



## Is 200 the new 100? Four of area's elite RBs eclipse magical mark on opening weekend

**Moving The Chains** , By Phil Stacey, Sports editor

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One weekend, 83 carries and a mind-boggling 907 yards rushing.

No, it's not what you probably think - one college running back tearing up the hapless Notre Dame or Michigan defenses last week.

Rather, it was the combined rushing totals of four of the North Shore's elite running backs on the opening weekend of the high school football season.

That quintessential quartet - **Greg Pierce** of Beverly, **Melikke Van Alstyne** of Salem, **Jake Cotter** of Hamilton-Wenham and **Bobby Tarr** of Bishop Fenwick - averaged almost 11 yards a carry and, between them, scored 13 touchdowns as all of their teams won.

You'd have to figure that two of the area's other prime time backs - tailback **Derek Coppola** at St. John's Prep and Gloucester fullback **Andrew Fulford** - could have gone over 200 yards last week if their respective teams needed them to. But the Eagles (44-0 over Peabody) and Fishermen (34-14 against Winthrop) each cruised early on and didn't need the full four-quarter services of their respective standout backs.

With four RBs hitting the magical 200-yard mark on opening day (as opposed to only one last year), it begs the question: is 200 the new 100 for area runners?

Certainly, gaining 200 yards in one game is not as rare as, say, a perfect game in baseball, a five-goal game by an individual in hockey or a 45-point night by someone on the basketball court. Seven backs accomplished the feat last season, combining to hit 200 or better 16 different times. (It should be noted that the incomprehensible Tarr made up the bulk of those, rushing for over 200 yards nine times in 11 games in 2006. Only one other back, Ipswich's Steve Phaneuf, did it as many as two times).

Still, it's not as simple as calling a toss, sweep or inside handoff, giving the rock to your best runner and watch his slice and dice his way through opposing defenses. Two hundred yards in one game is an unconceivable number to most high schoolers; only the very elite backs can even dream of hitting that mark.

Each of the four running backs who broke that barrier last weekend have different styles and different stories.

Start with Beverly's Pierce, who had 250 yards and three TDs in his team's 28-13 home win over Lynn English. A senior co-captain, he is in his first year as a starter, having served as the backup ton one of Beverly's all-time best, **Pat Bailey**, for the past two seasons.

When Bailey was hurt for a couple of games last season, Pierce filled in admirably, including a 248-yard performance against Danvers. Bailey would even say that "Greg is much faster than I am," but at the time it came across as modesty.

Now? Well, Bailey wasn't an honor student for nothing. Pierce can absolutely fly, and has an acute sense of where would-be tacklers are.

Van Alstyne, the lone junior in the group, burst onto the scene as a sophomore in Salem, rushing for 1,177 yards and 12 scores. Matched up against Tarr and Bishop Fenwick last season at home, Van Alstyne turned in a career-high 225 yards rushing that night.

Now bigger and stronger (he's added about 10 pounds of muscle) but just as fast (if not faster) than a year ago, Van Alstyne chewed up 227 yards on 23 carries in last week's 26-0 shutout over Danvers. As the featured back in the Witches' explosive backfield, fans should get used to seeing him sprint for long touchdowns with regularity this fall.

Tarr is in his own category entirely. His 209 yards and three scores last week came on just a dozen carries as Fenwick shot out to a 34-0 lead over a bewildered Newton South team and cruised from there.

A big (6-foot-1, 210 pounds), bruising back who can run around and over defenders with equal parts success, Tarr is in the midst of a historic run, the likes of which may never, ever be seen again on local gridirons. And, in a rich-get-richer scenario, he's running behind a huge line that, like himself, has several Division 1-AA prospects on it.

Going back to last season, Tarr has eclipsed over 200 yards in - get ready for this - nine straight games. That's a total of 2,262 yards rushing in his last nine high school football games.

Watching Tarr run with the football is simply beyond words - if you're fortunate enough to have seen him play, it's the high school football equivalent of watching **Ted Williams** the season he hit .406 or being glued to your seat while **Bobby Orr** (pre-multiple knee operations) embarrassed foes with his speed and puck-rushing abilities.

Yes, he's that good.

Cotter is perhaps the most intriguing of the four backs. A season removed from never gaining more than 50 yards in a single game, he seemingly burst out of nowhere last week at Pentucket, running for 221 yards and five scores as the Generals won, 32-20.

A senior captain this year, the 5-foot-10, 200-pound Cotter has obviously put in the offseason work to get ready for his final year of football. Apparently, he's got some God-given gifts (speed, field sense) that should allow him to have some more big performances this fall, too.

If the first weekend of action is any indication of what North Shore running backs plan on accomplishing this fall, it's going to be a long season for defenses - and a great one for the fans.

*Moving The Chains is a column on high school football that runs each Friday during the fall season in The Salem News. Contact sports editor Phil Stacey at [pstacey@ecnnews.com](mailto:pstacey@ecnnews.com) or at 978-338-2650. For more football-related information, go to our new sports website, [www.rallynorth.net](http://www.rallynorth.net).*

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