

High School Football Game of the Week: Small game, big consequences; Beverly and Marblehead fight to keep pace in NEC Small title chase

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MARBLEHEAD — When Beverly High quarterback Mark Hannable was sidelined for his team's first three games this season with mononucleosis, he got weekly encouragement from someone you might not expect.

That would be Hayes Richardson, his QB counterpart at Marblehead High.

"We struck up a friendship last year after we played them and some of their guys came to our game against Swampscott the following week. Since then, we've talked a lot," said Hannable, who will lead his Panthers into Piper Field in Marblehead tomorrow night to face Richardson and the red-hot Magicians (7 p.m.) in a Northeastern Conference Small showdown.

"We talk probably once or twice a week during the season about how we're doing, other teams and that type of stuff. It's a good (friendship) to have; he's a quarterback, too, and if one of us has played a team already that the other guy's team is playing that week, we can talk about things that might work and those sort of things. It's cool."

Richardson, whose 7-1 team is off to its best start since the 1991 season — that is, a little bit before most of this team's players were even *born* — would tell his signal-calling counterpart that he wanted him healthy for this game, and would often wish him a speedy recovery.

"The fact that he's only been back for four games and is already playing so unbelievable shows you how good he is," Richardson said of fellow senior, Hannable. "He's gotten back to the speed of the game so quickly. Mark's really a terrific player."

Tossing the verbal bouquets aside for a moment, though, and you quickly realize their friendship will be put on hold for two-plus hours tomorrow night as both try to guide their respective teams to victory — and solidify their positions in a hotly contested NEC Small championship race.

Potent offense

Tomorrow night's battle in Marblehead features a Beverly team coming off of its most prolific shutout victory in *90 years* — a 51-0 shellacking of Saugus — against a Magicians squad that is totally focused on winning the program's first NEC football title since before President Nixon was impeached.

Host Marblehead, at 2-0 in conference play, is tied for the top spot with Swampscott and can control its own destiny by winning its final three games. Doing so would result in the Magicians winning the NEC crown and advancing to the playoffs for the first time in 36 years.

Richardson, who is extremely dangerous improvising when the pocket breaks down and defenses over-persue on him, has run for a team-high 12 touchdowns and thrown for 11 more in addition.

His main targets when he puts the ball up include Alex Haigis (246 yards, TD), Matt Perlow (230 yards, 2 TDs), hulking Evan Comeau (211 yards, 4 TDs) and Flynn McCormack (153 yards, 3 TDs). The running tandem of Will Quigley and Marcell Hardmon has combined for over 800 yards and nine scores.

"I can't remember being this excited to play a game. I'm ready to play now," Richardson said earlier this week. "It's our Senior Night, and it should be an electric atmosphere."

Beverly, at 2-1 in the NEC Small (5-2 overall), is also in charge of its own fortunes. If the Panthers can go on the road and beat not only Marblehead tomorrow night but also prevail at Swampscott next Saturday, they would be crowned champions.

"These are must-win games for us. It's basically do-or-die," Hannable said bluntly. "Everything's on the line; we just have to take care of business and worry about ourselves."

Marblehead has scored 179 points in its last five games, an average of almost 36 per game. The Magicians have already secured themselves of back-to-back winning seasons for the first time since 1991-92.

To put the Magicians' recent spell of success in its proper perspective, consider this: they have won 13 games since the start of last season, with the chance for three (or more) victories this fall. In an eight-year span from 2000-07, they won a grand total of 19 games.

Critics will point to the fact that Marblehead has beaten only two teams with winning records this year: Pentucket (27-2) and Danvers last week (42-20).

Looking to make a run for it

Beverly has an electric offense of its own; their shellacking of Saugus last week is supplanted only by the Panthers' 65-0 thrashing of Lynn English back in 1919.

Hannable has completed nearly two-thirds of his passes (42 of 68) for 698 yards and nine TDs. Steve Dubois (24 catches, 349 yards and 6 TDs), Justin Marrs (22-401-7), Curtis Manuel (13-

220-1, but who miss last week's game with an injury), Mark Theriault (12-51) and Dylan Terry (10-94) make up arguably Beverly's best-ever group of pass catching receivers.

Looking to get its ground game untracked is key for Beverly as the calendar turns to November. Other than Terry and his 415 yards on 80 carries (including 3 TDs), the ground game has not developed the consistency the Orange-and-Black would like.

As is the case in any big game, there are subplots heading in to tomorrow's clash. Under a similar scenario a year ago, Marblehead went into Hurd Stadium in Beverly, scored the game's first 21 points and stunned the heavily favored Panthers, 33-30.

Add to that Magicians' first year coach Jim Rudloff was a member of the Beverly High coaching staff for several years under head man Dan Bauer, and there's plenty of familiarity between the two squads.

"Last year's game, it definitely wasn't the way we wanted it to go," said Hannable. "Ever since that game, we've talked about it and want to make sure it doesn't happen again (tomorrow)."

In the same vein, Richardson said he and his teammates are excited to be playing meaningful games in November, games that not only will determine if they're still playing football come December, but games they'll also remember the rest of their lives.

"As much as I want to say no, it has come up," said Richardson, when asked if he and his teammates dream of what it'd be like to win the school's first NEC crown since 1973.

"The (MHS football) teams we watched and idolized as youth kids, they just didn't have the numbers. It's weird in a way being the team that was able to turn it around; it's a really great feeling, actually.

"But we haven't done anything yet," Richardson said with emphasis. "We won't be satisfied with anything but a league title."

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