

High Schools

PIAA FOOTBALL
CHAMPIONSHIP GAMES

CLASS AAAA

NESHAMINY vs. PITTSBURGH CENTRAL CATHOLIC

■ Tomorrow at 5 p.m., HersheyPark Stadium

■ TV: CN8

Juggernaut awaits
Redskins in final*Central Catholic is unbeaten and on a roll.*

MATT FREED / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

By Rob Parent

INQUIRER SUBURBAN STAFF

Fifteen games up, 15 opponents mowed down. So the popular notion is that this Central Catholic team from Pittsburgh that will play Neshaminy tomorrow night for a PIAA Class AAAA championship at HersheyPark Stadium might be the best there ever was.

Or at least the most loaded football team out of the West in a long, long time.

"The thing we're stressing to our guys is that we have to play our best game of the year," said Neshaminy coach Mark Schmidt. "After 14 weeks, you have to grow up sometime."

With only a one-point, overtime loss to North Penn spotting its record, Neshaminy has certainly evolved over the long seasonal road to Hershey. A team that started 15 non-seniors has reached the state championship game, just as an honored group did in 2001.

Funny parallel with that state title game of three years ago ... Neshaminy was a prohibitive underdog to Woodland Hills. Guess who won?

"Woodland Hills was a great challenge and a great day for our program," Schmidt said. "But we know what's coming — probably a better challenge and probably a better team."

That said, there is at least one educated dissenter to the theory that Neshaminy could face a quick and ugly demise tomorrow.

St. Joseph's Prep coach Gil Brooks, whose team lost a heart-breaking 14-13 Catholic League Red Division title match with Cardinal O'Hara Saturday, had his eyes opened on Sept. 4 when the Hawks lost to Central Catholic, 38-12.

Brooks noted that diminutive, dynamic Vikings back Eugene Jarvis (5-6 and 165, and 2,054 rushing yards) is special, but Brooks said the player that really gets the Vikings going is quarterback Shane Murray, equally adept at passing, running ... and defending.

"Shane Murray is a great quarterback," Brooks said. "But he probably hurt us just as much [playing] safety."

Brooks said he saw only Murray, Jarvis and John Pelusi as certain Division I prospects.

Central Catholic, deep and quick, is not particularly big. It is extremely well-coached. It is also naturally talented at the skill positions, just not historically so, Brooks believes.

"They're a very good team," Brooks said, "but I think Cardinal O'Hara is just as good, and is more diverse on offense. I don't think [the Vikings] are as good as my team last year or the Brooklyn Poly Tech team we played this year."

"I don't want it to sound like sour grapes. I just honestly be-



JOHN BEALE / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Pittsburgh Central Catholic's Shane Murray and Eugene Jarvis are key weapons for the Vikings. At top, QB Murray passes against Erie McDowell in a 44-3 playoff win on Nov. 26. Above, running back Jarvis scores one of his three TDs in the 44-0 win over Bishop McDevitt in the WPIAL title game Saturday.

lieve we could have beat them. We got them at the wrong time."

So, apparently, did everybody else.

Central Catholic's magical season began with a 28-20 victory over rival Gateway, which lost with Penn State-bound running back Justin King suffering from dehydration.

The two teams would meet again, in the WPIAL championship game at Heinz Field. The Vikings won, 28-0. From there, Central Catholic went on to states and rolled, beating Erie McDowell and supposedly gifted Bishop McDevitt (Harrisburg) by a combined score of 88-3.

In a 44-0 win in the Western final, Central Catholic faced McDevitt's LeSean McCoy, a running back who entered play

with 2,788 rushing yards and 31 touchdowns. Central Catholic touched him to 39 yards on 22 rushes.

Everyone is saying numbers don't even tell the full story of how good Central Catholic is — or can be.

Now comes Neshaminy. Ready, kids?

"Neshaminy definitely has a fair shot to win," said Brooks. "I think they have to establish a little tempo with their running game and then keep them off balance throwing the ball. If they do that, they have a shot."

History is certainly on Neshaminy's side. For as good as western Pennsylvania's reputation is for high school football, teams from the East have won every AAAA championship game since 1995.

So in that respect, Central Catholic, which earned its stripes a year ago with a loss to North Penn at HersheyPark, is a team carrying the banner and heavy expectations of half a commonwealth. If long-awaited victory is presumed, it only adds to the pressure and prestige of being No. 1.

"We can't look at it that way," said Central Catholic coach Art Walker Jr. "We can't look at records in the past and the last time the WPIAL won this thing. That can't be our focus. That can't be our mindset."

Alas, it is ... and maybe Neshaminy is hoping to use that little intangible in its favor. ▽

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