

# Now a whole state watches

*In this new day, no longer are North Penn and Neshaminy just area powers.*

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From the windy hills around Lansdale to the heartbreaking ridge in Langhorne, it doesn't get any better than the football game tomorrow that will draw the ticket-buying attention of thousands.

Or at least, it didn't used to get any better.

Even before North Penn and Neshaminy started to collect state football championships, they were rivals in the Suburban One League. So nothing would distract from their appointed autumn rounds, especially when the setting was Neshaminy's so-called "Heartbreak Ridge" stadium on a crisp Saturday afternoon.

A day game? Maybe retro really is in.

"Homecoming," Neshaminy coach Mark Schmidt said. "We always have that on Saturday, and playing during the day — it's tradition."

But one thing that is different from the old days is the way that Eastern teams play dominant roles on the Pennsylvania football stage, with Neshaminy

and North Penn starring.

One or the other has been in the Class AAAA state championship game three of the last four years. North Penn won the title in 2003, Neshaminy in 2001.

"Sure, the playoffs have made this game more [than just a rivalry]," Schmidt said. "But we have to keep it in perspective, to not put too much pressure on the players and ourselves and try to enjoy the moment."

While the Suburban One National race is far from over, eyes are already trained on the PIAA state playoff power ratings.

A Neshaminy win over North Penn would put Pennsbury back among the league front-runners. The Falcons' only loss this season was to North Penn. Pennsbury plays Neshaminy in two weeks.

A Neshaminy loss? That would leave the Redskins unusually low in the playoff points race.

The points system won't care that Neshaminy's losses will have been to St. Joseph's Prep and North Penn — just the two top teams in the region.

Even with District 1 teams get-

ting all eight slots at the Class AAAA level, there is still much intrigue as to what team survives and gets what seed.

In Class AAA, such District 1 teams as Strath Haven will be on the bubble, dependent on how such District 12 teams as Bok and Ben Franklin fare the rest of the way, with the two districts sharing just four playoff spots.

It's a numerical nightmare based on strength of schedule and record of opponents, etc. But it's also a lot more interesting than the pre-playoff days.

Said Simoni Marco Lawrence, an Upper Darby running back, in the wake of his team's 27-26 overtime upset of Strath Haven on Monday: "We were conscious of everything about this game — what it meant for our playoff chances and how it was a rivalry that we hadn't won in 10 years."

Upper Darby now is seventh on the district's Class AAAA playoff points chart. Meanwhile, Strath Haven has momentarily fallen off the Class AAA map. But that doesn't mean that the Panthers are doomed to miss the playoffs for a second

straight year.

"You have to get to Week 9 or 10 before you get a clear idea," coach Kevin Clancy said. "Every game we play has playoff implications. We feel we can't afford to lose a game."

The same seems to be true on a lower enrollment level, as Lansdale Catholic witnessed last year in rolling to a Class AA state title.

"It was thrilling," coach Jim Algeo said. "The playoffs — it's like how I'm not supposed to eat ice cream, but when I do, it's still really good."

Algeo concedes that he thought of the playoffs just last week, when he sat down to discipline eight members of his team for breaking team rules.

Of those eight, four were starters, and Algeo knew that suspensions would give Upper Perkiomen, a Pioneer Athletic Conference opponent, a real chance. Since Lansdale Catholic had a league loss, its power ranking didn't need to take another hit. Still, Algeo doled out one-game suspensions. Lansdale Catholic squeaked by, 6-0.

"There are more important