

Round One Preview - After "Winning The Riverbend" Roxana's Triple Threat Will Be Tough For Paris To Handle

by Bradley Piros, Reporter
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(14) Paris (5-4) @ (3) Roxana (9-0) Saturday 3 p.m.

ROXANA - The Shells finished an undefeated season, their first in 20 years, and are headed back to the playoffs for the second year in a row.

One of four undefeated teams in Class 3A, Roxana was awarded the No. 3 seed by the IHSA. Byron (9-0) is the No. 1 seed while Princeton (8-1) is No. 2.

The Shells climbed up to a No. 3 ranking in Class 3A in the AP's final state-wide rankings released on Wednesday. Max Preps has them No. 2, right behind Byron.

A season ago, Roxana made the playoffs with a 6-3 regular season record. They went in and beat Hillsboro on the road 13-7 before running into a freight train in Fairbury Prairie Central back in Roxana. Fairbury came into that game undefeated and went on to a 41-20 win. Roxana earned the No. 9 seed last year.

This time around, the Shells have a much more favorable seed and will be taking on No. 14-seeded Paris.

At one point in the season, the Tigers found themselves sitting at 2-3 after a tough stretch to open the season. They then rattled off three wins in a row before losing their week-nine game, finishing the season 5-4.

Only one of their wins was over a team with a winning record when they beat North Vermillion (7-3) out of Indiana in week one by a score of 21-14.

On the flip side, Roxana has won games over three playoff teams. The Shells beat Red Bud 42-7 in week two, Freeburg 55-21 in week six, and Breese Central 52-28 in week seven.

Red Bud (7-2) is seeded No. 5 in Class 2A, the Midgets (6-3) are No. 10 in 4A, and the Cougars are No. 4 in 4A.

Three of Roxana's wins were of the shutout variety, 27-0 over Jersey (3-6), 37-0 over Columbia (2-7), and 45-0 over East Alton-Wood River (0-9).

Roxana's other two wins were 49-6 over Civic Memorial (2-7) and 52-14 over Marquette Catholic (1-8).

The six wins over teams that didn't make the playoffs, their records are a combined 12-42, but they were rivalry games that head coach Wade DeVries wanted on his schedule.

He said multiple times over the course of the season that he wanted to "win the Riverbend" and he did just that.

Many doubted the validity of the Shells' schedule, but they solidified themselves with those wins over Freeburg and Breese Central as they continued to climb the rankings.

Anyone who knows Roxana knows about their offensive triple threat.

Junior Andrew Ellis as well as seniors Terrell Graves and Evan Wells are three of the area's best running backs, regardless of class.

The three have combined for 42 rushing touchdowns. They account for 44 of Roxana's 56 scores this season. Only 10 touchdowns this season have been in the air and Ellis caught two of those and threw another. Junior Kael Hester and Aiden Briggs have four receiving TDs each.

Wells eclipsed 1,000 rushing yards in the lopsided win over Marquette, finishing the season with 1,082 yards on 115 carries and 19 rushing TDs. Ellis racked up 847 yards rushing and 13 TDs while Graves had 640 yards and 10 TDs.

Thanks to their three-headed rushing monster, senior QB Chris Walleck doesn't have to throw the ball that much. He threw for 533 yards this season on 27 throws good for a 60 percent completion rate. When he has to throw the ball, he's effective, but for the most part, he lets his running backs do most of the heavy lifting.

Of course, with tremendous rushing statistics comes a very strong offensive/defensive line.

When Wells doesn't have the ball in his hands, he's a D-lineman. So are Ellis and Graves. Seniors Keylon Caruthers and Braden Johnson get the job done as well as Hester and Zeb Katzmarek.

It's a defense that has 18 sacks and 10 fumble recoveries.

Up and down the roster Roxana has skilled players, and they are all going to prove to be a handful for Paris on Saturday.

Should Roxana win, they'll more than likely host their round two game over the winner between No. 6 seeded St. Joseph Ogden (7-2) and No. 11 Carlinville (6-3).