

These coaches aren't afraid to schedule the tough teams.

Winning programs take risks

By Rob Parent

INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

No way that Neshaminy coach Mark Schmidt was going to regret playing St. Joseph's Prep to open the season. It's just that in the immediate wake of a 28-14 home loss to the Hawks, Schmidt was disappointed enough to talk briefly about the games that weren't, rather than the loss that was.

Specifically, Schmidt said on that season-opening night of Sept. 2 that there were three teams he felt would be competitive opponents for Neshaminy's first nonleague game of the season. But all three, Schmidt said, had one reason or another to not make themselves available to play the Redskins.

The only one that did come by way of an offer from old friend Gil Brooks, who coached a St. Joseph's Prep team that might have been ranked one spot lower than then-No. 1 Neshaminy in The Inquirer's top 10 preseason rankings.

But Schmidt knew his team had a lot of wrinkles to iron out, and he also knew Prep was a team coming into its own. Essentially, Schmidt figured it would be a good game, but he had to know what his team could be in for. A loss in a non-league game would have a negative effect on the state power rankings used to determine Neshaminy's eligibility for PIAA district tournament bids.

Some people might have considered this game an upset. Schmidt knew better.

"We made a number of phone calls and all the situations were that they were unavailable to play or they didn't return the calls," Schmidt said yesterday as his Neshaminy team, fresh off two redemptive victories in the last two weeks, prepared to open its Suburban One National Conference league season tonight at Abington. "Prep was available, and so we played them."

Taking a similar can-do view on nonleague games is Absecon coach Doug Colman, whose team for the second straight year stepped down in classifica-

The Inquirer TOP 10

Football

| Team | Rank |
|---|------|
| <i>Last week's rank in parentheses.</i> | |
| 1. St. Joseph's Prep (1) | 2-1 |
| 2. North Penn (2) | 3-0 |
| 3. Neshaminy (4) | 2-1 |
| 4. Cardinal O'Hara (3) | 2-1 |
| 5. Downingtown East (5) | 3-0 |
| 6. Coatesville (6) | 2-1 |
| 7. Conestoga (7) | 3-0 |
| 8. Strath Haven (8) | 2-1 |
| 9. Abington (9) | 3-0 |
| 10. Council Rock North (NR) | 3-0 |

Under consideration, listed alphabetically: Central Bucks East (2-1), Harry S Truman (3-0), Malvern Prep (2-0), Norristown (3-0), Pennsbury (3-0), Ridley (2-1), Upper Darby (3-0).

—Rob Parent

tion to play Cape-Atlantic cross-division opponent St. Joseph, which for the second straight season went the distance and nipped Absecon, perhaps hurting its playoff power rating.

"I don't worry about that," said Colman. "To me, the kids get better when they play better teams."

Neshaminy's loss to the Prep was not a crushing one. Indeed, the game was close most of the way, and Neshaminy cruised in its two subsequent nonleague games against Archbishop Ryan and Central Bucks South.

"Playing Prep taught us a lot," said Schmidt, "and it made us a better team."

But with the PIAA's playoff eligibility determined by a rather complex combination of won-loss record, enrollment classification of opponent and eventu-



LINDA JOHNSON / Inquirer Suburban Staff

Neshaminy head coach Mark Schmidt scheduled powerful St. Joseph's Prep in his opener. Though the Redskins lost to Prep, Schmidt says it was a good learning experience for his team.

al won-loss record of opponent, even a learning process-loss to the Hawks leaves Neshaminy with a potentially smaller margin of error when determining its playoff chances.

Local district playoff hopefuls that might have suffered such a toll included Coatesville, which lost a nonleague game to Bethlehem Catholic; Bensalem, which lost to Ridley; and West Chester Henderson, which went down on a field goal to Malvern Prep. In New Jersey, Pennsauken upset Cherokee in the opener.

Certainly a loss to the Prep this season wouldn't be an up-

set for anybody. But that fine scheduling line was a concern for Schmidt. Thinking along the same lines as Colman, however, Schmidt says that going the opposite route when it comes to scheduling nonleague games would be more detrimental in the long run.

"We don't want to play teams that we could bulldoze," said Schmidt. "We did that a couple of years back, and in our third game [against Abington], we got punched in the head."

To Colman, it might be a better idea to do away with the power-ranking process altogether:

"I think they need to go to a playoff system in New Jersey," he said.

Doing so, Colman said, would result in leagues scheduling fewer nonleague opponents, and the best of all leagues in their respective classifications playing out their claims of superiority on the field when it counts rather than in the early days of September.

"And if a team claims to be the best," Colman said, "we'd love to play the best."

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