

## HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL - OPENING WEEK POCA, NITRO SEEK FORMER GLORY

Publication: THE CHARLESTON GAZETTE

Published: Tuesday, August 25, 2009

Page: 1B

Byline: RICK RYAN ASSISTANT SPORTS EDITOR

Call it the Redemption Bowl. When **Poca** and **Nitro** tangle Friday night at Underwood Field, each gets a chance to take the first step toward reclaiming its spot among the playoff contenders in its class.

Not too long ago, the Dots (in Class AA) and Wildcats (in AAA) ranked among the elite teams in the state.

**Poca** captured three consecutive state championships from 2001-03 and reached the playoff quarterfinals in 2006. **Nitro**, meanwhile, qualified for the postseason five times in a row (2003-07), and advanced to the Super Six finals in 2005 before losing to Morgantown in overtime.

But each of the former state powers has come upon hard times. The Dots went 2-8 last season and 4-6 in 2007. **Nitro** fell to 3-7 a year ago, ending its playoff streak.

**Poca** coach Bob Lemley realizes the opportunity to pick up a valuable win this week and the AAA playoff points that go with it, but doesn't want his team to get ahead of itself.

"We're just looking for a win - one thing at a time," Lemley said with a chuckle. "We know we've played **Nitro** competitively the last couple years and had chances, but they fizzled out there at the end. I think this will be a similar-type game. First game of the season and everybody's keyed up. I hope we don't make a whole lot of mistakes. But our guys, they're anxious to start winning like we used to."

The rivalry between the bordering towns cooled when they didn't play for 10 years. **Nitro** has won all three meetings since the resumption of the series, and the last two have been entertaining, high-scoring games - 38-35 last year and 48-33 in 2007.

"It's the first game, and anything can happen," Lemley said. "We want to keep the turnovers down and control the ball the best we can. It's going to be a fun game. I've known [**Nitro** coach] Bob Gobel for a long time, but this is the first time I've coached against him."

There could be plenty of points in this one, too, as each team returns a versatile starting quarterback, the Wildcats with Mark Chandler and the Dots with Jason Cuffee.

Chandler had a combined 1,150 yards and 11 touchdowns rushing and passing while playing only about half the season under center. Cuffee, who played in only four games because of a knee injury, ran for five TDs and threw for 233 yards.

"They're going to run their offense around him," Lemley said of Chandler. "He'll be tough to stop. They run the read option; sometimes he'll run the ball, and sometimes he'll throw. If you make a mistake, it'll cost you. You've got to contain him the best you can and make them punt a few times, too."

Cuffee sat out Poca's lone preseason scrimmage last Friday at Clay County. The Dots also have senior running back Caleb Arthur, who ran for 1,801 yards and 17 TDs last season.

Gobel, back as a high school head coach for the first time since his one and only season at Herbert Hoover in 1999, said he feels no pressure to live up to Nitro's reputation for featuring high-flying, high-scoring offenses as he approaches the season.

"No, not really," he said. "One thing I learned a long time ago to be successful in coaching is that, first of all, you have to dictate your offense toward what kind of players you have. I do think we have the capability of throwing the football. We enjoy putting it in the air. If this is the case, is that what we like to do?"

"I don't feel like I have to live up to anybody or anyone. My main objective is to put our players in the best positions I can as a coach to make them successful."

Reach Rick Ryan at 304-348-5175 or [rickryan@wvgazette.com](mailto:rickryan@wvgazette.com).