



AIA FEATURE STORY By: Don Ketchum

FOUNTAIN HILLS FOOTBALL

PHOENIX, AZ (November 20, 2008) – Could this be the year that the football team from Fountain Hills High School climbs to the top of Class 3A?

The 2008 season certainly didn't start out with much evidence of that.

Fountain Hills was trounced by Payson 26-0 and had to find some way to regroup.

The team shook it off, stuck together and proceeded to chalk up 11 straight victories leading to its appearance as the No. 3 seed in Saturday's semifinal game against perennial power Lakeside Blue Ridge (No. 2) on the new artificial turf field at Paradise Valley High in Phoenix. Kickoff is 4 p.m.

The other semifinal, which follows at 7 p.m., features top-seeded Payson and fourth-seeded Wickenburg.

The Class 2A semifinals also are Saturday at North Canyon High in Phoenix. Top-seeded Phoenix Christian meets No. 4 Benson at 2 p.m., with No. 2, defending champion St. Johns putting it all on the line against No. 3 Chandler Valley Christian at 5 p.m.

Fountain Hills has played a tough schedule in the past, including many of the state's top teams. This year has been different than before in that the team defeated such strong programs as Coolidge (regular season) and 2007 champion Show Low and Winslow in the playoffs.

In the course of the 11 straight victories, Fountain Hills averaged 31 points while giving up an average of only 9.6.

"This year, the chemistry has been the thing," said Fountain Hills coach Jim Fairfield. "The kids have been friends with each other and lived up here (northeast of Scottsdale) for quite a few years now. They hang together off the field. They are a fun group of kids – easy to coach."

Shortly after the 2007 season ended, the players got together to set their goals for 2008.

"They wanted to leave no doubt this year. They wanted to make a statement and they have, by winning 11 in a row," Fairfield said.

The coach could not point to any particular individual who has stood above the rest.

"A lot of people say this, but we mean it when we say that it has been a total team effort," Fairfield said.

Fairfield and his assistant coaches helped the players define their goals, both individually and in groups (positions).

"There were a lot of days in the weight room. We also did a lot of speed training, and our overall team speed is better," he said.

The opening loss to Payson seemed to go against the team's approach.

“This team is a team of go-getters. They don’t like to sit back and wait for something to happen. They want to make it happen themselves,” Fairfield said.

The team took halftime leads in all but two games.

“They want to go get it right away and not let up. They want to stay strong for the whole game,” he said.

The community has been very appreciative. Even Mayor Jay Schlum is a fan and has attended games.

A group of “spirit buses” made the trip out to Williams Field High in Gilbert for last week’s quarterfinal game against Winslow.

Now it’s Blue Ridge, winner of numerous state championships, the last in 2004. Fountain Hills will be aiming for a trip to the championship game on Nov. 29 at the Walkup Skydome at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff. A title would be the school’s first.

“We used to open up our season with them, and Coach (Paul) Moro will have his team ready,” Fairfield said. “He is a very solid coach and his teams are well-rounded, but he can be tricky, too. He always seems to have something in reserve.”

Fairfield added that his main assistants, Steve Wapon and Keith Hinton, have done a good job of helping the players maintain their focus all season.

“We are trying to treat this as any other game, but you know that isn’t the case,” Fairfield said. “We are not changing our approach. It’s an all-or-nothing game, and you just go out there and go as hard as you can.”

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