

PLAYOFF FOOTBALL: HIGHLAND VS. AVON



AARON JOSEFCZYK / GAZETTE

Highland's Jameson Gordon (7) and Garrett Phillips celebrate an Anthony Wayne turnover.

Always about the team

Versatile safety Phillips is a key leader for Hornets

John Urchek
The Gazette

Senior Garrett Phillips doesn't take the chance to suit up for the Highland football team for granted. Opportunities are winding down.



Phillips

As the 5-foot-10, 185-pound safety and his teammates prepare for a battle of unbeaten teams when second-seeded Highland faces top-seeded Avon in the Division II, Region 6 championship at Elyria's Ely

NEXT UP

WHO: Highland (13-0) vs. Avon (13-0)

WHAT: Division II, Region 6 championship

WHEN: 7 p.m. Friday

WHERE: Mercy Health Field at Ely Stadium, 1915 Middle Ave., Elyria

RADIO: WEOL 930-AM; WEOL.com, Stream 1



Stadium on Friday, Phillips is striving for another chance to celebrate.

"I don't think it's like this everywhere," Phillips said. "The whole community is behind us. It's special

because you feel like you're playing for the community. I've played with all these guys since I started playing football from flag into tackle and now high school. It's a bond like having a bunch of other brothers."

Highland (13-0) is looking to join 2013 as the only teams to win regional titles in program history. Meanwhile, the Eagles (13-0) are seeking their seventh championship in eight seasons.

Avon ended the Hornets' season at this level last year with a 28-14 victory, but Phillips believes his team has everything it needs this time.

"People say this every year, but I

really feel it's true this year that we have a really special group of guys," Phillips said. "There's not a single guy on our team that's me first. Having that is so refreshing, because there's no one that's a diva that we have to worry about. It takes a lot of stress away, and there's no distractions."

Phillips is tied for the team lead with two interceptions and is among Highland's leaders with 51 tackles (1 for loss) and two pass breakups.

His value goes well beyond numbers or his abilities as a safety who can come up and stop the run or play in pass coverage.

See PHILLIPS, C3

PHILLIPS

From C1

"He's able to galvanize the entire team and get them to follow him," Highland coach Mike Gibbons said. "He's arguably one of the best leaders we've had in our program. He leads by example, but will also be vocal when he needs to."

"He hands down the one communicating our coverages, making checks and making sure we're all in sync. You need someone who is going to take charge, and that's what he does for us."

Phillips credits those who came before him for setting the right tone and exemplifying

the type of leader he wanted to become.

"Our senior class puts a lot of work into carrying on what they showed us," Phillips said. "How they carried themselves when we were freshmen, a lot of us saw that and wanted to emulate that when we were seniors. Guys like Aaron Filips, Lukas Stiles and Creed Hill, those kind of guys."

Phillips and the rest of the Highland defense will be tested by an Avon offense that starts with Kent State-bound quarterback Nolan Good (176-for-270, 2,912 yards, 28 TDs, 7 INTs).

Good's quality receivers are led by senior slot Matt Maxey, the Eagles' all-time receiving leader who has team highs of 79

receptions, 1,210 yards and 10 touchdowns. Phillips likely will see plenty of Maxey in pass coverage while also helping to stop a running attack led by Tyler Kaufmann (87 carries, 609 yards, 10 TDs), Quainte' Smith (57, 450, 9) and Good (51, 527, 9).

"We've been great up front all year, and I think we can continue that," Phillips said. "They've got a good guy at quarterback (Nolan Good) and a bunch of talented guys at receiver. Limiting (the receivers) production and getting pressure on the quarterback is always a huge part of our game plan."

Phillips is used to stepping up. With the Suburban League American Conference title on

the line, Phillips led Highland with 12 tackles and two interceptions and scored the final touchdown on a 5-yard run in a 34-0 victory over Aurora.

"We kind of stressed that whole week that big time players step up in big time games," Gibbons said. "He definitely did that. He's the leader of our team, and we're glad he's on our team."

In last week's 38-14 win over Whitehouse Anthony Wayne, Phillips tied tackle Ryan Zywiec for the lead with six tackles to go with a pass breakup.

Phillips takes the same sort of all-in attitude from football into the other areas of his life as well.

"He's extremely focused in

anything he does," Gibbons said. "He's a great student. He's a great role model to the younger kids. He's an outstanding young man in every facet of his life."

Come Friday night, Phillips will be devoted on extending his season with his brothers and continuing the Highland legacy.

"My favorite part (of football) is spending time with the guys after a win and after practice," Phillips said. "I really love the team aspect of it. It's 11 as one working towards a common goal and accomplishing that goal. That's really special to me."

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