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When the high school football season started, all seven teams in Randolph County felt like reaching the state playoffs was well within reach. But after 11 weeks of regular-season play, only three teams have realized those playoff aspirations.

Eastern Randolph, Randleman and Providence Grove were the only three teams from the county to qualify, giving the county its lowest number of playoff participants in years.

The trio is led by Eastern Randolph, the Piedmont Athletic Conference champions, which earned the top seed from the 1-A West Regional. The Wildcats, under the direction of veteran mentor Burton Cates, finished unbeaten in conference play at 5-0, had an impressive 9-1 overall record and earned a first-round bye. ER will play the winner of No. 17 Mountain Heritage (4-6) at No. 16 South Stokes (4-6) in second round action next week.

"You never want an open date going into the playoffs, never," said Cates in a way you knew there was a "but" coming. "But in all the years we have been very fortunate to make it to the playoffs, we needed it bad. We are banged up. We have some injuries and the bye couldn't have come at a better time."

With two weeks to heal, Cates said he expects everyone to be healthy. The bye not only allows his players to heal, but it gives the coaching staff the opportunity to see their opponent live.



"Once you get to the second round, you have to be playing your best football," Cates said. "It gets knocked down to 32 teams and anyone can beat anyone. You have to be playing your best."

The Wildcats closed the regular season with a 28-13 victory over Randleman, which was also unbeaten in PAC play entering the final week. The Tigers finished 4-1 in league play and 7-3 overall. RHS earned a No. 10 seed in the West Region and will host No. 23 Lincolnton (5-5) Friday night.

Providence Grove is the second 2-A team out of the PAC to qualify. The Patriots finished 3-2 in PAC play and went 7-3 overall. A victory over Southwestern Randolph lifted PG into the playoffs and kept the Cougars from making a return trip.

"With the experience we have, we don't have to do much to get them ready," PG coach Calvin Brown said. "They know what's at stake."

The Patriots will be looking for their first-ever playoff victory Friday night. Of the schools appearing in state playoff action this season, PG and South Davidson are the only teams to have played in 10 playoff games without a victory.

If the Patriots play up to their potential, this could be the year.

"There is going to be a group at some point who wins the first playoff game in school history," Brown said. "Why not us? Why not this year with this group of seniors?"

The one constant with all three teams is the conference season has prepared them for playoff action.

"Our conference was tough," Brown said. "I felt we were just as good as (ER and RHS), but we made mistakes and they did what good teams are supposed to do and they took advantage. I feel we can compete with anyone."

