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Moving The Chains high school football column: Prep won't let early losses define their season

By Dan Harrison
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Early adversity can be detrimental to a callow football locker room.

Or, it can be the first big step in the maturation process.

When St. John's Prep senior quarterback Tommy Gaudet went down with a season-ending injury against Dracut on opening weekend, the Eagles went on to lose their first three games and many wrote off coach Jim O'Leary's squad as one struggling in the wake of a 2010 Super Bowl loss.

But O'Leary knew his team wasn't floundering at all. Packed with first-year starters, especially on the offensive line, the Eagles simply needed game experience.

Now that its players have some games under their belts — and more importantly, back-to-back wins over Brockton and St. John's Shrewsbury, St. John's Prep (2-3) is expecting to do more than just hang tough when it begins Catholic Conference play next week against Catholic Memorial.

"Our first two games we lost by a few points, one of them in overtime, so we knew we had a pretty good football team," explained O'Leary, whose Eagles have rushed for a combined 481 yards the last two games. "We're as young as we've ever been, and now that half the season's gone we're starting to mature. People have grown and really come along."

A big part of the Prep's recent recipe for success has been sophomore running back Jon Thomas, who churned out 343 yards and five touchdowns in the two wins. Thomas isn't playing both sides of the ball, so the burgeoning back can handle a heavy load (87 carries already this season).

O'Leary prefers diversity in the running game, so the play of Alex Moore (36 carries for 155 yards) could be big going forward.

"We're getting to the point where we can two-platoon people like we like to. You can't go through the grind of our schedule with only 18-20 players; you have to play 22-25 players," said O'Leary.

"We needed people to mature and they are; the kicker is we need to continue to keep doing that. You don't want your best game to be Week 5 against Shrewsbury."

Jack Sharrio has stepped under center nicely in replace of Gaudet. Last week he threw the Eagles' first touchdown pass of the season to put the Prep ahead early.

The Prep is throwing the ball on about 25 percent of their offensive plays, which is unusually high for the ground-and-pound style the Eagles play. But that's because Sharrio is completing a hair under 60 percent of his passes and guys like Moore and Lucas Bavaro (who caught Sharrio's TD pass) have proven they can go up and get the ball.

O'Leary spoke of the importance of the Eagles passing game.

"It sends message (to the other team) that they have to defend the whole field. People try to put eight, sometimes 10 people in the box. The only way to prevent that is to throw the ball," said O'Leary. "Throwing 25 percent is a great mix for us, but it has to be effective. If you only throw 10-15 times a game, you need complete 8-12 of them and have them be big plays."

Even if the Eagles take a step back offensively at some point, O'Leary can rely on his defense to keep opposing teams out of the end zone and, more importantly, come up with the big play.

The Eagles have a very skilled secondary with guys like Moore and Gerald Kahari, who broke out last week with three of the Prep's four interceptions against Shrewsbury. The Eagles also recovered a pair of fumbles and took two of those INT's for scores, but both were called back on block-in-the-back penalties.

Owen Lynch and Tucker Mathers can put the heat on opposing quarterbacks coming off the edge, while interior defensive lineman Kyle Kaneb has been the best down lineman for O'Leary thus far.

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It's been a trying season for coach Scott Connolly's Witches, but Salem High may have found a silver lining in last weekend's 35-14 loss to Lynn English. Senior back Davis Walsh showed signs of breaking out for the Witches by taking eight carries for 78 yards, including a 49-yard touchdown scamper.

On the play just before his touchdown, Davis — who runs like a steamroller with a turbo boost — had a 60-yard run down to the Bulldog 1-yard line (a play that was called back for a wide receiver holding call that came 20 yards downfield).

"That's a kid who has a motor that doesn't stop; he just keeps running and running," said Connolly. "To run 60 yards and then have it brought back, and to run it again (49 yards) the next play; that's pretty special. But that's Davis; that's his heart and that's what he does.

"He goes 100 miles an hour all the time, whether he's on offense or defense (at linebacker). He's a tough, tough kid — and a kid you love to coach."

Salem QB Christian Dunston continues to look athletically spectacular in spots but needs to be more consistent in his decision making. With big-play potential in both his arm and legs, Dunston showed just how dangerous he can be on the last play of the first half against English. Trailing 14-0,

Dunston wiggled his way out of the pocket and, rolling to his right, connected with Ben Kapnis along the back sideline in the end zone for an 18-yard touchdown strike.

The junior, who plays safety, added a pair of interceptions on overthrows by Bulldog quarterback Jermaine Kelly.

The Witches have the potential to supplement some consistent offensive production with big scoring plays. Look for Salem to make some noise in Tier 2 league play if the Witches can limit penalties and put forth a full four-quarter effort.

It may take a few weeks, though, especially since Salem hosts powerful Swampscott tonight (7 p.m.). The Big Blue will be hungry for a win after suffering their first loss of the season in Malden last Saturday.

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Junior Brendan Flaherty of Beverly gets a lot of headlines for his ability to run the football, but in one of the few highlights in his team's home loss to Masconomet last weekend, the junior back showed the depths of his dexterity.

On Beverly's first drive against the Chieftains, Flaherty ran a down and out, but QB Dave Rollins misfired slightly and the ball sailed towards the defensive back in coverage. What should have been an interception turned into a 6-yard reception for the Panthers as Flaherty showed the presence of mind (and hand-eye coordination) to rip the ball out of the defender's hands right before both players came crashing to the ground.

It wasn't the first time Flaherty's hands were on display in such a pass-grabbing manner. In last year's Division 3 Super Bowl win over Somerset High, Flaherty had a spectacular fourth down touchdown grab on a jump ball.

The Panthers may need more big plays like that through the air if other teams are able to duplicate what Masconomet did defensively: namely, shutting down the Beverly's four-headed rushing attack of captain Nick Theriault as well as juniors Kenny Pierce, Dom Abate and Flaherty.

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Hamilton-Wenham junior signal-caller Trevor Lyons had a career day last Saturday, rushing for 287 yards and five first half touchdowns as the Generals gashed Bishop Fenwick for 490 yards in the run game. Lyons and senior running back Elliot Burr have combined for 1063 rushing yards and 12 touchdowns on the ground through five games.

The behemoth offensive line that leads the way for H-W's smash-and-dash attack has been a force through the first half of the season as the squad is averaging 6.9 yards a carry.

Junior Steve Turpin (168 yards on four carries) came on strong against Fenwick with 66 and 97-yard touchdown runs. He could prove to be a viable third option on the ground if the workload gets to be too much for Burr, who already has 101 carries and also plays linebacker defensively.

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When they play for the 90th time tonight, the Marblehead football team has a chance to beat host Gloucester for the first time since 1991. That's when the Magicians handed the Fishermen their only Northeastern Conference loss in a Super Bowl winning season.

The Fish currently hold a 16-game unbeaten streak (1992-2007) in the series, yet Marblehead still leads the all-time series 44-40-5.

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Moving The Chains is a column on North Shore high school football that runs each Friday during the fall sports season. Contact staff writer Dan Harrison at dharrison@saalemnews.com, by phone at 978-338-2654 and follow him on Twitter: [@DanHarrison_SN](https://twitter.com/DanHarrison_SN).