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Moving the Chains: Five to Watch in new NEC/CAL

Moving the Chains Matt Jenkins

Change swept through the football landscape in the offseason with the creation of the multi-tiered Northeastern Conference/Cape Ann League mega-conference, which features 24 teams spread out over four divisions.

Some familiar foes will continue rivalries with titles on the line (notably Tier 2 with Beverly, Salem, Danvers, Gloucester, Marblehead and Swampscott), while other title hunts will look very different this fall (how about Tier 1 with Masconomet and North Andover lining up against Peabody, Lynn Classical, Lynn English and Revere?).

No matter how different things look, however, this is still football and the players ultimately decide who wins.

So with that in mind, here are five players to watch who will undoubtedly have something to say about who captures titles in Tiers 1 and 2 this fall:

5. D.J. HENRICK, Peabody Sr. FB/ILB: Perhaps overshadowed on the offensive side of the ball by his flashy backfield mate Nat Gaye, the powerful Henrick takes a backseat to no one on defense. The Tanners will run a new-look 4-3 defense this fall and Henrick will be firmly positioned in the middle, calling the shots, delivering the hits and making the plays.

Peabody head coach Scott Wlasuk envisions Henrick as a defensive game-changer this fall, the type who has a nose for the football and routinely makes 10 to 15 tackles a game.

Coaches around the newly organized NEC/CAL are already preparing to deal with Henrick. The senior captain can expect to be a target for opposing blockers on every play.

Henrick isn't a slouch offensively, either. He scored four rushing touchdowns last year, but his primary job when Peabody has the ball is to help open holes for Gaye and fellow back Brady Doyle.

4. BRENDAN FLAHERTY, Beverly Jr. RB/DB: There may not be a more gifted running back on the North Shore. Flaherty has good size for a high school running back (6-foot-1, 180 pounds) and blazing speed, but his sophomore season was limited due to a few nagging injuries. As long as Flaherty can stay healthy, the Panthers have a chance to compete for the NEC/CAL Tier 2 title.

Even with injuries that limited his touches early last season, Flaherty still found a way to accumulate 1,274 rushing yards and 16 touchdowns during Beverly's run to a Division 3A Super Bowl championship. And the Panthers' Wing T offense, which is designed to keep defenses

guessing, will function far better with Flaherty, senior Nick Theriault and junior Kenny Pierce all in the lineup together (not to mention new face Dom Abate).

3. WILL QUIGLEY, Marblehead, Sr. RB/DB: The North Shore's top returning running back stat-wise, Quigley brings experience, explosion and the ability to be a difference-maker for the Magicians as they try to climb to the top of the NEC/CAL Tier 2.

As the focal point of Marblehead's offense a year ago, Quigley churned out 1,342 yards and 15 rushing touchdowns despite being the main target of the opposition's defense as well. His career 5.97 yards per carry average shows his capability to hit the home run, and he's a small threat in the passing game also with 23 catches, 358 yards and six touchdowns in two years.

The popular belief is that perennial champion Gloucester may be slightly vulnerable this year which, if true, would make Tier 2 wide open. Swampscott, Beverly and Salem should all be in the hunt, and Danvers is an improving team under second-year coach Sean Rogers. Quigley is the type of player that could keep Marblehead in the race until the end.

2. MIKE WALSH, Swampscott Sr. QB: Walsh may be the single reason why some people believe Swampscott is the team most capable of finishing better than Gloucester. The senior signal caller is without a doubt the best dual threat on offense in the area. In his first year as the Big Blue's starting quarterback, Walsh completed 183 of 295 passes for 2,265 yards and 21 touchdowns. He was also Swampscott's top rushing threat, rolling out 756 yards on the ground and 14 more TDs.

It's hard to imagine Walsh bettering those numbers, but if he comes anywhere near reproducing them Swampscott will certainly be difficult to handle in Tier 2.

Walsh, headed to Brown University after graduating, has an accurate arm and is sneaky quick on his feet, which makes him elusive in the running game.

1. KURT HUNZIKER, Masconomet Sr. FB/ILB: Hasn't he graduated yet? It seems like Hunziker has been around so long that he should have graduated with the Chris Splinter and Evan Bunker class. The reason for that, of course, is that Hunziker broke into Masconomet's defensive lineup as a freshman and played a key role for the Chieftains while Splinter and Bunker were leading them to Cape Ann League titles.

Now, Hunziker is more than just a key role player for Masco. He's the one who will be leading the Chieftains as they try to become the first champion in the NEC/CAL Tier 1.

The 6-foot-3, 220-pound Hunziker is big, fast and fearless, and he's still getting college football looks even though he's already committed to play lacrosse for UMass Amherst. There's no doubt he'll be terrorizing opposing ballcarriers and quarterbacks on the Tier 1 teams — Peabody, Revere, Lynn Classical, Lynn English and North Andover.

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Jermaine Kelly, who was beat out by Mike Walsh for the Swampscott quarterback job last fall, has resurfaced this season at Lynn English. Kelly has a big arm, but he only completed 5 of 16 passes for 71 yards and two interceptions while competing with Walsh during the early portion of the Big Blue's schedule last year.

Kelly was a factor on defense for Swampscott and ran the ball 13 times for 91 yards and a touchdown. He also caught one pass for two yards.

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Bishop Fenwick went to Moultonboro, N.H., for camp this summer, a first under coach Dave Woods. For nearly four days, Woods and the Crusader coaching staff had the undivided attention of their team. Everyone experienced wall-to-wall football with practices and meetings taking up the entire day.

"We have a lot of young kids and we really wanted to get them to bond and buy into (the system). We wanted their undivided attention for three, almost four, straight days and got it," Woods said. "The kids loved it and the coaches liked it.

"A ton of teams do it. We used to do it when I was at Don Bosco and when I first got here we always talked about it. After last year we decided this was the year."

The Crusaders have a lot of young talent in sophomores Nick Bona, Charlie Maistrellis and Ben Kaupp, as well as a potential freshman contributor in Rufus Rushins of Lynn.

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Moving the Chains is a column on North Shore high school football that runs each Friday during the fall season in The Salem News. Contact staff writer Matt Jenkins at mjenkins@salemnews.com, or at 978-338-2648, and follow him on Twitter: [MattJenkins_SN](https://twitter.com/MattJenkins_SN).