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RAMSEUR - It is widely known in North Carolina that if a high school football team is practicing on Thanksgiving, it's been a very successful season.

While most were sitting around a table with friends and family enjoying a wonderful Thanksgiving meal Thursday, the Eastern Randolph High School varsity football team was putting the finishing touches on preparing for tonight's NCHSAA home regional semifinal battle with Mount Airy.

Kickoff is 7:30 p.m. at Burton Cates Stadium.

The Wildcats are the top seed and come into the contest 11-1 and on an 11-game winning streak. Mount Airy comes in 12-1.

"Even back in August, I can remember at Eastern Alamance, even though we lost that football game, I felt good leaving the field," ER coach Burton Cates said after leading another team deep into the playoffs. "I told them that night I was impressed with their desire and fight. This team just keeps battling."

That has been quite evident in the playoffs. Ervodd Cassidy and Lucas Smith each scored a pair of touchdowns in a 28-12 win over Mountain Heritage after ER earned a first-round bye, and in last week's 29-26 win over Robbinsville, the Wildcats had to dig in defensively when the visitors had the ball twice deep inside ER territory in the closing minute. The win earned ER an invite to the fourth round, bettering the third-round setback last season.

"We always ask our players to leave the program in a better way than they found it," Cates said. "There are expectations each year and they don't let each other down. This team has a great work ethic. It may not be the most talented team we have ever had, but they find ways to do it."

Though the Wildcats have received contributions from many on both sides of the ball and special teams, junior lineman Jani Norwood is one of the many who have stood out all season. The 6-foot-4, 305-pounder is playing on both sides of the ball.



"He was the best offensive lineman in the state as a junior and we put him on defense for the playoffs," Cates said. "He's special."

Cates said Norwood is receiving plenty of attention from Florida State, Duke, N.C. State and North Carolina.

"The first night we had contact his freshman year, we were doing one-on-ones and I looked back at the coaches and said this cat is really good," Cates said. "We knew he was special that night."

Norwood is one of the linemen who will have to contend with a powerful Mount Airy offense. Mount Airy rolled through the first three rounds of the playoffs, destroying No. 28 North Stokes 72-0, annihilating No. 13 North Rowan 57-7 and crushing No. 12 Hayesville 49-0. It was a continuation of the regular season which saw Mount Airy fall in its second game before reeling off 11 straight wins. Overall, Mount Airy has an astounding 688-88 point differential.

"They are the real deal," Cates said. "You can look on film and they are talented at every position. There are no weaknesses in any phase of the game. We have to get them into the third quarter. They haven't had to play into the third quarter. We have to keep them in range." Something the Wildcats have done throughout the playoffs.