

Sports

BAKER FOOTBALL QUARTERFINAL PLAYOFF GAME PREVIEW

Banks puts 20-game winning streak on the line as Baker seeks to avenge 2018 loss

By Jayson Jacoby
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Baker senior quarterback Spencer Shirtcliff knows that he and his teammates have a chance Saturday to not just make history, but also to break it.

When the Bulldogs take on Banks at 1 p.m. at Hillsboro High School's Hare Field, the stakes won't be limited to earning a berth in the Class 4A football semifinals.

Baker will also seek to avenge the 49-13 loss to the Braves that ended Baker's season in the first round of the playoffs on Nov. 2, 2018. (And although neither Shirtcliff nor any of his teammates was yet in high school, Banks also knocked Baker out of the 2015 playoffs with a 34-0 win in the first round.)

And if the revenge factor wasn't sufficient motivation, there's also this — Banks hasn't lost a football game in more than a year.

The top-ranked Braves have won 20 straight. Their last loss was 35-28 at Gladstone on Aug. 31, 2018. Banks then won 11 in a row, culminating in a 31-20 win over Seaside in the 2018 Class 4A state championship game.

Shirtcliff said he's well aware of the multiple storylines associated with Saturday's quarterfinal contest. "Everyone's really excited," he said. "We're glad to get



Photo courtesy of Beth Shirtcliff

Baker quarterback Spencer Shirtcliff throws a pass against Cascade in a playoff game Nov. 9. Shirtcliff threw for 302 yards and two touchdowns in Baker's 38-21 win.

another chance at Banks."

Baker earned that chance by beating Cascade 38-21 on Nov. 9.

Shirtcliff completed 11 of 24 passes for 302 yards and two touchdowns. He also ran for a score.

"We're definitely a lot more confident with a playoff win under our belt," Shirtcliff said. "We have some strong senior leadership."

Seniors accounted for four of Baker's five touchdowns against Cascade. Caden Long and Riley Flanagan each caught one of Shirtcliff's TD tosses — Flanagan's going for

Game to be played at Hillsboro High

Banks is the home team for Saturday's game, but coaches and players decided to move the venue to Hare Field at Hillsboro High School because it's artificial turf rather than grass, said Ben Buchanan, the Banks athletic director. Rain has softened Banks' grass field, and rain was likely in the area Thursday night and Friday.

88 yards after the Cougars cut Baker's lead to 24-21 early in the fourth quarter. Senior running back Alex Hammans had a 4-yard touchdown run.

Sophomore running back Gauge Bloomer had Baker's

final score on an 8-yard run, and junior kicker Mahonri Rushton booted a 29-yard field goal.

Although Banks dominated the 2018 playoff game, leading 42-0 at halftime, Shirtcliff doesn't think that result has any relevance a year later.

"We're definitely not the same team as we were last year, and they're not the same team," he said.

Shirtcliff, who threw a pair of touchdown passes to Flanagan in the fourth quarter of Baker's loss at Banks last year, believes the Bulldogs' passing attack, and in particular Long's and Flanagan's height, can take advantage of the Braves' defense.

Banks coach Cole Linehan said those two receivers have the full attention of his coaching staff.

"Baker's obviously a great football team," Linehan said. "They run the ball well. They have some tall receivers they like to get the ball to."

Long is 6-foot-4. Flanagan is 2 inches shorter but his leaping ability allows him to play taller.

Banks' defensive backfield isn't exactly vertically challenged, however.

Jacob Slifka, who earned first-team honors in the Cowapa League at both wide receiver and cornerback, is 6-foot-5.

Shirtcliff, who said he's "feeling great" and fully recovered from the separated shoulder he suffered Sept. 27 at Ontario, thinks Baker's offense is poised for a strong performance after showing good balance against Cascade.

The Bulldogs ran for about 150 yards to go along with Shirtcliff's 302 yards passing.

"That balance definitely helps to keep the defense on their toes, not knowing what's coming," Shirtcliff said. "We just have to get the ball to all our playmakers."

He's confident that Baker's defense, which has been a strength this year, will continue to play well.

"Our defense is going to play great like they have all year," Shirtcliff said.

Jason Ramos, the longtime Baker assistant coach who has guided the Bulldogs to a

Baker Bulldogs

- Member of the Greater Oregon League
- Head coach: Jason Ramos
- Season record: 6-3 overall, 2-2 league
- OSAA rank: 8

2019 SCHEDULE:

- Sept. 6: Baker 40, Nyssa 0
- Sept. 13: Homedale (ID) 28, Baker 7
- Sept. 20: Baker 53, Elmira 6 (at Bend)
- Sept. 27: Baker 41, Ontario 6
- Oct. 4: La Grande 34, Baker 21
- Oct. 11: Baker 30, Pe Ell/Willapa 14
- Oct. 18: Baker 47, Ontario 0
- Oct. 26: La Grande 34, Baker 0
- Nov. 9: Baker 38, Cascade 21 (playoff)

Avg. points per game: **30.8**

Avg. points allowed: **15.9**

Banks Braves

- Banks is about 10 miles west of Hillsboro
- Member of the Cowapa League
- Head coach: Cole Linehan
- Season record: 9-0 overall, 5-0 league
- OSAA rank: 1

2019 SCHEDULE:

- Sept. 6: Banks 21, Gladstone 6
- Sept. 13: Banks 35, Sweet Home 20
- Sept. 20: Banks 19, Marist Catholic 14
- Sept. 27: Banks 31, Tillamook 7
- Oct. 4: Banks 49, Astoria 7
- Oct. 11: Banks 62, Valley Catholic 6
- Oct. 18: Banks 34, Seaside 6
- Oct. 25: Banks 45, Molalla 6
- Nov. 8: Banks 28, Marshfield 22 (playoff)

Avg. points per game: **36.0**

Avg. points allowed: **10.4**



Photo courtesy of Beth Shirtcliff

Gauge Bloomer on the run against Cascade Nov. 9.

6-3 record in his first year as head coach, echoed his quarterback's thoughts.

"Our defense is the strength of our team and it's going to keep us in any ballgame we play," Ramos said. "We feel confident going forward that we can compete with anybody."

Banks reloads after losing key players from 2018 title team

Linehan said he doesn't believe the Braves feel extra pressure due to their 20-game winning streak.

"We don't think about streaks," Linehan said. "The guys have done a great job of only worrying about themselves and the next game."

Banks has kept its record unblemished despite having to replace much of its offensive production from 2018, including quarterback Hayden Vandehey and wide receiver Blake Markham.

Senior quarterback Tanner Shook "has done a great job," Linehan said. Shook was named to the first team for the Cowapa League.

He was joined there by a trio of senior teammates — Martial Stegemeir at running back and wide receivers Jarred Evans, the Cowapa League offensive player of the year, and Slifka.

Slifka caught a 45-yard touchdown pass in Banks' win over Baker in the 2018 playoffs.

A key to the Braves' continuing success is continuity on the offensive line, said Linehan, who's in his fourth year as head coach after serving as defensive coordinator for the previous two years.

"We're strong up front," Linehan said.

Senior linemen Luis

Rascon, Andrew Nichols, Risdon White, JJ Ellis and Walker Copley average about 222 pounds.

And the group boasts not just size, but also experience.

"They've played in a lot of big games for us," Linehan said.

Banks didn't lose as much on the defensive side of the ball from 2018, and the Braves have given up just 10.4 points per game. The unit is led by senior linebacker Bryson Cook, the Cowapa League defensive player of the year.

Banks gave up its highest point total of the year in its first-round playoff win, 28-22 over Marshfield on Nov. 8.

The Pirates led 9-0 in the first quarter before Banks scored 28 straight points.

"Marshfield is a good team," Linehan said. "They gave us all sorts of fits. It was a good first-round test."

Linehan said that although the Pirates were seeded 16th, the lowest among Class 4A playoff teams, he believes the ranking was skewed because three of Marshfield's five wins were over teams — Cottage Grove, Junction City and Ontario — that among them had just one win.

Baker and Banks didn't have a common opponent this season, but Marshfield did play two teams that were on Baker's schedule.

Marshfield beat Ontario 44-38 and Elmira 16-0.

Baker's margin of victory of those teams was much larger, as the Bulldogs routed Ontario twice, 41-6 and 47-0, and beat Elmira 53-6.

Linehan, who said he has watched video of multiple Baker games, said those numbers don't surprise him.

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