

# SalemNews.com, Salem, MA

*November 3, 2011*

## High School Football Game of the Week: It's Showtime

### Heavily anticipated Beverly/Swampscott showdown set for Saturday

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Football fans around America have been anxiously awaiting Saturday's college football matchup between the top two teams in the country: Alabama and LSU.

But pigskin patrons around the North Shore have had Nov. 5 marked on their calendars for a long time now for a totally different reason.

The most anticipated game of the 2011 high school regular season to date will kick off at 2:30 p.m. at fabled Hurd Stadium on Saturday as 7-1 Swampscott and 6-2 Beverly square off in a clash of Tier 2 titans.

Both teams come into Saturday's contest unbeaten (2-0) in league play with just three games remaining. This will also be the final home game of the season for the host Panthers.

Reigning Northeastern Conference MVP Mike Walsh commands the prolific Swampscott offense as a multi-threat quarterback. Meanwhile, the NEC's reigning Defensive MVP, Mark Giles, anchors a Beverly linebacking core that has helped the Panthers shut out Danvers, Peabody and hold Winthrop to just seven points this season.

The host Panthers' strength and depth across the board really stand out to Swampscott skipper Steve Dembowski.

"I think right off the bat they have a very big D-line that is very active and they play multiple fronts. The linebackers all have experience and play very, very well. They have talent everywhere, and they can grind you down with that run game," Dembowski said.

"They have the ability to jump on people early offensively, then eat 'em up on defense if they're able to build a lead. They're a very talented group of kids who provide a challenge to us at every position."

The Swampscott offense, meanwhile, has scored under 20 points just once this fall, that coming in its only loss (at Malden). The Big Blue average 30.8 points a game, but haven't tasted victory on the Hurd turf since 2004.

Better than a year ago

If Dembowski is the architect behind the vaunted Swampscott spread offense, then this season Walsh is his master craftsman. The Brown University-bound senior signal caller has thrown for 1,621 yards and 21 touchdowns to go with only five interceptions.

"Mike certainly has a better understanding of the offense and is taking better care of football this year (his second as a starting QB). And our receiving crew is more balanced, more consistent, and it's something I attribute to all the work they did in the summer," said Dembowski, who is 7-5 all time against Beverly and 4-4 against current Panthers head coach Dan Bauer.

"The O-line has played very well, too. We've done a lot of things better (than last year) and have been more balanced. I feel like we are probably a better team right now than a year ago. Hopefully, we can score some points Saturday and take some pressure off our defense."

An indication of the balance Dembowski spoke of: Walsh leads the Big Blue in rushing with 680 yards on 95 carries, 11 of which he has taken to the end zone. A.J. Baker, Rich Sullivan and Nick Mennino have been a big part of Swampscott's success at receiver, and each possess the type of big-play potential that can keep opposing coaches up at night.

Big plays caged the Panthers in a loss to Concord-Carlisle the first week of the season — something Bauer and Beverly fans alike have not forgotten.

"They always run the ball well," Bauer said of Swampscott. "They can throw it and have big play capability with their receivers, as seen in the last couple weeks."

Grind them down

Bauer talked about what his defense needs to do to slow down Swampscott.

"It's like anything on defense; you have to stop the run first. And that's easier said than done (against Swampscott) because the QB is an extra back, not always accounted for in the spread," he said. "It's important to stop the run — or at least contain it the best we can and really work hard on not giving up the big play."

Offensively, Beverly will look to continue feeding its four-headed monster in the backfield as Kenny Pierce (747 yards), Dom Abate (473 yards), Brendan Flaherty (452 yards) and Jake Theriault (291 yards) have combined for 25 rushing touchdowns and also have caught the only three passing touchdowns quarterback Dave Rollins has thrown.

"I think it's the balance of their backs carrying the ball and the way they sprinkle in the pass. They use a variety of formations, motions and shifts to get you off your game, and they have talented players who are well-coached. That itself is enough to cause a headache," Dembowski said.

"Obviously, our inner eight guys have to win some 1-on-1 battles (defensively), and you have to take away their bread-and-butter stuff. We need to be as sound defensively as we can and tackle well.

Their back are so good at breaking tackles and getting yards after contact; we have to try and eliminate that."

Bauer feels that Swampscott's defense is highly underated. "They play good D and that doesn't always get talked about," he said. "Their linebackers run well to the ball and the free safety robs in there and gets to the ball fast. They have good team speed, they stay home and follow their responsibilities."

SWAMPSCOTT (7-1) AT BEVERLY (6-2)

When: Saturday, 2:30 p.m.

Where: Hurd Stadium

All-time series: Beverly leads, 25-20-1

Keys to the game: How will the Beverly secondary and linebackers handle the Swampscott receivers? Can Beverly generate enough pressure to make Swampscott QB Mike Walsh uncomfortable? Will the Big Blue be able to match up defensively with the pick-your-poison nature of the Beverly backfield?

Did you know: Beverly is the only team in the NEC that Swampscott's seniors have not beaten at least once.