

Wioncek has support from both sides of the rivalry

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The North Shore's premier Thanksgiving football rivalry unfolds for the 111th time this morning at Bertram Field in Salem, and Beverly High's Joe Wioncek finds himself in a unique position this holiday morning.

Imagine being No. 1 in the hearts of two families on opposite sides in the revered Beverly vs. Salem rivalry?

The 17-year-old junior receiver and starting outside linebacker is the grandson of Salem High's illustrious retired athletic director, Paul Higgins, and has three uncles who captained Witches' football teams: Tom in 1981, Jimmy in 1983 and Mark in 1987.

Joe Wioncek, his father, was a guard on Salem's 1974 Salem Super Bowl team and married the only Higgins daughter, Mary Ellen, who starred in field hockey, track and swimming at Salem High. She's now an aide in the Beverly school system.

Obviously, the Wioncek family will be seated on the Panther side of Bertram Field today.

Tom and Mark Higgins (the principal of the Witchcraft Heights elementary school in Salem), will be in attendance on the press box side (i.e., home stands). Jimmy, an investment banker in New York City, will not make it. Paul and Janice Higgins may attend if today's projected mild weather forecast holds up.

Wioncek got to play in the 2008 turkey tussle as a sophomore, but in a limited capacity on special teams punt coverage.

"It's such a significant experience to play on Thanksgiving, and we're happy for Joe that he's got a bigger role (this year)," Uncle Mark said. "The friendships (between the two teams) you make are endless. Andrew Morency and Bernie Stavis are former Beverly players, good guys, that I'm friendly with."

Wioncek is absolutely sure his Salem grandparents and uncles will be rooting for him, no matter where they're located.

He's right.

"We want Joey to have a terrific game. Ideally, he'll play great and Salem will win by one point," Uncle Mark said. "When the play is run to Joey's side, we hope he makes the stop. We're hoping Salem will choose to run the other side and be successful."

Wioncek realizes today is a big day for everyone in his family on *both* sides of this historic rivalry.

"My grandparents are from Salem, but they've been to so many of my games in Little League, Pop Warner and varsity baseball that they know a lot of people here. They've loved being at my games," Wioncek said. "They and my uncles and my own family have been great in their support. I've heard about the Beverly-Salem game since I was a little kid."

Beverly head coach Dan Bauer, who is 5-1 in the series, calls Wioncek the ultimate team player.

Panthers' QB Mark Hannable simply refers to Wioncek as a great athlete.

"Let me see how many positions he's played . . . wide receiver, tight end, tailback and quarterback on offense, and cornerback and both inside and outside linebacker on defense. That's seven spots," said Hannable. "Think about that in terms of his value."

Hannable can deeply appreciate Wioncek's baseball skills, too. Wioncek has started at catcher since his freshman season, with Hannable patrolling center field.

"He's probably the best catcher in the conference . . . in the state of Massachusetts," Hannable said.

Wioncek is often cited for his natural skills and ability to perform under pressure.

He did not take a single varsity snap as a quarterback a year ago, but when Hannable went down in the preseason with mononucleosis this fall, Wioncek stepped up to play QB and performed admirably. HE piloted wins over Melrose (25-6) and Lynn English (24-20) before Gloucester put a 41-0 hurtING on the Panthers.

Wioncek hooked up with Justin Marrs with 13 seconds left for the game-wnning pass against Lynn English and threw for four touchdowns and 463 yards until Hannable returned.

"I was glad to play, but it's Mark's job. He's worked hard to be the QB," Wioncek said.

Bauer said that Wioncek has mentioned the service academies, but Joe's love and favorite sport is baseball, and his goal is play at the Division 1 level. "After college? Well, my first goal is D-1, and I'll stay with that for now, Wioncek said.

Panthers varsity baseball coach Dave Wilbur (also an assistant for the football program) is extremely high on Wioncek, who has a 4.07 grade point average and ranks in the top 20 percent of the junior class.

As a freshman for Wilbur's Panthers, Wioncek hit .436 (24 for 55) with 10 RBIs and 16 runs scored. His sophomore season was even better: .461, a .621 on-base percentage, 29 RBIs and 31 runs scored.

"I've watched Joe from Little League since my son was the same age. He's one of the more focused and driven kids I've seen. He's all business when it comes to sports or the classroom," Wilbur said. "We're dealing with a highly-intelligent young man, an honor student who is mature and a student-athlete in the true sense of the term.

"If you've got someone in the program like him, he makes everyone around him look better."

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