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PRINCE WILLIAM

\$1 DECEMBER 14 - 20, 2023

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DIGITAL GATEWAY APPROVED

Supervisors greenlight largest data center corridor in the world

» BY BEN PETERS
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After a 27-hour meeting, the Prince William Board of County Supervisors on Wednesday approved the PW Digital Gateway, allowing construction of what's expected to become the largest data center corridor in the world.

The project, 23 million square feet of data centers on roughly 2,100 acres along Pageland Lane in western Prince William near Gainesville that will be built out over the next two decades, was given the green light by the board's Democratic majority

with all Republicans dissenting. The final vote in favor was 4-3, with Democratic Supervisor Kenny Boddye of the Occoquan District abstaining.

Boddye previously voted in favor of a motion to deny the rezonings, but that failed on a 4-4 tie. He then sought, and received, a reduction in the amount of data center space that could be built on the southernmost portion of the site, close to Manassas Battlefield National Park and Conway Robinson State Forest.

Ultimately, the project was approved despite widespread public opposition

HOW THEY VOTED

| | |
|------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| In favor | Opposed |
| » Chair Ann Wheeler (D) | » Jeanine Lawson (R-Brentsville) |
| » Victor Angry (D-Neabsco) | » Yesli Vega (R-Coles) |
| » Andrea Bailey (D-Potomac) | » Bob Weir (R-Gainesville) |
| » Margaret Franklin (D-Woodbridge) | Abstained |
| | » Kenny Boddye (D-Occoquan) |

and recommendations for denial from both the Prince William County Planning Commission and the county's professional planning staff.

Authorization of the Digital Gateway is the culmination of years of maneuvering,

GATEWAY » PAGE 4

FLY, EAGLES, FLY



Freedom High School's football team defeated Highland Springs 42-34 to claim its second straight Class 6 state title Dec. 9 at the University of Virginia. The Eagles are the first Prince William County high school football program to claim back-to-back state titles since Hylton did it in 1998 and 1999.

DOUG STROUD | FOR INSIDENOVA

BACK TO BACK

Freedom celebrates another state championship

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BACK-TO-BACK . . .



Freedom head coach Darryl Overton (middle) celebrates after the Eagles defeated Highland Springs 42-34.
DOUG STROUD | FOR INSIDENOVA

Freedom holds off Highland Springs for second straight Class 6 state title

» BY DAVID FAWCETT
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CHARLOTTESVILLE

Kam Courtney stood off to the side by himself while his teammates swarmed the middle of the field, hugging and laughing with each other.

The Freedom-Woodbridge senior would join them in a moment. But for now, Courtney, his face flush from crying, needed time to himself to soak in the dueling emotions tugging at his heart.

His high school football career was over. But, man, what a way to end it.

In the game fans wanted to see when the season started back in late August, Freedom defeated Highland Springs 42-34 to claim its second straight Class 6 state title Dec 9 at the University of Virginia.

The Eagles are the first Prince William County high school football program to claim back-to-back state titles since Hynton did it in 1998 and 1999.

The showdown between the defend-

ing Class 5 and 6 state champions lived up to its billing. After the Eagles jumped out to a 28-0 second-quarter lead that led fans to consider the possibility of a running clock starting in the second half, Highland Springs battled back to get within eight points twice before falling short.

Courtney played a big role in keeping the Springers (13-2) at bay and helping Freedom (14-0) win its 29th straight game. The University of Indiana commitment ran for two touchdowns, converted a critical first down on a fourth-and-1 and grabbed an interception.

So much to take in. And so much to let out. Why not savor it?

“This was a little different than last year,” Courtney said. “I knew I was coming back to play one more season. It’s overwhelming.”

Tristan Evans-Trujillo understood. His face was streaked with tears as well – for all the same reasons.

With all of its key skill players back from last season’s 15-0 state champion, Freedom was expected to be in this position. But it’s one thing to say you will do it and another to see actually happen.

For Evans-Trujillo, the senior quarterback who finished his high school career as the state’s all-time leader in career touchdowns (121 this season) and single-season touchdown passes (61, last season), Saturday’s outcome was a crowning achievement.

He posed for photos with his teammates and made sure he took, at his request, one with his linemen. They lifted him up and then, under center Walter Hughes’ specific instructions, let their quarterback down gently. Evans-Trujillo also gave credit to Overton and most all of to God.

“With God, all things are possible,” Evans-Trujillo said.

On Saturday, nothing was certain until time ran out after Highland Springs, with the ball, got a first down at its own 30-yard line after a pass completion.

“I was a little nervous until the clock hit zero,”



Jeffrey Overton Jr. jumps over a Highland Springs defender en route to one of his two touchdown runs.
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... TO-BACK?

Can Freedom pull off a three-peat?

BY DAVID FAWCETT
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Graduation will hit Freedom's football team hard. The two-time defending Class 6 state champions will return only four starters on offense and four on defense from a program that has won 29 straight games – and they will face a challenging non-district schedule again next season with rematches against programs like DeMatha and Varina.

But despite the impending losses, there's still plenty to work with as Freedom eyes doing something only one other Class 6 program in Virginia (Westfield) has ever done: win three straight state titles.

For openers, two of the returning starters are all-state performers Jeffrey Overton Jr. and JuJu Preston.

Juniors who play on both sides of the ball, Overton totaled 2,355 rushing yards and 42 rushing touchdowns this season, while Preston caught 67 passes for 1,295 yards and 19 touchdowns. Overton is only 415 yards from becoming Prince William County's all-time leading rusher.

Preston has already committed to Clemson, while Overton has a host of scholarship offers from Power Five colleges, including his most recent one from Ohio State, which he announced Monday.

In addition to playing on offense, the two also play in the secondary. Overton was a first-team all-region defensive back this season, and Preston rotated in as well to the point that he was essentially a fifth starter at times

back there.

The two are even a passing-receiving threat. Overton connected with Preston on a 53-yard touchdown pass Saturday in Freedom's 42-34 win over Highland Springs in the state final.

"JuJu and Jeff are enough," Darryl Overton said. "They are a lot to deal with."

In addition to Overton and Preston, Freedom brings back junior offensive linemen Jonah Fuga and Justyce Robinson, first- and second-team all-district picks.

On defense, first-team all-district junior linebackers Devin Reeves and Braxton Hunt return, along with junior defensive back Jachai Hughes (second-team all-district). Hughes returned an interception for a 38-yard touchdown in the state final.

As for up-and-coming players, Overton is high on 6-4, 165-pound freshman Tyson Washington and 5-7, 155-pound junior Derek Moore to complement Preston at the wideout positions after the graduations of EJ Reid, Aaron Duncan and Kam Courtney.

Overton said Washington will be a Power Five recruit and Moore would be a starter on any other team. Moore recorded three touchdowns this season and caught 10 passes.

Sophomore Daylen King (6-1, 270) should step in as one of the starting offensive linemen. Freshman Karmine Stanley (5-10, 160), the younger brother of senior all-district lineman Ju'elz Stanley, is another player Overton said will be a Power Five recruit. Karmine Stanley is listed as an athlete on Freedom's 2023 roster.



Freedom's Caleb Tucker is next in line to start at quarterback. DOUG STROUD | FOR INSIDENOVA

Freshman defensive lineman Alpha Conteh (6-3, 200) will make an impact as well and is another projected Power 5 recruit.

Junior running back/defensive back Darrell Fansley (5-9, 165) will contribute. He ran for one touchdown this season.

Sophomore Caleb Tucker (5-11, 190) is next in line to start as Freedom's quarterback with record-setting senior Tristan Evans-Trujillo graduating. Tucker has been Evans-Trujillo's backup the past two seasons.

With Freedom leading by such large margins in most of its games this season, Tucker saw action in seven contests as a reserve, going 18 of 29 passing for 320 yards with one interception and three touchdowns.

"[Caleb] is physically gifted," Darryl Overton said. "He has the throwing power and the arm strength. He has to mature and get some of the leadership Tristan had. The physical ability is there. I need to see him take strides with the intangibles."

FREEDOM » FROM PAGE 18

Evans-Trujillo said. "Then a wave of emotions hit me. It came to me. It's over. It's a great way to finish."

A FORMIDABLE FOE

Head coach Darryl Overton could not have been prouder of his team. He has coached many of these players for years, starting in his youth organization.

Overton knew Highland Springs presented a formidable foe. And indeed the Springers were, scoring the first touchdown on a Freedom team since the Eagles lost to Stone Bridge 38-35 on Sept. 10, 2021.

Highland Springs also forced Freedom to do something it had not done (gasp) in 12 games: Punt.

In addition, questions lingered about how Freedom would react in a pressure-packed situation against a formidable opponent. Would the Eagles cave when pressed or persevere?

Overton knew the answer. He had full confidence in his players and they responded in kind.

Highland Springs scored back-to-back touchdowns in just under two minutes to make the score 28-13 with 6:04 left in the second quarter.

Still up by 15 just under four minutes into the third quarter, Freedom went to its diverse and deep offensive playbook to call on Jeffrey Overton and have him

throw to JuJu Preston.

Seeing Highland Springs closing on the line of scrimmage, Darryl Overton called for the ball to be snapped directly to his nephew. In the state semifinals, the Eagles tried the same play with Jeffrey Overton only to see the ball hang in the air and fall way short.

"It was a duck," said Jeffrey Overton, goggles hanging off the side of his head in preparation for a possible double during

This time was different. He hit Preston in stride along the Freedom sideline. The Clemson University commitment took it from there. With an outstretched left hand, Preston grabbed the ball at the 30-yard line, pulled it into his chest and ran untouched into the end zone. EJ Reid's extra point gave Freedom a 35-13 lead with 8:47 left in the third.

A RISK PAYS OFF

Courtney provided the second momentum-swinging moment. After Highland Springs closed within eight (35-27) with 1:17 remaining in the third, Freedom faced a big decision to start the fourth quarter: Go for it on fourth-and-1 at its own 39 or punt?

Never averse to taking risks, the Eagles went for it. Courtney took the hand-off and, aided by great blocking, burst



Freedom prepares in the locker room before the start of the state final. DOUG STROUD | FOR INSIDENOVA

through a hole on his left side.

He saw nothing between him and the end zone except an official. Courtney attempted to sidestep the official, but the official moved the same way. With nowhere to go, Courtney ran into the official. The collision slowed him down and allowed Highland Springs to tackle him.

Undeterred, Courtney ran the ball two plays later for a 49-yard touchdown that gave Freedom a 42-27 lead.

As he continued to sort through his emotions after the game, Courtney still faces big decisions. This weekend, he will return to Virginia on an official recruiting trip. From there, he will graduate early and enroll at the college of his choice in January.

It was all a lot to consider, but it could wait. He worked so hard to reach this point and took none of it for granted. He never will. Let the tears flow.

"It's joy," Courtney said.



Is Freedom the best team ever? You decide

Is the 2023 Freedom High School football team better than the 2022 version that went undefeated as well and won a state title?

What about Hylton's back-to-back unbeaten state champions in 1998 and 1999? Or Osbourn's 14-0 state champion in 2006 and Manassas Park's 14-0 state champion in 2004?

All talented, successful and dominant in their own right. But is there a clear winner for the best and most talented high school football team to come out of Prince William County, the city of Manassas and Manassas Park?

Depends on who you talk to and what criteria you use. To say you're the best means you've won a state title. Add to that an unbeaten record and perhaps a big difference between points scored and points allowed and you bolster your case even more.

You might also consider how far some of the players went in their playing careers. Did they play in college and at what level and did they ultimately make it to the NFL? Or maybe not – as long as you had good players regardless of whether they competed beyond high school?

There's also this thought: To say one team is the best doesn't mean they were the most talented. There have been teams who have fallen short of a state championship, yet still fielded a loaded lineup. And teams who have won state titles with no Power 5 recruits.

Understanding then that any discussion like this is always subjective, here are some points to ponder:

Let's start with the best team.

Combined, Prince William County, the city of Manassas and Manassas Park have produced nine state champions in football. Of those nine, six went undefeated and two, Freedom and Hylton, won back-to-back titles.

At 12-2, Gar-Field, an underdog story if there ever was one, made history by becoming the county's first state champion in 1990.

Osborn and Manassas Park were blessed with talented quarterbacks in future NFL defensive back Brandon Hogan and Zach Terrell, respectively, who spearheaded their teams' drive in winning it all.

In 2010, Battlefield, like Gar-Field, overcame one favored challenger after another to go 13-2 and finish on top. And Hylton showed its mettle going 13-1 with a championship in 2002.

The two unbeaten Freedom and Hylton teams, though, headline the discussion.

Statistically speaking, Hylton's 1998 team was more dominant than the 1999 squad. The Bulldogs outscored opponents 469-134 in 1998 with only two games won by 10 points or less, including the state final.

In a more pass-heavy era, no one's offense compares to Freedom's. The Eagles set a state record in 2022 for single-season points with 952.

Although overshadowed, Freedom's defense is impressive as well. In 2022, the Eagles allowed only 9.9 points a game with six shutouts. This year, they gave up 10.8 points a game and posted five shutouts.

When comparing his two teams, Freedom head coach Darryl Overton gives a slight edge to the 2023 version. For the most part, both teams featured the same players, especially on offense with all the skill players back.

Overton said it was harder to eclipse last season's point total because Freedom played one less game after the DeMatha contest was called because of bad weather. Running clocks also made it difficult to have time to score more points, Overton said.

"[The 2023] team was offensively a little better,"



Freedom head coach Darryl Overton gets the Gatorade bath.

DOUG STROUD | FOR INSIDENOVA

Overton said. "[The skill kids] were bigger, faster and stronger. The offensive line was all back."

Defensively, Overton said this year's team had more depth. But the quality was higher last year with seniors TJ Bush (Class 6 defensive player of the year) and Kendall Bannister (all-state defensive back).

As far as most talented team, here are six candidates to think about, using Division I as a measuring stick:

- Freedom's 2022 team had five players who signed with Division I colleges or have made Division I commitments. The 2023 version features three Division I commitments and counting.
- Hylton's 1998 and 1999 teams had numerous Division I players both seasons, including future NFL linebacker Ahmad Brooks, Virginia Tech defensive back DJ Walton, Auburn defensive back Karibi DeDe and quarterback Kenny Irby. The 1998 team also included North Carolina lineman David Stevenson, while the 1999 team included Bowling Green linebacker Jason Kaminski.
- The 1974 Woodbridge team, which finished 12-1 as the Group AAA state runner-up after losing 24-21 in the last minute to Bethel, featured eight players, who went on to play at Power Five schools, including Michigan, Kansas, Alabama and North Carolina. Running back Russell Davis, who went on to play for the NFL's Pittsburgh Steelers, still holds state playoff records for most rushing yards in a game (384) and best rushing average in a game (22.4 yards per carry) when Woodbridge defeated Lee-Davis in the semifinals 35-12.
- The 1988 Potomac team, which went 10-2 and

Freedom's 2023 game-by-game results

Freedom went 14-0 this season in winning the Class 6 state title and has now won 29 consecutive games over two seasons.

| Date | Opponent | Score |
|----------|---------------------------|-------|
| Aug. 26 | at Coolidge (DC) | 48-0 |
| Aug. 31 | at Varina | 35-27 |
| Sept. 22 | vs. Gar-Field at Hylton | 60-0 |
| Sept. 29 | Forest Park | 64-6 |
| Oct. 6 | at Colgan | 66-0 |
| Oct. 13 | at Woodbridge | 63-7 |
| Oct. 20 | Potomac | 65-0 |
| Oct. 27 | Hylton | 73-0 |
| Nov. 3 | St. Michael the Archangel | 65-20 |
| Nov. 10 | Potomac | 75-7 |
| Nov. 17 | Colonial Forge | 52-16 |
| Nov. 25 | Battlefield | 50-7 |
| Dec. 2 | Madison | 55-14 |
| Dec. 9 | Highland Springs at U.Va. | 42-34 |

lost 21-3 to eventual state champion E.C. Glass in the Division 5 Northwestern Region final, had six major Division I players on its roster, including two NFL draft picks (Tommy Thigpen and Craig Novitsky).

So there you go. Much to consider. Much to debate. And much merit to whoever you choose as your favorite. David Fawcett is the sports editor for InsideNoVa. Reach him at dfawcett@insidenova.com



DAVID FAWCETT



CLASS 6 STATE CHAMPIONS



Fly, Eagles, Fly

Freedom jumped out to a 28-0 second-quarter lead in the Class 6 state championship game on Dec. 9 before Highland Springs made things interesting to get within eight points twice in the second half.

But the Eagles held on to complete their second straight undefeated season, defeating the defending Class 5 state champions 42-34 at the University of Virginia. Jeffrey Overton Jr. ran for 264 yards and two scores, and Kam Courtney added two rushing touchdowns for Freedom.

All photos by Doug Stroud | For InsideNoVa

 For more pictures, visit [INSIDENOVA.COM](https://www.insidenova.com)



Freedom players wait for head coach Darryl Overton, I to give his pre-game talk.



Freedom assistant coach Jeff Overton, left, and activities director Tom Annunziata after the awards ceremony.



Freedom's Tristan Evans-Trujillo (12) in a tender moment with his girlfriend after winning the state title.



Freedom fans cheer on their team.



Freedom's Jachai Hughes returned an interception 38 yards for a touchdown.