

The Pueblo Chieftain

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Colts gird for gridiron battle

South catches competitive Dakota Ridge in first round tonight.

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THE PUEBLO CHIEFTAIN

Dakota Ridge High School football coach Ron Woitalewicz is all too familiar with coming to Pueblo for state playoff games.

And it's not exactly filled with great memories.

"Hopefully they'll give me the key to the city and we can figure out how to finally get it done down there," Woitalewicz said.

The Eagles have lost their last two playoff games in Pueblo, to South in 2005 and eventual state champion Pueblo West last year. Dakota Ridge will take another Steel City shot against the Colts at 7 o'clock tonight at Dutch Clark Stadium as the Class 4A playoffs kick off. The Colts, undefeated and seeded third, are old hands at hosting the first round, a product of their nine consecutive Foothills League titles. With that experience comes the awareness that any team in the playoffs is dangerous.

"They're a solid ball club and we've got our work cut out for us," South coach Mark Haering said. "But I think that's true across the board for every 4A football team and it has been for the last so many years. You're looking at the best 16 teams, there's no doubt about it."

No. 14 Dakota Ridge (7-3) played in the West Metro League this year after the long-dominant Mountain Plains was disbanded. The Eagles had several games against mediocre competition, but also played Wheat Ridge, Heritage and Chatfield, all quality teams.

The Eagles had Heritage, ranked No. 1 for most of the season, down 31-17 last week before a spat of turnovers cost them the game in the final 17 seconds.

"It's been kind of a tough year for our kids," Woitalewicz said. "In this league we were blowing people out at halftime and our starters hadn't played a full game in five weeks before the Heritage game."

Dakota Ridge is a big, powerful team that balances the run and pass out of multiple formations. Tailback Andrew Melton has rushed for more than 1,500 yards with 24 touchdowns and receiver Austin Rodriguez has 24 catches for eight scores.

Sophomore quarterback Bolton Howes, a transfer from Arvada West, has settled in after five games and completed 73 percent of his passes.

"Their size is a big difference from when Pueblo West played them last year," Haering said. "We're going to be running up against an opponent that is physical up front along with some athletic ability. That tailback is probably one of the faster kids we've gone against."

"It's going to be a physical game and when you get into the playoffs, it always starts and ends up front."

South's defense thrives on quickness with linebackers Sam Collins and Josh Dome, along with linemen John Garza, Matt Taibi, Jordan Cartmell and Spencer Hawkins.

The Colts will be without one of its best players in senior Brody Lockett, who re-injured a knee last week at Sierra. Lockett is a standout safety, South's leading rusher and a threat to take it the distance every time on special teams.

"Anybody who's watched us in the last three years, and especially this year, knows that Brody's a key factor in our game plan," Haering said. "Obviously we're going to have to have kids step up. I don't know if you can replace him, but you're going to go with what you have."

Lockett's absence will mean more carries for Rory Bowen-Jimenez (589 yards, eight touchdowns), Kallen Baca and Zack McGinn in the Colts' running game.



Rory Bowen-Jimenez



Brandon Kliesen

But South's win over Sierra last week, by far its most quality victory of the season, was powered by quarterback Kameron Wilhite and the passing game. Wilhite has connected with 10 different receivers while throwing for 836 yards and eight scores.

"Every year they run the ball well, are tough and physical, and have good team speed," Woitalewicz said. "We have to slow down their running game, pass protect and try to win the field position and special teams battles."

It will be tough to best South on special teams. The Colts are dangerous with returns, solid in coverage and have a great weapon in kicker Brandon Kliesen, who routinely kicks off into the end zone, has a sure leg and is a big punter. Haering has been pleased with his team's discipline and ability to capitalize off opponents' mistakes. He's hopeful that will translate into a clean game tonight.

"The last few years what hurt us and sent us home early was turnovers, mistakes at key times and special teams mistakes," Haering said.