

Western Sun title on the line

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Last Friday, Batavia's football team and its coaching staff were rooting for Geneva to defeat Kaneland.

Tonight, they'll attempt to uproot those same Vikings from sole possession of first place in the Western Sun Conference and force either a two- or three-way tie for the title.

Geneva (8-0 overall, 6-0 in conference) guaranteed itself at least a share of the title with a gripping 24-21 victory over Kaneland last Friday. Batavia (7-1) and Kaneland are both 5-1 in conference action. The Knights will likely finish at 6-1 as they close out their conference schedule against a struggling Yorkville (1-5) team in Maple Park, so they'll certainly be cheering for Batavia tonight.

"We feel great about this opportunity," Batavia coach Mike Gaspari said. "We needed help from them (Geneva) and that was fantastic. Since the loss to Kaneland we've taken care of our end of things and now we still have an opportunity for the conference title. We had set our sights on that and we've known that we'd have to compete against teams like Geneva to win one. With it being Week 9 it's even more special for the kids on both sides."

It could truly be a special evening tonight for the Vikings. How much better could an undefeated regular season be, especially if it culminated with a victory over rival Batavia?

"I talked to the kids about it and we just want to finish this the right way and we're really not in the mood to share (conference title) with anybody," Geneva coach Rob Wicinski said. "I go back to the bowling analogy. We're in the ninth frame and going into the 10th, and you want to end it right and you want momentum. That's extremely important to take into the playoffs."

"It would be nice to go undefeated but this just another game in the season for us," Geneva running back Chris Modjeski said. "The game should be fun but we're just looking at it like any other week and we need to just come out and play."

Batavia's offense has come to life after a 24-14 loss to Kaneland in Week 5. Since then, the Bulldogs have gone 3-0 while outscoring their opponents 165-34. While those opponents are a combined 6-18, Batavia does own nine wins in its last 10 games against Geneva.

"They're a typical Batavia team, extremely big and aggressive, well coached and a lot of good athletes so we will have our hands full," Wicinski said. "We're preparing for everything, they're entire offensive package, and we know it's going to be physical on both sides."

Senior quarterback Alex Schroeder (71-of-123, 1,159 yards, 6 INTs, 9 TDs) leads the Bulldogs offense, which has received a boost from Tharryn Wright who has been an outstanding linebacker for the past three seasons. Wright continues his defensive duties but in the past two weeks he has carried the ball 13 times for 100 yards and 5 touchdowns.

At this point in the season Wright is one of several players for both Batavia and Geneva who

are receiving playing time on both sides of the ball.

“That’s not unusual for teams to go into the playoff run with the best kids on the field,” Wicinski said. “We’re seeing a little less rotation and more kids playing both ways.”

One big question for Batavia is the status of sophomore running back Brian Krolikowski (80 rushes, 508 yards, 6 TDs). He leads the team in rushing yards, but missed last Friday’s game with a back strain. Gaspari expects him to be ready to play.

Schroeder (62 rushes, 401 yards) is at his best when he’s able to use his athleticism and speed to run the ball as well as move around in the pocket. Alex Warner (19 catches, 488 yards, 4 TDs), fullback Brandon Holl (19 catches, 267 yards, 4 TDs) and tight end Jordan Church (16 catches, 199 yards, 2 TDs) are his favorite targets.

Batavia knows it won’t be easy to score points, as Geneva’s defense has been stingy all season. The Vikings have yielded only 64 points, thanks in part to a defensive unit that has worked extremely well together, with seniors such as linebackers Alex Springhorn and Josh Brennan, tackle Maxx Parcell and end Karl Sandman coming up big week after week.

Similarly, the Vikings offense has been stellar. A nice balance of Modjeski (151 rushes, 1,066 yards, 10 TDs) in the backfield and efficient passing from quarterback Shaun Ratay has led to many, many end zone visits. Ratay (73-of-115, 1,161 yards) has thrown 21 touchdown passes and only 5 interceptions.

His targets include Mike Mayszak (22 catches, 468 yards, 9 TDs), Pat Schiller (11 catches, 92 yards, 2 TDs) and tight end Aaron O’Connell (26 catches, 341 yards, 3 TDs). Unfortunately for the Vikings, O’Connell has a severe ankle sprain and is questionable to play tonight.

Batavia defensive ends Kevin McFarland and Mike Garrity and the rest of the defense will look to spoil the Vikings’ fun, something that hasn’t been done through the first eight weeks.

“Their match-ups do pose some problems for us,” Gaspari said. “They have great athletes at the skilled positions.”

Regardless of the outcome, one positive is that on Saturday both teams will be anxiously awaiting word on who and where they will play next week in the opening round of the playoffs. Likewise, the opportunity to participate in a game of this magnitude, and in front of several thousand people, is something Gaspari hopes the kids on both sides take time to appreciate.

“The Tri-Cities is a special place to be and we do emphasize to the kids to take time this week to enjoy it,” Gaspari said. “They’ve accomplished so much and put in a lot of work since last November and I am so proud of how they’ve worked. And the Geneva kids can feel the same way and both can take a lot of pride.”

But only one team can leave the field with a “W.”