

"You have to respect Eastern Pennsylvania football. Both Neshaminy and North Penn are established programs that have won state titles in the last five years, and the Prep has had a great run, as well."

### Christopher Lawlor

USA Today writer who compiles the Super 25 rankings

# National respect for area squads

## RANKING from C1

But no other urban region can match Philadelphia's three teams.

Is that an indication of how high school football is heating up around here?

"I think it is," said Neshaminy head coach Mark Schmidt, whose team won the PIAA Class AAAA state championship in 2001, two years before North Penn won it.

"Football is growing again around here because it's become important again. The school districts are starting to get away from the budget-cutting and have realized that kids getting more involved in sports makes for a better school. Football is the cherry on that sundae."

For Neshaminy, the sweet fruits of victory are breeding resurgent numbers both in the stands and on the field. At the Neshaminy team picture session yesterday, Schmidt said, team officials had to scramble to find enough jerseys to outfit the 108 players still participating in training camp.

"And that," Schmidt said, "was after two weeks of two-day practices."

Such hard labor in the heat didn't deter even the rawest of

Neshaminy's hallway recruits, because they witnessed the success that last year's Redskins team had enjoyed. After winning just three games in 2003, Neshaminy went 13-2 last season, earning a share of the Suburban One National title, a District I championship playoff victory over league coach North Penn, and an appearance in the PIAA Class AAAA state championship game.

"We all had an exciting feeling of accomplishment for that team," said Sheila Murphy, Neshaminy's athletic director.

The magical run ended at HersheyPark Stadium in a 49-14 loss to Central Catholic of Pittsburgh, which had hung a 38-12 defeat on St. Joseph's Prep in the Hawks' 2004 season opener.

But now it's Neshaminy and St. Joseph's Prep — a private school able to draw players from Pennsylvania and South Jersey — that are experienced teams coming off age.

Not coincidentally, the Redskins are hosting the Hawks in a nonleague season opener next Friday night at Neshaminy's "Heartbreak Ridge," a stadium that likely will be filled to its capacity of about 7,000.

Who says Philadelphia



LINDA JOHNSON / Inquirer Suburban Staff

**Neshaminy defensive tackle Tom McEown** (left) takes a turn as an offensive lineman during a recent scrimmage. Neshaminy won the PIAA Class AAAA state football championship in 2001.

schools can't light it up on a Friday night?

"I think it's incredibly impressive," said coach Gil Brooks, whose Prep team has 17 returning starters from a 10-3 squad that lost to Cardinal O'Hara in the Catholic League's Red Division championship game last year. "I don't think people realize how good the football is in this area."

But Brooks is accustomed to this national rankings business. His 2003 Hawks team finished the season at No. 3 in the USA Today Super 25.

Though schools in this area can't match the college-campus-sized schools in the South and West, North Penn coach Dick Beck acknowledged that inherent advantages come to pro-

grams the size of Neshaminy and North Penn, which has the largest male enrollment of PIAA-affiliated schools in the state.

"But the reality is that kids are kids," Beck said. "Our players are like anybody else's. It's not like they're all college scholarship athletes that we recruit or something. We just play the best kids from our area that come out for the team."

While everyone is looking forward to seeing the area's two highest-ranked football teams start off the season by taking each other on, not everyone is excited by the national-level rankings now tagged to the game.

When a high school sports Web site listed Neshaminy in its

top 10 nationally in a preseason poll earlier this month, Schmidt joked that he would have liked to lay a hard hit himself on "whoever ranked us there."

After all, it's hard enough to keep a football field worth of talented teenagers focused on that tried-and-true adage of "one game at a time."

"It's good news, and it's bad news," said Murphy, the athletic director whose 20-year run as Neshaminy's field hockey coach ended with a state title in 1990. "It's a wonderful acknowledgment for our team, but we don't know what is going to happen until the games begin."

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LAURENCE KESTERSON / Inquirer  
**John Shaw** of St. Joseph's Prep runs with the ball during a recent practice.