

# Expect fewer surprises at top of heap this season

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The surprises made 2001 fun.

Surprises such as the Neshaminy, Conestoga and Cheltenham football teams. Few people thought those teams would have as much success as they did last year.

Neshaminy, of course, finished 15-0 and won the PIAA Class AAAA championship. Conestoga reached the postseason for the first time in school history. Cheltenham reached the playoffs after a 4-8 record in 2000.

And how can anyone forget that mighty Central Bucks West finished 7-3 and missed the playoffs - oh, the horror! - for the first time since the PIAA began postseason play 10 years ago?

Will we see more of that in 2002?

Perhaps.

But, more likely, expect a return to

form. West, which enjoyed a decade of dominance in the 1990s as the premier football program in the area, is The Inquirer's top-rated preseason team in Southeastern Pennsylvania.

Everyone knows that high school football is tricky. While late-season surprise teams talk about the lack of respect they received in August — and how it motivated them all year — they should know better than anyone that the unexpected improvement from a few key players can turn a 4-8 team into a dangerous one.

In other words, stick to what you know.

You know that the Bucks will not miss the playoffs two straight years. It's simply impossible.

In fact, it is even written in the PIAA District 1 handbook. Section II, Article 3.4 states: "Central Bucks West must

make the playoffs if they have missed it the year before. The good people of Doylestown might implode, otherwise."

The Bucks return eight starters, including two Division I prospects. So expect them to return to their old ways, which makes them the team to beat in Southeastern Pennsylvania.

It's too bad that Strath Haven, ranked second, plays in Class AAA and West is an AAAA team, because there are plenty of people who would like to see Bucks County's best play Delaware County's finest.

Sure, the Panthers lost receiver Josh Hannum, who is a freshman at Penn State, but they return a cluster of talented players that make them the heavy favorite to win the District 1 Class AAA title and challenge for a state championship.

Also in the top five are Downingtown,

the Ches-Mont League's best; Archbishop Carroll, a team that would be challenged more if it played in the Catholic League Red Division; and St. Joseph's Prep, which starts the season with tough games against C.B. West, Malvern Prep and Holy Cross.

Last year, the Prep started 0-3 before it won the remainder of its games to take the Catholic League Red Division championship. That slow start could happen again, although this year the Hawks get West and Malvern at home.

Malvern starts the season at No. 6. Conestoga is No. 7, Sun Valley is No. 8. Cardinal O'Hara is No. 9 and has the best chance to knock the Prep from the Catholic League Red title. Upper Merion rounds out the top 10.

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