state runner-up finish in 2014.

Craig spent three years on Mannion's staff and was the head freshman coach the past two seasons, so players are familiar with their new leader.

"What's cool is all the sophomores and juniors, I was their head coach as freshmen," said the 26-year old Craig, a 2009 Silverton graduate. "Even the seniors, obviously I've been in the program so they know me. There's not one kid I haven't directly coached at some point."

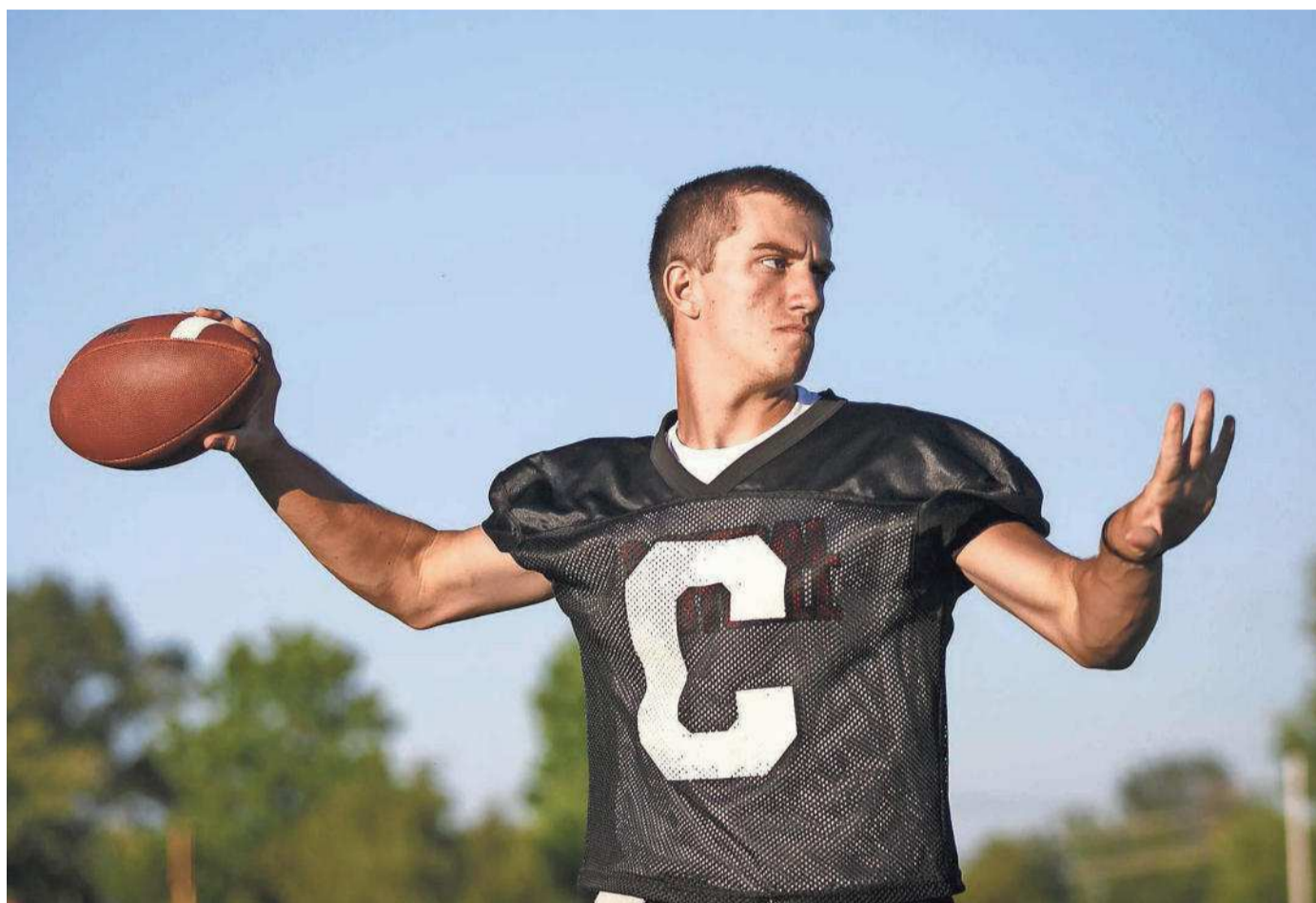
It's not as if Craig inherits a rebuilding project.

The Foxes are a perennial Class 5A state playoff team coming off a 7-3 season, including a 4-2 mark conference mark.

"I think we have depth and some great pieces," Craig said.

As one of the state's youngest head coaches, Craig realizes he has much to learn. But he brings passion and energy to the field.

"I don't worry about it," Craig said of



Central quarterback Peter Mendazona, throwing during a practice in Independence, Ore., had a stellar junior season last year, completing 62 percent of his passes for 2,717 yards, 36 touchdowns and seven interceptions.

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his inexperience. "There might be things where age might be an issue, but for me if I just focus on what's happening here on the field, the peripherals will take care of themselves."

2. How will Dallas replace Tanner Earhart?

Last season, running back Tanner Earhart was a beast for the Dallas football team.

With 2,068 yards and 24 touchdowns, the senior was named the Class 5A state offensive player of the year and helped the Dragons reach the state semifinals.

This year, Earhart is at Linfield College, so how do you replace a star of that caliber?

"You probably won't. But we think the guys that we have are top notch, and the important thing is that we produce and we're successful," Dallas coach Tracy Jackson said.

This season, Evan Courtney likely will be the lead running back for Dallas, a team that has 22 seniors.

In a conference as tough as the Mid-Willamette, it's important to keep emo-

tions in check — not too high after wins, not too low after losses. That starts with the coaching staff.

"It starts with me. If I unload on them because they lose a game, that's stupid coaching," Jackson said. "Around here, I take the heat. I blame the coaches for losses, and we credit the wins on (the players). But we just can't be too high or too low. We have to learn and move on to the next game."

3. Peter Mendazona enters third year as Central's starting QB

Central quarterback Peter Mendazona had a stellar junior season last year, completing 62 percent of his passes for 2,717 yards, 36 touchdowns and seven interceptions.

His strong effort helped lead the Panthers to the Class 5A state semifinals, and he is hoping for another deep playoff run this season.

"Our goal is to win the conference championship and go far in the playoffs, looking for that state championship," Mendazona said. "We just need to get better at the little things and preparing

for the team ahead. I need to lead the team on every drive and give us a chance to win the game."

Although he isn't generating a ton of recruiting buzz, Central coach Shane Hedrick said Mendazona is one of the state's top returning quarterbacks.

In fact, Mendazona's recruiting situation reminds Hedrick about what his son, Grant, went through as a quarterback recruit years ago.

"Why aren't the college coaches after (Mendazona) as much? Because he's not 6-(foot)-3. I had a son like that about seven years ago. He had one Division I scholarship offer, and by the time it was over, he had a pretty good career," Shane Hedrick said about Grant, who played at Boise State and completed 70 percent of his passes as a senior to lead the nation.

"(Mendazona) has those quarterback fundamentals," Shane Hedrick added. "He's smart, he's athletic. He's multi-sport, which I firmly believe in. He's got a very good arm, very good accuracy."

4. Silverton's Levi Nielsen returns

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In Tri-River Conference, other teams are closing gap on Regis

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Competition is so strong in the Tri-River Conference that every week in league play is like a state playoff game.

Last season all five teams — Regis, Kennedy, St. Paul, Santiam and Central Linn — advanced to the OSAA Class 2A state playoffs with Regis winning the state championship and Kennedy making the semifinals.

The Tri-River figures to be just as competitive in 2017.

"Every year we have great athletes and a lot of good coaches," Kennedy coach Joe Panuke said.

So who's the favorite?

St. Paul and Santiam have the most experience coming back, but tradition is with Regis and Kennedy.

"They both graduated a bunch of kids, but they have such strong programs and do such a great job," said St. Paul coach Tony Smith, whose Buckaroos begin their fourth year in the Tri-River since moving up from 1A. "I think the league is probably more balanced than any year we've been here."

Here are four things to know about the Tri-River Conference heading into the 2017 football season:

1. Target remains for rebuilding Regis

Regis enters the 2017 season with a target on its back.

So what else is new?

The Rams reached the state semifinals the previous two seasons before breaking through in 2016. They outscored four playoff opponents 172-40, and routed Stanfield, 53-14 in the championship game.

"Being Regis, being a private Catholic



Brandon Piete, left, a senior running back and linebacker, practices with the Regis High School football team on Thursday before the season begins. Piete is the team's only returning starter.

ANNA REED / STATESMAN JOURNAL

school, it always seems like there's a target on our back," said fourth-year head coach Kyle McGrath. "I think that target is a lot bigger now."

For the Rams to make another extended playoff run this season, they'll need major contributions from players who were not in the spotlight a year ago.

Senior running back/strong safety Brandon Piete is the only returning starter.

"They still played on Mondays in their JV games and got their work in," McGrath said. "They're hungry. They're really excited to see Friday (games) and how it goes for 'em."

It will be difficult to replace quarterback Bryce Piete, Brandon's older brother and a two-year starter who excelled as a playmaker and leader.

Juniors Anthony Barboza and Kirk Scott, a transfer from Weston-McEwen, are battling for the starting job.

"It will be different," Piete said of not playing with his older brother. "I never really had a quarterback who wasn't my brother."

The Rams will be tested early in their season opener against Blanchet, which reached the 3A state semifinals last season.

2. The post Bishop Mitchell era begins at Kennedy

How do you replace Bishop Mitchell? Well, you don't do it with one player.

Mitchell, who rushed for 2,217 yards and 28 touchdowns last season, is now a freshman on the Portland State football team.

"He was just a special kid. He was humble," Kennedy coach Joe Panuke said. "You hope the younger kids see how hard he worked and can learn from that."

Panuke said the running game will be a "three-headed monster" with seniors Christian Larios and Anthony Garcia, and junior Bryce Vandervort.

Another key player the Trojans need to replace is two-year starting quarterback Brett Traeger. Sophomore Emorej Lynk, a standout receiver as a freshman last season, moves into the starting quarterback role.

The offensive and defensive lines will be anchored by Nick Suing, a 6-3, 265-pound junior.

3. Smith returns as starting QB at St. Paul

It's always a plus when a school returns its starting quarterback and holds the situation at St. Paul with senior Hold-en Smith, son of head coach Tony Smith.

Smith, who started on defense as a sophomore, helped lead the Buckaroos to their first playoff berth since returning to 2A in 2014.

"It's great with receivers and running backs, but having experience at quarterback and the offensive line is huge," Tony Smith said.

St. Paul has a major hole to fill at running back with the graduation of Fernan-

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