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North Crowley, Arlington can complete comeback

Football Insider ◉ The playoffs are within reach despite tough starts.

Football is all about finishing strong.

The North Crowley Panthers and Arlington Colts have proved it with the way they have bounced back from dismal starts to their year.

And after Friday's game at Panther Stadium, one of the two teams will be even closer to finishing off a turnaround season.

"Without question, this will determine the playoff state for both teams," Arlington coach Scott Peach said. "We know this is our shot. They know this is their shot too."

Arlington won its first game of the year but then

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lost three straight to fall to 1-3, 0-1. The Panthers started the season by losing all three of their three nondistrict games.

Now, in Week 9, the Arlington-North Crowley matchup has major playoff implications.

North Crowley is locked with Arlington Bowie at 3-2, fighting over the final playoff spot in District 4-5A. The Colts have won four straight and are in a three-way tie for first place with Arlington Lamar and Arlington Martin. The three teams are all 4-1 with two games remaining.

"We sat down as a team about a week and a half ago and talked about our goals," Peach said. "All of that ties in to what will happen in the next two weeks and into the playoffs if we make it. I think we looked ahead earlier in the season, so now we are focused on North Crowley. I think everyone in that locker room knows what's on the line."

North Crowley narrowly missed the playoffs last year. This season, the Panthers are averaging 38 points a game under second-year coach Keath Magee. Led by dual-threat quarterback Josh Price — 1,040 passing yards, 743 rushing yards and 24 total TDs — North Crowley is hungry for the postseason.

"They are an extremely dangerous team right now," Peach said. "Coach Magee has done some good things in his two years there, and they are an athletic football team. They have great size at a lot of positions. We have to play our best football to beat them. We know that, especially with the way they are playing in district."

When Arlington has struggled, the Colts turned the ball over and committed multiple penalties.

"Those were the things that were hurting us early in the year," Peach said. "If we don't get over those issues, we won't make it far. We've made some strides in that area. You find out about that really quickly when you play good foot-

ball teams, so we will see where we are Friday night."

National audience

Running back Johnathan Gray and the Aledo Bearcats (6-2, 5-0 in District 5-4A) enter today's 7 p.m. nationally televised game on ESPN against Birdville (7-1, 4-1) with a chance to secure the district championship.

For both teams, running the ball has been important this year. The Bearcats are averaging a whopping 11 yards a carry with 2,734 of their total 4,403 yards on the ground. Birdville has 2,452 rushing yards this year, averaging seven yards a carry.

"We have practiced hard for them, knowing they are a great team," said

Gray, who has 1,975 rushing yards and 37 touchdowns. "Playing against Birdville every year, knowing that they are a district-championship quality opponent, gets us fired up."

Birdville has three strong running threats, with quarterback E.A. Northey (1,012 yards, 9 TDs) and running backs Tyler Klutts (725 yards, 15 TDs) and Xavier Turner (563 yards, 5 TDs). Northey also has nine passing TDs.

"With the game on national TV, it gets us even more fired up," said Gray, who accepted an invitation Wednesday to play in the 2012 Under Armour All-America Game. "We just can't wait for the game."

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