

CIF-SS DIVISION 9 CHAMPIONSHIP PREVIEW

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Todd Mather

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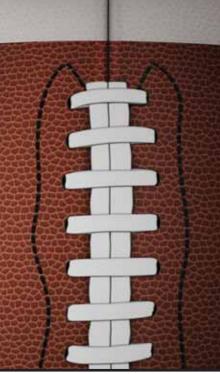


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Eyes on the prize: Burros brace busy week, prep for battle



Burroughs head coach Todd Mather (center) discusses strategy on the sideline with assistant coach Jason Griffin (left) and quarterback Austin Griffin (right) during the Burros' victory against Oak Hills on Oct. 20.

The stage is set, as Burroughs hosts Aquinas for the CIF-SS Division 9 title

BY CHRISTOPHER **LIVINGSTON**

Sports Editor clivingston@ridgecrestca.com

t's fitting that in this holiday season, the ■ Burroughs football team has yuletide feel-

After reaching their fourth CIF title game in school history, the first that they will host, the Burros have certainly had a busy week preparing for the game while reveling in the fanfare.

"Busy, overwhelming, a lot of messages, a lot of phone interviews, a lot of questions getting squared away," said head coach Todd Mather.

As he served as an assistant under then-head coach Jeff Steinberg during the Burros' title run in 2005, Mather remembers a simpler time.

"I did my job as an assistant coach, got my position group prepared for the game and didn't realize that Coach Steinberg had to go through all this," he said. "I think it's a little bit worse here because we're hosting it this time, and that's where all the logistics part of my phone calls have been.

Nevertheless, they have enjoyed the busy week,

which began Monday with a trip to the CIF-SS football championship luncheon in Long Beach.

'It was neat," Mather said. "You get to see all the teams, the last few teams that are in it. It's a really nice, classy lunch. It gave us a little headsup on what this week is going to bring for all of us: the excitement, the exposure with the media, and the phone calls that we are getting and that stuff. It was neat, met the players from Aquinas and sized them up, they sized us up.

While in awe of the different level of players

there, the Burros found an opportunity to mentally compare themselves with the other championship contenders across different divisions.

"We could play against those guys," said quarter-back Austin Griffin, coyly.

But all fun and food aside, the Burros have remained focus on this week's task. San Bernardino's Aquinas Falcons come to town in the CIF Southern Section Division 9 championship game, a team that has been on the radar all season long.

"I keep preaching to them that our schedule 74 points **OF VICTORY** prepared us for this," Mather said. "We've been in five or six of these games already. It's another game for us, where I feel Aquinas hasn't been in a game of this caliber. And this is what we do at Burroughs. It doesn't matter what other people do. We're going to continue to do what got us here. Enjoy all this exposure

Week in and week out, the No. 1 and 2 teams in Division 9 have been Aquinas and Burroughs. Now, both teams will be able to prove their worth

and people around, but

you deserved to be here

and you earned that."

through their gameplay. Off the field, the togetherness of the team has been second to none. Mather, himself a Burroughs quarterback in the early 90s, didn't hesitate when asked if he wished he was basking in

the spotlight of a champi-

onship game. "I don't," Mather said, emotions setting in. "I'm getting to enjoy it with my son. I wouldn't want it any other way. It's enjoyable for me, and it's enjoyable that I'm with

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DEFENSE WINS CHAMPIONSHIPS

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BY CHRISTOPHER LIVINGSTON

Sports Editor clivingston@ridgecrestca.com

s they say defense wins championships, the Burroughs football is gradually becoming the epitome of that statement.

The Burros' path to the CIF-SS Division 9 championship game has had some bumps - and even a misdirection, perhaps but its defense has remained stable.

When head coach Todd Mather needed to tweak his offense midseason, the defense never wavered, continuing to keep rallies short and yards at a minimum. In tȟe playoffs alone, the Burros' defense has only allowed two touchdowns, and it took it until the semifinal game to do so.

In the meantime, defensive coordinator Elijah Soto has never had to scratch his head over his schemes, instead relying on the athleticism of his players to guide through.

"I have to say that it's the same guys playing both sides of the ball," he said. "It's a unique situation in that we ĥave so many two-way players. That being said, it's really the hard work from guys on both sides of the ball. It's been one of those things where we said that we're always going to staff our defense first, we'll figure out how to score on offense with what we

The strength of schedule has allowed the Burros to use Friday nights as a workout of sorts. They have seen a variety of different offenses over the season and have learned to tweak its style or make the adjustments needed to match up.

Triple-option with twoback sets? Palmdale. Need extreme power

sets? Barstow and Tehachapi. How about something

similar to Burros, the spread offense? Check, Rancho Verde and Para-

"Our preseason schedule has allowed us to see so many different types of athletes, positions, offensive formations, and of-

fensive schemes, that we're just in a good spot when it comes to the playoffs to be able to adjust to the different types of offenses we see at that level," Soto said.

Week after week, Soto has thrown out his favorite term - mental gymnastics - to refer to the buzz that surrounds the defense at the line of scrimmage.

The headgames, the distractions, the secondguessing and questioning, it all must dissipate before the ball is snapped.

In short, keep it simple. "Just play football," Soto said. "At the snap of the ball, you play way faster and way better. That's what we try to do with a lot of the prep during the week so that when it comes to Friday night, we're able to do this thing."

But while playing simple football, the defense has to be mindful of its discipline, something Soto said that the Burros have been in charge of due to their chemistry.

"One of the best things we have going for us is that a majority of our defense has been starters at the varsity level since their sophomore year, Soto said. "We run a very disciplined practice, a very disciplined study

A majority of it has come through repetition, repetition, repetition. Prior to practices, the Burros gather in the classroom for what could be considered an eighth period: a lecture and film study

with application and a little homework.

'We see it so many times, we do it visually," Soto said. "Then we go on the field and we rep it physically, then we go back and review it visually. We have them draw it up. We have it on video. We make sure that we're tracking their hours when they take a look at it at home. Then they come back out and rep it again. They've been able to ingest it and learn from it



CHRISTOPHER LIVINGSTON/DAILY INDEPENDENT

Brock Mather (55) and Brandon Milner (44) celebrate after making a defensive stop during the Burros' season opener against Palmdale on Aug. 25.

in so many different

And it has shown via improvement. Let's start with a basic facet, tackles. The Burros started the season with 40 against Palmdale, and it has been their lowest total to date. In fact, they have tallied at least 50 per game since (excluding 49 against Serrano a month ago), and are averaging 58 per

During the regular season, the Burros have allowed 360 yards in two games, Palmdale and Rancho Verde. In the other games, they have kept their opponents to less than 300 yards. Serrano (266) and Sultana (258) got the best of the Burros' defense toward the end of the regular season, and

those two games were close finishes.

In fact, in three games this season, Burroughs quarterback Austin Griffin threw more passing yards than the total yards of the opposing team's defense: Tehachapi (279-109), Barstow (219-180), and Hesperia (315-240).

(Quick note: Paraclete, Rubidoux, St. Anthony, and Mayfair did not report offensive stats when they faced the Burros.)

And don't forget, the Burros love to hit. They have 31 sacks - six in the quarterfinal game against St. Anthony - eliminating 202 yards in the process. Senior linebacker Brock Mather has led that charge with 133 total tackles, 9.5 sacks, and four quarterback hurries.

Fellow classmen, linemen Wyatt Soto (nine sacks, 76 tackles, nine hurries), Tyler Gaska (5.5, 76, three), and Jack Sherritt (6.5, 62, three) playing significant roles.

As for turnovers, they

have forced 16 total (nine

fumble recoveries and seven interceptions). Brandon Milner and Michael Hardwick have two picks apiece, and Bryson Pippin has two fumble recoveries this season.

But if you ask Soto what the biggest improvement was, he'll bring up the number of personnel.

"We have been able to develop more players then we had in Palmdale," he said, referring to the season opener that had

six Burro defensive starters go down, three in the first half. "It's not like we didn't know that we didn't have a deep bench at that point. It's just we hadn't had the time to develop a bunch of second-

ary players." In many cases, that meant developing more two-way players. In turn, that meant more challenging practices; the Burros have to make ends meet with a limited squad. Without a scout team, "we literally have half the practices on either side of the ball as most teams we faced. We work offense two nights a week, and defense two nights a week."

SEE DEFENSE. A6



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The Burroughs offensive line gets to work after the snap during the first-round playoff game against Rubidoux. Below right, Nick Farris lines up at center prior to the snap.

BATTLE TESTED

Burroughs' O-line shores up during season

BY CHRISTOPHER **LIVINGSTON** Sports Editor

clivingston@ridgecrestca.com

▼ime stood still for the Burros when quarterback Austin Griffin stayed on the ground after taking a hit on a Friday the 13th game against Apple Valley. When he was ruled out for the game, the Burros' offense had to adjust.

No one has had to adjust more on the fly than the Burros' front five: tackles Brock Mather and Wyatt Soto, guards Dylan Goeppinger and Tyler Gaska, and center Nick Farris . As the Burros adopted the run game,

which they still use even after Griffin's return, the offensive line has developed a sense of urgency.

"You really can't screw up," Farris said. "You just have to play perfect offense."

That enough provides motivation each Friday night, when the Burros square up against larger linemen. Burroughs has developed a reputation for having a small line, but it makes up for it through speed and tenac-

It wasn't difficult for the line to adjust to the run game. Farris likened it to simply pulling out a tool from the toolbox.

"Our whole IWV of-

fense was we pounded the ball," Farris said. "We just had to bring it back out and pound the guys and do what we needed to do, because we were down a man. We put it on Oak Hills and every team since then. Our run game

has really stepped it up." For Farris specifically, he shoulders a responsibility to protect Griffin. "He's been my quarterback for 10, 11 years now. I know I can't get him hurt, so I think in my mind that I have to do everything to get that guy blocked so I can protect

my quarterback. Griffin certainly appreciates his line. He credits it for his offensive pro-

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duction, especially his eight rushing touchdowns this year, tied for the most on the team with Antonio Ramirez.

"I have a lot faith in them," Griffin said. "Those guys are the hardest working guys on the team. They don't get very much credit. I just love them and appreciate all they do for me."

That chemistry has been vital during games, as Griffin and Farris run the offense like a business: Griffin handles the backs and receivers, and Farris focuses on the line.

"It turned into a routine," Farris said. "He came in, gave that call, I gave their call. I was



ready, Grif looked at me, I looked at him. Ready? Break. And I snapped and ran into their line-

man. We did our thing." How about in noisy environments, such as Friday's CIF-SS Division 9 championship game?

"I was thinking about doing a line huddle real fast before," Farris said. "If not, I'll just scream it. They (the Falcons) don't know our play calls. Everyone's going to have to be louder."



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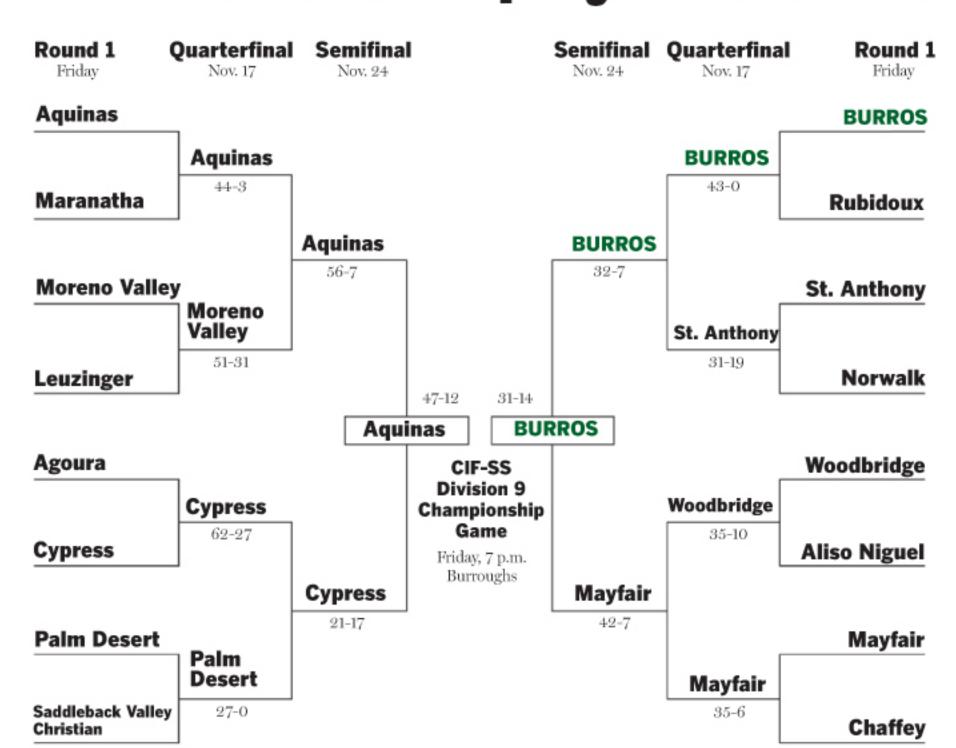


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CIF-SS Division 9 playoff bracket



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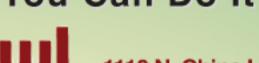
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Continued from A2

Scouting the Falcons

The Falcons come into Friday's game not having lost since another championship match, last year's Division 10 final against St. Anthony. (It's also interesting to note that the Falcons' last regular-season loss was to another Burroughs recent adversary in the playoffs, Riverside's Notre Dame Titans, on Oct. 7, 2016.)

Along the way, they have outscored their opponents 687-99, while putting up no less than 40 points per game in the playoffs. Defensively, they have not allowed more than one touchdown per game this year since Oct. 6 (against the aforementioned Titans), and the most they've allowed was three against Crespi back

in September. "They're big and physical up front," Mather said. "They're very fast. They're great in the run game, guys just get to the ball fast. They'll give up some things in the pass game, but that's part of

what they're gonna give up and rally to, and they focus heavily on what they want to take away from you."

That run game has been bolstered by senior Branden Rankins, who has tallied 2,545 yards, 64 percent of the team's total. His 40 touchdowns are not only the most on the team, but nearly six times as much as the second-leading rusher, quarterback Salieu Ceesay (seven), which means that rollouts and scrambles are to be expected.

"Offensively, I think their strength is obviously their line," said Burroughs defensive coordinator Elijah Soto. "They are a multiple-threat team, and they have the ability to eat up clock and power the ball as well as go to spread. The QB is decent at getting the ball down the field, and he has a few threats.

Speaking of which, if the Falcons need to go to the air, they will. Ceesay has thrown for 1,944 yards and 25 touchdowns while only throwing one interception. Tight end Joshka Gustav is a favorite, as he has snagged

11 touchdowns on 667 yards. Senior slotback Marceles Gooden has more receptions (32) for 508 yards and six scores.

Defensively, the Falcons have 18 interceptions and 11 fumble recoveries, and have forced seven turnovers in the playoffs alone. At cornerback, Gooden has led that charge, grabbing seven interceptions this season,

shoulder injury against Apple Valley last October. But the resilient quarter-"We set out a goal for the beginning of the year, and we're

going to make it happen." - Burroughs senior quarterback Austin Griffin

three of them in the quarterfinals against Moreno Valley.

Scouting the Burros

This year began with heightened optimism for the Burros, as Griffin returned after sitting out the entire 2016 season with a back injury. It was a long campaign for the then-junior, who has found retribution this

"First, I have to thank the man upstairs for let-

back was back just as soon as he was gone, getting a few reps the next week against Oak Hills. He returned full-time against Serrano and has continued to sling it, passing for at least 200 yards in four of the last five games. This year, he has racked up 2,592 passing yards, 204 rushing yards, and 39 total touchdowns (31 through the

ting me play again," Grif-fin said. "I didn't want to

leave (the Burros). I left

them last year, and that

sucked. I wasn't going to

do it again. We set out a

goal for the beginning of

the year, and we're going

when he was victim to a

Griffin suffered a scare

to make it happen."

So, when the signal caller suffered his injury,

that forced Mather to put a halt to his spread offense. His embracement of the run game steadily increased week-by-week, thanks to a Burros staff that accepted change. Brock Mather, normal-

ly a linebacker, donned a No. 9 jersey and became a fullback for the Burros for three games, tallying 184 yards and four scores. Antonio Ramirez has been the primary back, racking up 736 yards and eight trips to the end zone. Carson Liszka (199 yards) and Brett Stephey (159) all contributed triple-digit yards this year.

Case in point, the Burros were just fine. The opposing teams, however, scratched their heads in the film room.

"The last two teams we

played, Mayfair and St. Anthony, their coaches came up to me after the game and said, 'You guys are a nightmare to prepare for, because you never run the same plays out of the same formation. You put in at least two different formations each week that we haven't lined our kids up against because we've never seen

you do it," Todd Mather said. "So, that's our jobs as coaches. We always tell the kids we're going to put them in position to be successful and you

have to execute it from there." Now, reaching the pinnacle of their season, the Burros expect to be no

different. "Pip (wide receiver Bryson Pippin) lines up in the slot as the No. 3 receiver, the two receiver, the one - we're gonna put our guys who we need to have the ball where we need them," Todd Mather said. "We're gonna mix it up and play great defense behind it. Our defense is our strong point. We don't have to change much there. Offensively is where we're going to get creative and try to keep teams on their toes."

The Burros and Falcons will kick off at 7 p.m. from Sherman E. Burroughs Stadium. The game will be livestreamed online through Fox Sports GO, on the radio on KLOA 1240AM and KZIQ 92.7FM, and on Twitter @senorlivingston.

Continued from A3

What's made the holiday season more merry for the defense is that in the playoffs, there are no JV and freshman-level

games. That gives the Burros a boost during practice, making it livelier and thorough.

"They're still willing to suit up even though they are done with their games and work with us on the field to give us the best scout look that they can,"

Soto said.

Make no mistake, both Soto and his assistant coach Evan Sherritt are perfectionists, so it's no wonder that the Burros defense will focus on de-

"I literally have a 65page defensive scouting

report that's growing," Soto said, "and some people think that's crazy. The truth is our kids adjusted just fine. Our goal as a staff is we're not going to be outcoached. We're going to have the best team going in. We're going to make the best adjust-

ments. We're going to do everything but be able to stick the pads on and strap on a helmet to help these kids get there."

The Burros, each and every game, have taken note.

"They have confidence in the gameplan," Soto

said. "If something does go wrong, and they make a mistake, they don't hang their heads. They don't come wandering off the field upset and dejected. They know that they'll make the play the next

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BY CHRIS FORE

've always had a whole lot of respect for the "small town" coaches and football programs! The ones who coach their kids year in and year out with everything they have. The ones who can't rely on transfers for success because the closest high school vou can transfer from is an hour and a half away. The coaches who give everything they have to their program, to the kids, and their families. The programs who shut their towns down on Friday night because they are the best show in town!

Burroughs High School head football coach Todd Mather and his staff are these coaches I'm talking about. Burroughs is in Ridgecrest, California. Ridgecrest is a town of about 29,000 people surrounded by four mountain ranges including the beautiful Sierra Nevadas. It is two hours from Bakersfield and two hours from San Bernardino, just about smack dab in the middle. Ridgecrest evolved into a growing and dynamic city during the 1950's and 1960's as a support community, vital to the mission of the Navy, by providing housing and services for Federal employees and contractors. Now you know a little

about this town. Maybe you can picture a Friday night football game in Burroughs. One of those towns that still closes up on Friday nights to support their boys. Half of the football staff went to school at Burroughs; none of them teach on campus. They either run their own business or

work on the naval base. Not being on campus makes their jobs even harder.

Todd Mather was born and raised in Ridgecrest. He was a First Team All Conference Quarterback and Safety at Burroughs High in 1991 and 1992. Mather started coaching his former high school team in 1998. Then stepped away from the high school to coach his son and friends in 2005. His son's team went 58-1 throughout their youth football days. All part of the plan for this small town. As freshman, that group went 10-0. Now, they are seniors. It all comes down to this: the CIF Championship.

Coach Mather took over as the Head Coach in 2011. They were a .500 team that first year. But he and the staff had patience and built upon a solid program over the

He had a vision: to lead the Burroughs Burros back to a CIF Championship appearance, the ultimate prize for a high school team in Southern California. They won a CIF Championship in 2005, under Head Coach

one of the coolest motivational ideas I've seen!

Mather explains: 'So the week that I got the head coaching job I put a brand new ball in a glass case that said "CIF Championship Ball." I hung it on the wall in the varsity football locker room. Each season I told the kids that my goal each year was to open that glass case and use that ball in the CIF Championship game. Then after the CIF Championship game we would sign it, put it back in the case and leave it hanging in the locker room and that, along with a new Championship ban-

On Monday, Mather and the Burros opened that

"There were four screws holding the case closed. Each of the four captains came up and unscrewed one of the screws and we opened the case and will use that ball in the game Friday. It took me seven years to open that case. And how fitting in my last year and with my son (who is a senior)."

The Burros have played a brutal schedule this year; five opponents this year reached the semifinals in

ner, would be our legacy."

their respective divisions (Silverado, Tehachapi, Rancho Verde, Paraclete, and Apple Valley) and two of them are playing for a Championship (Rancho in Division 3 and Paraclete in Division 5). Even through that meat grinder, the Burros enter Championship game with an 11-2 record vs an undefeated Aquinas High School.

They play Friday night, in a small town called Ridgecrest.

which he has had for seven years, on Monday. Don't expect to get in to any business after 6 p.m., they'll be cheering on their boys, as they play with that football, that's been under a case for 7 years!

Burroughs head coach Todd Mather holds up the game ball after opening its case,

Chris Fore has his Masters degree in Athletic Administration, is a Certified Athletic Administrator and serves as an Adjunct Professor in the M.S. Physical Education Sports

Management program at Azusa Pacific University. He is a speaker with the Glazier Clinics, and a

CHRISTOPHER LIVINGSTON/DAILY INDEPENDENT

Coaches Choice author. Coach Fore runs Eight Laces Consulting where he specializes in helping coaches nationwide in their job search process. He also serves on the California Coaches Association Board of Representatives, and the Southern California Football Coaches Association.



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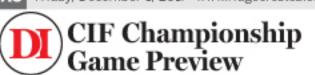


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Good Luck Burros In The CIF Championship







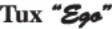


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