

Hardmon's 3 TDs send Marblehead past Beverly in NEC Small title chase

By **Phil Stacey**
Sports editor

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MARBLEHEAD — Another rung on the ladder of success has been successfully scaled.

That's how the Marblehead High football team has viewed this 2009 season: a succession of challenges they must face — and scale — each week. Last night, they took a giant leap towards their first league championship in 36 seasons.

Using an extremely effective ground game over the final two quarters and some terrific blocking in the trenches, Marblehead scored its biggest victory of the season — and realistically, one of its best in the last 20+ years — by pulling away from Beverly, 39-21, before a raucous and festive crowd at Piper Field.

The victory sends Marblehead soaring to an 8-1 record, its best start since the 1986 squad also ran out to an 8-1 mark before falling on Thanksgiving Day.

More importantly, the Magicians remained unbeaten and atop the Northeastern Conference Small standings at 3-0, tied with rival Swampscott (pending the Big Blue's outcome against Saugus this afternoon).

The loss knocked Beverly (5-3 overall, 2-2 NEC Small) out of the conference championship picture.

"It had nothing to do with adjustments; it was all about the kids," said Marblehead's rookie head coach, Jim Rudloff, when asked if there were any particular changes his team made at halftime to account for their second half performance.

"These kids are in tremendous shape, they're very proud and they have huge hearts. That's what it came down to in the second half. I had nothing to do with it; it's all them and the genes their parents gave them."

Senior Marcell Hardmon broke tackles, hit the holes and kept his legs moving all night. When he was finished, he had 151 yards on 19 carries and three touchdowns, which happened to be his team's final three scores.

Quarterback Hayes Richardson — who will be battling Swampscott QB Matt Barbuzzi for the league's Player of the Year honors down the homestretch — had another masterful game at the Magicians' controls. Behind an offensive line that had plenty of push up front, he threw for 138 yards and a score while also rushing for 73 yards and another TD.

"(Richardson) is dangerous because he can throw and run equally well. You've got to defend against both all the time," said Beverly head coach Dan Bauer.

"It's a game of momentum, and in the end they had all of it. We took it (in the third quarter) when we scored (their last TD), but got they got it back quickly, and we weren't able to get it again. We tried and played hard to the end; they just answered the bell and we stalled."

Played under a brilliant orange harvest moon that hovered behind the scoreboard all night, this game was decided in the second half when Marblehead scored 25 points over the final 22 minutes while surrendering just seven. And they did so by dominating on the ground, rushing for 247 yards on 32 carries (an average of 7.7 per rush).

The hosts put up the game's final 19 points, scoring three times after Beverly had taken its last lead, 21-20, on a beautiful 43-yard touchdown pass from quarterback Mark Hannable (166 yards passing) to Steve Dubois down the right sideline. Ryan Flannery then tacked on the third of his three extra points.

Refusing to back down, the Magicians promptly took the kickoff and needed just three plays to go 69 yards for the score that put them ahead for good. Will Quigley (55 yards) and Hardmon both had consecutive 20-yard runs before Hardmon took it to paydirt from 29 yards out, slipping through a pair of would-be tacklers at the Beverly 10-yard line before breaking the goal line. The score gave Marblehead a 26-21 edge.

Hardmon then iced the game by capping off drives of 57 and 63 yards, respectively, in the final quarter with scoring runs of 2 and 4 yards. The last touchdown, sparked by a Ryan Stanojev pick of Hannable, consumed over five minutes and 14 plays.

Other scores for Marblehead included Jake Kulevich's 36-yard punt return in the first quarter; a Richardson-to-Quigley 23-yard pass in the second, and Richardson's 2-yard rump over the left side early in the third.

Beverly's early scores came courtesy of a 37-yard burst from sophomore Nick Theriault (82 yards rushing) and a 15-yard run around left end from Hannable in the second quarter, giving his team a 14-6 lead at the time.