

Following Their Own Tough Act



Cardinal
O'Hara beat St. Joseph's Prep for the Catholic League Red crown last year. At left, O'Hara LB Greg Smith is lifted into the air by fellow linebacker Scott Taylor during a drill. At right, Neshaminy QB Andrew Fogel pitches the ball to a back. The Redskins lost just seven starters.



LINDA JOHNSON / Inquirer-Suburban Staff

By Rob Parent
INQUIRER-SUBURBAN STAFF

Pick a poll, any poll. Chances are you're going to see some familiar names there.

If you align yourself with the reigning District 1 champions and what is said to be this year's best football team in Pennsylvania, you can also take pride in seeing Neshaminy assuming a righteous ranking on national prep football lists.

Mark Schmidt took a look, saw his team's name up there, but experienced something other than just paternal feelings of pride and satisfaction.

"I thought that I'd like to shoot whoever does those rankings," Schmidt deadpanned.

As Neshaminy's head coach and also proud of what his team accomplished a year ago, Schmidt can make self-deprecating jokes. But considering the Redskins welcome back 15 starters from last year's state runners-up, it shouldn't be so surprising that they should garner much attention from the pollsters.

Neshaminy, favored to win the tough Suburban One League's National Conference, is currently ranked No. 9 in the nation by the Sporting News in its preseason preps poll. The Redskins are also ranked No. 10 in PrepNation.com's National Prep Poll

and No. 1 in PrepNation's Northeast Regional poll.

In USA Today's first national ranking, Neshaminy checked in at No. 9.

But rankings and polls, Schmidt knows, are only so much fodder for the fans. His job is to make his players understand that.

"The one good thing about that national rankings list is that we don't have to go very far down on that list to find two or three of our opponents," Schmidt said. "I guess it's nice that they thought we're that good of a team."

Yet what matters most, he added, is what his team does for itself. So the game plan for Neshaminy is the same as always — take one game at a time even if the fans and oddsmakers have other questions.

Such as: Can Neshaminy win it all this time?

"We're certainly going to try," said Schmidt, whose Redskins had a three-win season in 2003, then U-turned to a 13-2 mark a season ago that included a share of the Suburban One Na-

tional championship, a District 1 title and a trip to the PIAA Class AAAA state championship game.

"But we'll try to take it one at a time," he added. "We can't get ahead of ourselves. We did that two years ago when we played Abington. They took it to us and put us in a tailspin. We learned from that."

Neshaminy fans are likely to learn fast about tough competition. The Redskins open their nonleague schedule with St. Joseph's Prep, the favorite in the Catholic League Red Division and a team ranked fourth in PrepNation's Northeast Region poll and 20th by USA Today.

Among its talent-laden league opponents, Neshaminy certainly has a wary eye out for North Penn, which is ranked third in that same PrepNation Northeast Region poll. So Schmidt is determined to keep his players' perspectives slanted toward nearsighted levels.

"You can get punched in your nose if you look past it too far," said

Schmidt. "The opener [against St. Joseph's Prep] should be a fun game and a good game, and our other non-league games are against good, solid teams. We'd like to win at least 10 games again, but if we start looking at Week 7 or whatever, we're just going to be collecting equipment by that 10th game rather than looking ahead."

Adopting that same position is Cardinal O'Hara coach Dan Algoe, whose Catholic Red defending champion team knows it will have its hands full with St. Joseph's Prep team that returns 17 starters and is considered to be the strongest, deepest and most experienced team in the league.

O'Hara, which opens the season tomorrow with a game against defending Catholic League Blue Division champ Archbishop Wood in Ocean City, N.J., will also have the dubious pleasure of playing a powerful North Penn team this year. That game will be played Sept. 9 at North Penn as part of the school's 50th anniversary

celebration weekend. The always anticipated game between O'Hara and St. Joe's Prep will come Nov. 5, the last week of the regular season.

While acknowledging opponents such as North Penn and the Prep are important to O'Hara's efforts to improve the stature of its football program, Algoe said his team would focus just as seriously on opponents such as Father Judge, Archbishop Carroll and Mocsignor Bonner.

"Part of our success is that we respect our opponents," Algoe said. "Even if the opponent happens to be a last-place team, we approach that game the same way we'd approach a game with the Prep. That's the way you have to do it. In football, if you take somebody lightly, you can hurt them."

Of course, getting recognized in published polls as a team that no one can rightly take lightly doesn't hurt a program's reputation, either.

"We know Neshaminy is a good football team," said North Penn coach Dick Beck. "But we think we are, too. The league's strong every year, year in and year out. Some of the best teams in the state come out of our league."

Contact suburban staff writer Rob Parent at 610-313-8025 or rparent@phillynews.com.