

Moving The Chains high school football column: Marblehead may have a big say in NEC Small race

By Mike Grenier
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Jim Rudloff didn't make up Marblehead High's football schedule this season; it was set in stone when the first-year head coach got there.

Even allowing for a period of adjustment by the players, he'd have to concede there were winnable games on the front side of the schedule. But in getting off to a 3-1 start, Marblehead hasn't just won — it has dominated Pentucket (27-2), Ipswich (30-0) and Georgetown (42-0).

The Magicians, who play at Revere tonight, need not apologize for such convincing victories. They're doing exactly what they need to do: building confidence before they get into the meat of their schedule in the Northeastern Conference Small division.

"With the way the NEC is built right now, there are two realities," said Rudloff, whose team suffered its lone setback against Lynn Classical, 28-15. "One thing you have to recognize is that you have a second season (against divisional foes). Then there's the immediate reality that if you lose one game, it can set off a chain reaction that you can't stop.

"I'm a firm believer that winning is contagious and losing is contagious. We're trying to avoid (a losing streak)."

Last year Marblehead put together its first winning season (6-5) since 1992, and would like to think it will be a contender for the NEC Small title again this season.

Rudloff inherited an experienced quarterback in senior Hayes Richardson, who's been as good as advertised, throwing for 515 yards and seven touchdowns. Will Quigley (45 carries, 270 yards) has paced the running game, and the defense, led by linebackers Evan Comeau, Matt Evans,

Matt O'Neil and Josh Freidland ("a huge surprise," said Rudloff), has yielded an average of just 7.5 points.

However, the Magicians will have to show they can do it against NEC Small opponents, starting with Saugus in a couple of weeks. The other four divisional foes (Danvers, Swampscott, Beverly and Winthrop) have a combined record of 10-5.

"The kids are enjoying everyone talking about Swampscott, Beverly and Winthrop," said Rudloff. "We're enjoying the fact that we get ignored and we'd like to keep it that way. There's no chest thumping on our part, but everyone is quietly smiling.

"Still, with the history we have at Marblehead, we shouldn't be talking until we prove we are the best. I guess we'll know on Nov. 27 (after the Swampscott game)."

Richardson is as excited as anyone about the team's potential, but he doesn't want to look too far down the road.

"It would be awesome to win (the NEC Small), but that's an afterthought," said Richardson. "Right now we're thinking about Revere. They're a great group of athletes and they're much better than their (1-3) record. We have to work really hard to keep this thing going because Revere is capable of an upset."

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Ipswich coach Ted Flaherty isn't ignoring the obvious when he doesn't mention his team's 0-4 record and the fact that the Tigers haven't scored a single point this season. The way he sees it, he's just ignoring the negative.

There's no denying that the numbers have been ugly for the Tigers, who've been outscored 133-0 in losses to North Reading, Marblehead, Newburyport and Triton. Since winning the Division 3A Super Bowl over Cape Cod Tech under Flaherty in 2006, Ipswich has dropped 25 consecutive games.

If Ipswich dwelled on all of that negative-type pressure, it would be difficult — if not impossible — to get through the rest of the season. The Tigers have seven games remaining, including tomorrow's Cape Ann League contest at Pentucket.

"It's too overwhelming to look at this as the third (straight) year of not winning a game and not scoring points," said Flaherty. "Those are such awful things to think about, and we don't have time for it. We try to keep our practices fast paced. There are so many things for us to work on every day that we can't spend time on the (bad) stuff.

"We're physically overmatched quite frequently," he added. "We battle and play hard, but we don't have the horses — or at least not all 11 of them."

So what happens if they're lacking enough horses in every game? Does it mean Ipswich is in a hopeless situation?

That's hardly the case, said Flaherty. The players have shown no signs of packing it in. The concentration and the progress has to occur in practice. That's the point of origin, and the Tigers haven't lost sight of it.

"If you came to our practices, you wouldn't know we were losing," said Flaherty. "We do extra stuff (before and after practice). It's a full four hours. When you don't have success, you usually see hemming and hawing, but we don't get any of that. If they sensed any (discouragement) from us (coaches), they would fall apart. We can't have any of that.

"Here's what we do. We see mistakes on film and work on them. It's all about practicing better. If we don't make those mistakes, is it possible for us to win a game? The answer is yes."

Ipswich has standouts in terms of effort and leadership. James Riel, who plays cornerback and running back, is one of them. Ed Natti, an undersized guard, is another, said Flaherty.

Players aren't abandoning Ipswich; there are 60 kids in the program, counting the freshmen. They shouldn't be ridiculed for sticking together in the toughest of times.

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When it comes to player personnel, there are few things that are more disheartening to a coach than to have a dedicated senior struggling through injuries.

Hamilton-Wenham is going through that with quarterback Andy Duval, who's been in and out of the lineup. Duval is 14-for-28 passing for 173 yards in limited action. To make matters worse, the Generals are off to an 0-4 start.

"He's having a tough road," Hamilton-Wenham coach Andrew Morency said after Monday's 30-0 loss to Bishop Fenwick. "He's got nagging injuries; two bad ankles right now. What Andy does on a daily basis is all about trying to get healthier. I feel for him because the injuries are definitely having an impact on his senior season."

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Great news for the Beverly High football team: senior quarterback Mark Hannable has medical clearance and is likely to get some playing time tonight against Lynn Classical at Manning Field. Hannable has missed the team's first three games with mononucleosis. Joe Wioncek, who has done a terrific job stepping in, hitting on 41 of 73 passes for 459 yards and four touchdowns, remains the starter.

Tonight's game looms as a big one for the 2-1 Panthers, who need to bounce back from last week's 41-0 trouncing by Gloucester.

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Moving the Chains, a column on North Shore high school football, appears every Friday during the season in The Salem News. To reach Mike Grenier, e-mail mgrenier@salemnews.com or call 978-338-2676.

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