



Running to Glory:Running backs are the talk of North Shore football this fall

Moving the Chains

Salem News

"You'll run, you'll run

You'll run and not grow weary"

- **"Drowning Man" by U2, adapted from Isaiah 40:31**

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High school running backs all over the North Shore have followed the edict above this season - with electrifying results thus far.

Everywhere you look, players lugging the leather out of the backfield are putting up huge numbers. Power backs, speed demons and slashers alike are all treating the gridiron like their personal copy of Madden 07.

To wit:

Bishop Fenwick junior **Bobby Tarr** is on pace to reach an almost unthinkable milestone for a high school back: 2,000 yards in an 11-game season. With four games of 200 or more yards already to his credit - including a career-high 257-yard performance last weekend against Salem - Tarr leads the area in yards (1,147) and touchdowns (18), and is on pace to finish the regular season with 2,102 rushing yards and 33 TDs.

But he's hardly the only back with fleet feet making headlines this fall. Beverly senior captain **Pat Bailey** rushed for 263 yards on opening day (which tied for the second-highest total of his career) and has 582 yards and seven TDs in three-and-a-half games this year, having missed the last 11/2 games with an ankle injury. He's averaging 8.6 yards per carry.

Danvers' **Colin Lynch** has excelled in the team's new Single-Wing offense, touching the ball the majority of the time and rushing for 746 yards in 123 carries with five scores. Sophomore speedster **Melikke Van Alstyne** has burst onto the scene in Salem, rushing for 606 yards and eight TDs in his first season with the varsity. That includes a career-high 225-yard, 3-TD game against Bishop Fenwick last week.

St. John's Prep has its own thoroughbred in the backfield in junior **Derek Coppola**, who has five straight 100-plus-yard games to his credit and has 765 yards on just 79 carries (an average of 9.7 yards a carry). Ipswich's 1-2 punch of **Steve Phaneuf** (718 yards, 10 TDs) and fullback **Alex McCarthy** (349 yards, 3 TDs) causes nightmares for opponents, while the Masconomet senior tandem of **Eric Bunker** (336 yards, 15 total TDs) and **Andrew Dyer** (290 yards, 3 TDs) are threats to run or catch the ball.

Jeff Jones, a senior tailback from Beverly, rushed for 1,212 yards and 16 touchdowns a year ago at North Shore Tech. A nagging hamstring injury that forced him to miss nearly five weeks starting with the preseason continues to hamper Jones; now, he's hoping to simply get healthy and contribute to the Bulldogs ground game as they make their Commonwealth Conference Small playoff push over the next month.

You can't forget the dominant Winthrop backfield of seniors **Jason Griffin** (10 TDs), powerful fullback **Matt Murray** (8 TDs) and even **Joe McDermott**; same holds true for Lynn Classical runners **Rich Dellazoppa**, **Nate Guy** and **Quavari Jackson**.

"There are a lot of teams that have great offensive balance, which is allowing these running backs to perform the way they are," said Swampscott head coach **Steve Dembowski**. "Plus, if you can throw the football effectively, that's going to open up the running game."

Even less-heralded guys are getting into the act. Beverly junior **Greg Pierce** filled in for an injured Bailey last Saturday and rushed for an eye-popping 248 yards and three touchdowns (4 total) against Danvers. In that same game, Danvers senior **Brandon Ruta** ripped off an electrifying 65-yard TD run down the left sidelines, highlighting a career-high 161-yard performance.

In many ways, Tarr is the classic high school power back; a 6-foot-1, 190-pound brute who can both run around *and* over would-be tacklers. Lining up in Fenwick's Power-I formation, Tarr hits the holes well and smashes at the defensive line, blasting through lanes and gathering speed as he breaks through the initial wall of tacklers. He's even more dangerous when he gets around the end and into the secondary, where Tarr kicks it into another gear and can outrun even the fastest of defensive backs.

"I watched the film (last Saturday morning) of our game with Fenwick, and the thing that really amazed me about Tarr is his ability to change hands with the football as he's running," said Salem head coach **Scott Connolly**. "He can be carrying the ball with one hand and stiff-arm a defender to break free of a tackle, then switch the ball from one hand to the other - all without losing any speed."

Van Alstyne's 5-foot-10, 160-pound frame may appear spindly, but on the contrary he's extremely compact and delivers a powerful punch on both sides of the football. When his number is called, usually on sweep and power plays, Van Alstyne runs hard with his head down and keeps his legs moving forward for positive yardage.

Although he does his best damage outside the tackles, Van Alstyne is not afraid of physical contact; in fact, he's one of the Witches' best defensive players and tacklers in the secondary.

"Against us (three weeks ago), Van Alstyne was able to reverse field and turn a play that would have been third-and-long into a 28-yard touchdown. We were never able to come back from that play," said Dembowski.

Following in a long line of talented St. John's Prep backs over the last two decades - from **Kevin Dwan** and **Rob Konrad** in the early 1990s to **Chris Zardas** more recently - Coppola is the latest to emerge. While his 5-foot-9, 170-pound frame is a bit smaller than the traditional Prep power back, Coppola still possesses all of the intangibles - quick feet, great hands, balance and the ability to make tacklers miss - that have become a trademark of the Eagles' marquee back.

Phaneuf is arguably the most athletic football player on the North Shore, a running back who has tremendous vertical leaping ability to match his speed and on-field decision making. McCarthy is the heart and soul of the Tigers' attack - a tough, bruising back who fights for every inch of space he gets. At Masconomet, Bunker and Dyer also feed off of each other, with Bunker a slasher who can get around people, while Dyer prefers to simply bowl them over.

"Both Eric and Andrew can switch off in our backfield, playing the R (halfback) and H (upback in the I, or slot receiver)

positions," Masco coach **Jim Pugh** said. "It makes it harder for teams to key on one guy when you have two kids with ability like that."

Moving The Chains, a column on high school football on the North Shore, will appear each Friday in The Salem News during the fall sports season. Contact sports editor Phil Stacey at 978-338-2650, or by e-mail at pstacey@ecnnews.com.

A Dandy Dozen

A capsule look at some of the best running backs in The Salem News' readership area:

Player School Yards TDs* The Skinny

Pat Bailey Beverly 582 7 Terrific breakaway speed and superior footwork

Eric Bunker Masconomet 336 9 Slashes his way through opposing defenses

Derek Coppola St. John's 765 7 Great balance and hands allow him to excel

Andrew Dyer Masconomet 290 3 Straight-up runner bowls over the competition

Jeff Jones North Shore 402 3 He'll be even better once hamstring is 100 percent

Colin Lynch Danvers 746 5 Track sprinter can run away from defenders

Alex McCarthy Ipswich 349 3 Punishing runner never stops moving his feet

Jamie O'Connell Swampscott 341 1 Takes pressure off of Big Blue's passing attack

Steve Phaneuf Ipswich 718 10 Raw athleticism is his greatest trait

Bobby Tarr Bp. Fenwick 1,147 18 Combines power and speed to perfection

Melikke Van Alstyne Salem 606 8 Tall and thin, but extremely fast and powerful

Greg Pierce Beverly 452 6 Backup tailback a star in the making

* - ***Rushing touchdowns only***

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