

Passing Fancy: QBs will the key in stacked NEC Small

By Matt Williams
staff wrtier

October 22, 2009 12:34 am

There are usually one or two teams capable of winning a six-team league like the Northeastern Conference's Small division. Sometimes even three.

But five? This could be unprecedented.

With league play getting underway in earnest this weekend, it's anybody's game in the NEC Small. Defending champion Swampscott (4-2) looks good, but so do Marblehead (5-1) and Danvers (4-2). Beverly (3-2) has plenty of talent and Winthrop (3-3) is always tough.

Most observers wouldn't be shocked if any one of the five clubs earns the league's playoff berth — and we probably won't know which one until the ice chunks settle on Marblehead and Swampscott's 101st Thanksgiving Day meeting.

"You know, our biggest rivalry is Gloucester on Thanksgiving but playing Beverly, Swampscott and Marblehead — it feels like it's Thanksgiving every Friday night," said Danvers quarterback and co-captain Greg Ladd. "In years past this league's been more top heavy but this is anyone's league. It's exciting already."

The Falcons may have a leg up with a league opening win over Beverly last week, but each school knows this stretch run will be a dogfight. It'll be difficult for anyone to finish the NEC Small slate 5-0.

"We still feel like we can control our own destiny," said Beverly QB Mark Hannable. "If we do our jobs (i.e., win out), everything else will take care of itself."

What sets these teams apart — and what will eventually separate them from each other — is quarterback play. Each team has a veteran under center: Ladd, Hannable of Beverly, Hayes Richardson of Marblehead, Will Milano of Winthrop and Matt Barbuzzi of Swampscott. Collectively, it's as strong a group of signal callers as you'll find.

"I know Hannable's a very good quarterback, Ladd makes good decisions, Hayes is a good one and Winthrop's is too," said Barbuzzi. "As teams, I see it that whoever shows up and plays the best on a given night could win it."

The Big Blue are known as a passing team and to that end Barbuzzi boasts the most impressive numbers of the bunch: 1,196 yards, 11 TDs against one interception and an astronomical NFL passer rating of 114.7.

But Beverly and Marblehead have both adopted the spread and with Hannable (296 yards, 3 TDs in just two games) and Richardson (679 yards, 9 TDs) in their second seasons in the system, the Panthers and Magicians are dangerous offensively.

"We were talking about that the other night after practice — when we played Lynn English, Beverly and Marblehead three years ago they were all power-I running teams. Now all three are spread and every team has a guy who can lead it," said Ladd, who is called on to throw the least of the bunch in Danvers' wing-T attack.

Still, the fact that backs like Eric Burgos and Clinton Lutz are producing in the run game for Danvers means Ladd is finding more open passing lanes and more defenses biting on his play-fake.

"This year we're catching guys off guard and guys are open because teams are stacked up to stop the run," said Ladd, a three-year starter who's helped engineer the biggest turnaround on the North Shore. Danvers was 1-10 last year.

The spread in Swampscott is also benefiting from the running game, as for the first time in a long time the Big Blue are seeing opponents put six or seven men in the box. They have no choice if they want to contain Kyle Shonio, but that pick-your-poison defensive approach makes life way too easy for Barbuzzi.

"I love it. It helps me out a lot if there's a lot of defenders up," said Barbuzzi. "Whatever the defense is giving us that's what I feel like I have to do."

The newest members of the spread club, Marblehead and Beverly, have a common thread in coach Jim Rudloff, who was a Beverly assistant last year. Both squads are looking for a balance of pass run; Marblehead's Richardson has run for six TDs and the dual threat of Will Quigley and Marcel Hardmon is key.

The Panthers, with captain Dylan Terry in the backfield and Hannable getting comfortable after missing a month with an illness, are looking for that kind of balance.

"The running game hasn't been where we want it to be," said Hannable. "As the season goes, we want to get closer to a 50-50 mix."

Missing the start of year has Hannable behind the statistical battle with his signal calling compatriots. It hurts a bit — but the Panther gunslinger knows that ultimately winning the war of the league title is most important.

"A lot of teams are going spread and even if they're not they're throwing more. As a quarterback that's the best thing you can wish for," Hannable said. "You want what's best for your team first but at the same time you like being up there with the top guys (statistically). It's in the back of my head."

The second time around has been a bit more difficult for the Panthers and Magicians as defenses adjust to their tendencies. But running the set offensively also helps them prepare for it on defense.

"People seem to have liked our success in the spread. All the teams have their own version, though, and run it the best way they can," said Barbuzzi.

The Big Blue host upstart Danvers at Blocksidge Field Saturday in what could be considered the game of the week. But Beverly also hosts Winthrop looking to bounce back and hold off a potent Vikings offense led by Milano.

Saugus is a factor, as well, and faces Marblehead tomorrow night. The rest of the league knows an off-night against the feisty Sachems could be curtains.

It's league play the rest of the way with the exception of NEC Large Turkey Day rivalries (Peabody vs. Saugus, Danvers vs. Gloucester, Beverly vs. Salem). The structure that allows all non-league games before five straight games that "matter" adds flair to an already white-hot race.

"It's not really a preseason, but it's kind of it. It gives us time to get on track and work out the kinks," said Barbuzzi.

In a league as tight as the NEC Small, kinks are one thing teams can ill afford. With quarterbacks like these, they shouldn't have to worry much.

Copyright © 1999-2008 cnhi, inc.