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Game of the Week: Beverly, Marblehead clash as playoff picture becomes clearer

BY Matt Williams
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No matter who wins tonight's Northeastern Conference/Cape Ann League Tier 2 battle between Beverly and Marblehead, the league's champion and playoff representative won't be official until Thanksgiving.

But that hardly means that this 79th meeting between the Panthers and Magicians won't have a big impact on the chase.

Marblehead, which hosts tonight's game at Piper Field (7 p.m.), is 6-2 and unbeaten in the league play at 3-0. The Magicians control their own destiny; win their next two games, tonight then against Swampscott (8-1, 3-0) and they're going to the postseason.

For Beverly, the 2010 Super Bowl champs, the road is a bit murkier. The Panthers are 6-3, 2-1 in league play and would need to beat Marblehead, hope the Magicians knock off the Big Blue and wait for the tie-breaking points allowed to come in.

For the players on both sides, the focus tonight has to be on making plays, not on playoff permutations.

"We can't control what other people do, just ourselves," said Beverly head coach Dan Bauer. "We have to put that past us and we can't allow it to impact our preparation."

Marblehead and Beverly are both physical football teams that like to run the ball, albeit in different ways. The Panthers' Wing-T attack uses as many as five ballcarriers and can hurt you in a multitude of ways — with quick hitters, cutbacks and punishing runs up the middle.

Brendan Flaherty, Kenny Pierce, Nick Theriault and Dom Abate have combined for 2,184 yards rushing so far in 2011 and together they average 7.3 yards per carry. That kind of production will gash a defense and put the offense in favorable short yardage situations all night — something Marblehead will look to prevent.

"Marblehead is stout up front. Their linebackers really fly to the ball and they're disciplined," said Bauer. "Their front seven can really present some problems."

Shutting down Beverly is easier said than done, however. The Panthers average 27.6 points per game and have surpassed 30 points in a game six times. Their point total could be a key to victory — Beverly hasn't lost when scoring 14 or more. Conversely, Marblehead hasn't won a game when giving up more than 20 points.

Will Quigley, who has amassed 2,773 career rushing yards over the last three seasons, carries the load for Marblehead. He's the Magicians' all-time leading scorer and can hurt a defense running, catching passes and in the return game.

"Quigley is a heck of a player and certainly he's somebody who will get a lot of touches in the game," said Bauer. "He can run inside and outside and Marblehead will do some things with motion to get you spread out."

The Magicians have a disciplined offensive line and their multiple spread formations can create running lanes for both Quigley and QB Ian Maag. Beverly defensive linemen Tyler Suggs and Mike Dooling and linebackers Mark Giles and Nick Quartarone hold the key to shutting down Marblehead; whichever team wins at the point of attack should be on their way to victory.

Marblehead, be it with Maag or Gus Percy at QB, can throw the ball, too. The pair have combined for 965 yards passing and have a myriad of targets: Quigley, Jeremy Gillis, Brian Daly, Bing Bial, Colton Dana and Phil Coughlin have all caught at least seven passes.

The beauty of the NEC/CAL tiered arrangement is that every game at the tail end of a season matters, but the challenge is finding a way to rise to the occasion emotionally week after week. Both Beverly and Marblehead are facing that tonight.

"It's been a good week of preparation coming off a very physical and emotional game (against Swamscott," said Bauer. "The kids are ready to go and they have a lot of football left in them."

Beverly (6-3) at Marblehead (6-2)

When: Tonight, 7 p.m.

Where: Piper Field in Marblehead

All-time series: Beverly leads, 45-29-4

Keys to the game: The Panthers have been tough against the run most of the season, but how will they fare against the explosive Will Quigley? The Magicians, meanwhile, have a pretty good front seven and will certainly be tested by Beverly's Wing-T attack. Which defensive line digs in its heels and stops the run? The one that does will likely play for the winning side.

Did you know?: Will Quigley and Brendan Flaherty are two of the best running backs North of Boston, but did you know they both also lead their teams in receiving yards? Their ability to get open and make plays in the passing game could be a key tonight.