

PEACHTREE RIDGE HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL



North Gwinnett out to snap region title hex against defending champion Lions

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North Gwinnett and Peachtree Ridge have been down this road before.

The two teams meet tonight at North Gwinnett for the Region 7-AAAAA championship.

It's the fourth year in a row the Bulldogs have played in the title game, while it's the second straight year for the Lions.

It's the final game of the regular season and the antici-

ipation for this contest has been mounting since the preseason. There will be future Division I college football players on the field, an anticipated sellout crowd and regional cable television will air the game.

Step aside the Battle of Five Forks. The biggest game in Gwinnett is in Suwanee tonight with the Region 7 crown on the line.

"Pretty cool, isn't it?," North Gwinnett head coach Bob Sphire said. "It's really neat because it's at the end of the season and a game like this gets you ready for the playoffs."

Facing the pressures of a big game shouldn't be a problem for either team. Both have been in big games recently. No. 2 North Gwinnett opened the season with a win over nationally ranked Prattville, Ala., and has made deep runs in the playoffs the last three years.

"This is not our first rodeo being in the spotlight," Sphire said.

No. 8 Peachtree Ridge reached last year's Class AAAAA state title game after a thrilling win over Grayson in the semifinals. The Lions also

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PEACHTREE RIDGE at NORTH GWINNETT

PEACHTREE RIDGE LIONS (7-AAAAA)

- Coach: Bill Ballard
- Record: 8-1, 7-0 region
- Last week: Beat Norcross 20-10

NORTH GWINNETT BULLDOGS (7-AAAAA)

- Coach: Bob Sphire
- Record: 9-0, 7-0 region
- Last week: Beat Duluth 34-0

- When: Today, 7:30 p.m.
- TV/Radio: CSS/680-AM
- Last meeting: Peachtree Ridge won 19-7 last year
- Directions to North Gwinnett High School: From I-85, go west on Lawrenceville-Suwanee Road until it becomes Suwanee Dam Road. School is on the right.

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made a trip to Valdosta to play perennial power Lowndes, which has won four state titles since 1999. The 51-17 loss is the only blemish on the Lions' record this season.

"We're really excited. Our kids are extremely excited for the opportunity we have," Peachtree Ridge head coach Bill Ballard said. "We're excited to play a great football team and it's for the region title."

North (9-0, 7-0 region) features Division I standouts Austin Shepherd and JuWuan James. Shepherd has committed to Alabama, while James has decommitted from Alabama and is considered the top offensive lineman in the state.

"They've got a huge line of scrimmage. It's like an SEC offensive line," Ballard said.

The duo will have to block for quarterback C.J. Uzomah, who has offers from many of the top ACC and SEC schools. The junior missed last week's game against Duluth with an injury and will be a game-time decision against the Lions.

"We've told our kids he's definitely playing and were preparing for him to play," Ballard said.

North Gwinnett scored on the opening kickoff of last year's game, but those were the only points they could muster. Nick Lombardo threw two touchdown passes to lead the Lions (8-1, 7-0 region) to a 19-7 win. North managed just 65 yards of total offense in the second half. "We were fortunate last year. They were a little banged up," Ballard said.

North Gwinnett features one of the top offenses in the county, averaging 32 points. The Bulldogs will face a stingy Peachtree Ridge defense that has allowed 11 points per game this season. Take away the Lions' lopsided loss to Lowndes and Peachtree Ridge's defense has been pretty nasty.

"The defense has been very solid," Ballard said. "We haven't given up a ton of points. That's a big

