



## Making sense of the NEC Small football race

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If, before the current high school football season began, you had Marblehead High clinching its first-ever playoff berth before their Thanksgiving Day game was even played, then we have some advice for you: quit your job, sell your home and move to Las Vegas — immediately.

As improbable as this scenario may have seemed as recently as last week, that's exactly what could happen to the Marblehead Magicians this weekend.

Sitting in first place in the Northeastern Conference Small division with a perfect 3-0 league mark, Marblehead can clinch its first league title since 1973 and head to the playoffs for the first time if the Beverly Panthers win at Winthrop on Friday night, then Marblehead wins at Saugus Saturday afternoon.

How could this be, you ask?

A Beverly win would end their NEC Small portion of the schedule at 4-1, with their lone loss coming against Marblehead two weeks ago. A win by the Magicians over Saugus on Saturday would make them 4-0 and give them the NEC Small championship.

This would hold true even if the Magicians then went on to lose to host Swampscott on Thanksgiving Day in the 100th holiday meeting between the two schools. Under this scenario (assuming Swampscott beats 1-8 Danvers this Friday night), all three teams would finish 4-1 in league play, and Marblehead would win the playoff tiebreaker.

According to Northeastern Conference secretary/treasurer Dick Baker, the NEC follows the Massachusetts Interscholastic Athletic Association (MIAA) guidelines for football tiebreakers to determine which team advances to the postseason, following a five-step process.

The first guideline is head-to-head competition. Marblehead beat Beverly (33-30); Beverly beat Swampscott (20-16); and Swampscott would have beaten Marblehead on Thanksgiving. The next two guidelines (fewest league losses, most league wins) would also be thrown out.

Then it would go to the fourth tiebreaker scenario, which eliminates any team that has participated in the Super Bowl within the last two calendar years. Swampscott, which won the Division 3 Super Bowl last December, would be eliminated.

From there, it would revert back to the first tiebreaker: head-to-head. Thus, Marblehead's victory over the Panthers would ensure its first-ever postseason berth.

This isn't to say that both Beverly and Swampscott don't have a chance to reach the playoffs, though.

Beverly, which hasn't won an NEC title since 1988 (eventually losing to Dracut in the Division 2 Super Bowl), can clinch a playoff berth by winning at Winthrop (2-2 in NEC Small play) Friday night and if Marblehead loses its final two games (at Saugus and at Swampscott). Thus, the Black-and-Orange would go to the playoffs by virtue of beating Swampscott head-to-head.

Swampscott's path back to the playoffs is a little trickier. Since they would lose any tiebreaker, the Big Blue need the Panthers to fall in Winthrop Friday night, then win both of their remaining games (at Danvers and vs. Marblehead). That would give them a 4-1 league mark, including a head-to-head triumph over their arch rivals from Marblehead.

Sound complicated? It is.

But Marblehead — with a little help from Beverly — has a chance to do what almost no one thought possible when the season began as early as this Saturday afternoon: win the NEC Small title.

#### WHO WINS THE NEC SMALL CROWN?

Marblehead wins the title if ...

Beverly beats Winthrop Friday night and the Magicians defeat Saugus Saturday,

or

Marblehead, Beverly and Swampscott finish in a three-way tie.

Beverly wins the title if ...

Beverly defeats Winthrop Friday night and Marblehead loses its final two games (at Saugus and at Swampscott).

Swampscott wins the title if ...

Beverly loses to Winthrop, and the Big Blue win both of their games (at Danvers and vs. Marblehead).

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Photos



Marblehead can clinch its first title since 1973 as early as this weekend, if it can defeat Saugus and Beverly can beat Winthrop. Staff Photo



Beverly, coming off its big win this past weekend over Swampscott, is still in the NEC Small title hunt. It can win the title if it defeats Winthrop Friday and Marblehead loses its final two games. Staff Photo



Swampscott hurt its chances at a repeat title after falling to Beverly last weekend. The Big Blue can take the title if Beverly loses to Winthrop this week and if the Big Blue can win its final two games. Staff Photo