Anytime Benton Academy and Tri-County meet on the field is a significant event for many local football fans.

The two schools have enjoyed a spirited rivalry that began before any of the guys who will play in Friday night's game were even born.

A lot of TCA students are from the Bentonia area and other parts of southern Yazoo County, and it's not uncommon for students of both schools to live in the same neighborhoods or go to the same churches. Whenever Tri-County and Benton are scheduled to play, the game is guaranteed to be the talk of those neighborhoods that week.

But this week's game takes the classic rivalry to a whole new level. The winner plays for a state title.

For Tri-County, that's familiar territory. The Rebels are the defending Class A state champs, and they haven't lost a game this season.

Benton Academy last made it this far in 2006, when the Raiders lost to Briarfield Academy just one step away from playing for it all.

Tri-County has become a seemingly unstoppable force over the past two seasons. Running back Ryan Cothern (who I was shocked to learn is just a sophomore) looks like a man among boys at times as he leaves defenders behind. Quarterback Trey Bozeman is a serious threat both as a passer and a rusher.

The bad news for the opposition is that there are strong threats throughout the roster on both sides of the ball. Tri-County hasn't been beaten all year, and no team in Class A has even given them a scare.

Benton has come a long way since Tri-County defeated the Raiders 40-6 in week three of the season. The Raiders went on to finish second in the district and have dominated in both playoff games.

Kent Manor leads Raiders rushing game, and he is an exciting player to watch. Manor isn't the biggest guy in the conference, but if he can't run around someone, he isn't afraid to run over him. I've seen him drag much larger defenders for several yards on multiple occasions.

Quarterback Dalton Burton has great speed, and he has continued to develop all year long.

William Jones, Storm Davis and Phillip Smith will also probably have to contribute for Benton to win the game.

But no matter how well the Raiders offense performs, the defense will have to contain the TCA juggernaut for Benton to have any chance of winning.

That starts with Jason Berry, who has had some great games this year and probably delivered his best performance yet in last week's win at Deer Creek. The Raiders defense is loaded with talent, and many of the leaders are the same guys leading the offense. That's one of the things that makes it tough for Benton.

Ben Street is also a top performer, and Shelby Twiner has delivered some of the hardest hits I've seen all season. Will Guion has increasingly became a player to watch as the season has progressed.

With all of that being said, Benton Academy remains a serious underdog in Friday night's contest.

But that's the beauty of this kind of game. When you get this far into the playoffs, you're dealing with two great teams. You can throw what happened early in the season out the window. That's even more true when it's a classic rivalry match up like this one.

You'd better get there early if you plan on finding a seat.