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ASHEBORO - When Calvin Brown took over the reins of the Asheboro High School varsity football program in 2023, he warned that success wouldn't happen overnight. It would take years to build a true football program.

The Blue Comets took big strides in 2023, battling teams much closer than the year before, and in 2024, they took another giant step. Four wins, the most since 2016, two conference wins, their first since the four-year realignment and now a playoff berth, their first since 2016.

The Blue Comets, along with three other Randolph County teams, found out Sunday night they will be playing in the opening round of the state football playoffs this Friday night.

Eastern Randolph (10-0) earned the No. 4 seed in the 1-A West Region, while in the 2-A West Region, Randleman captured the fourth seed and Southwestern Randolph the 27th seed. Trinity, Wheatmore and Providence Grove failed to make the postseason.

"That was one of our goals at the start of the season," Brown said. "Have this accomplishment that hasn't been done since 2016. We still have a ways to go in our program, but it's a step in the right direction."

It was a step that nearly wasn't made.

The Blue Comets earned the berth after mid-week projections had AHS missing the playoffs because of the leapfrog rule. That rule states one conference team that finishes behind another conference team cannot make the playoffs unless both make the playoffs. In this instance, Asheboro lost to Montgomery Central in the regular season and finished behind the Timberwolves in the Mid-Piedmont Conference standings, with the Blue Comets still having a higher RPI ranking. But because AHS finished below Montgomery Central in the standings, AHS could not "leapfrog" MC and earn a playoff berth unless MC also earned a spot. Because of action last Friday night, Montgomery Central's RPI improved just enough to get them the No. 31 seed. That put AHS back in the postseason mix.

"There was a lot of emotion with our guys after the Montgomery Central loss and then thinking we were in and then we went through a period where we thought we were out," Brown said. "We didn't find out until Saturday night that we would be in again."

The team stopped practicing in the middle of last week, but will return to work in preparation for traveling to Dudley High School (10-0), the No. 5 ranked team in the West.

"It's definitely been a roller coaster," Brown said.

It wasn't a roller coaster for Eastern Randolph or Randleman. Both were firmly in with undefeated ER getting the fourth seed from the 1-A West and RHS (8-2) the No. 4 seed in the 2-A West.

The Wildcats will host No. 29 Swain County (1-9). ER captured its fourth straight Piedmont Athletic Conference title.

"I thought we had a great group of kids who were committed to trying to get better every week," ER veteran coach Burton Cates said. "We'll tell them this time of the year, you are only guaranteed one more Monday. This could be the last Monday you will ever practice at Eastern Randolph. Nothing is given to you. You have to earn everything."

RHS enters on the heels of two straight losses, but the Tigers were still strong enough for a fourth seed. RHS will host No. 29 East Gaston (4-6).

"We used the week to get healthy, we have a lot of guys banged up as I'm sure most teams do," RHS coach Shane Timmons said. "We were able to have a good film session with the ER game and purely guessing, we thought it would be East Gaston. We talked about how this is the third chapter of the season. You have your non-conference, your conference and now you play for one more game. I think our kids will be motivated."

SWR (6-4) will travel to No. 6 East Surry (8-2).

"We're just excited to be in the playoffs again," SWR coach Seth Baxter said. "We had a great week of practice. It was kind of unique. In the regular season when you have a bye, you know who your opponent is going to be. We had it down to three or four different teams. We continued to work on fundamentals and get healthy."

The 2024 football playoffs begin Friday with the four State Championships determined on Friday and Saturday, December 20 and 21 in Raleigh and Chapel Hill.