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Taking a look at the area's top linebackers

This week, we rank the top linebackers in Southeastern Pennsylvania.

In compiling our top-15 list, we took into consideration the following instincts, open-field tackling ability, range from sideline to sideline, skill at stopping the run and defensing the pass, and strength at blitzing and pressuring the quarterback.

The rankings are based on our observations during games and coaches' insights. Here are the linebackers:

1. Wyatt Benson, Harford School, senior, 6-foot-1, 220 pounds. Patrolling the middle, the Temple recruit has a nonstop motor, terrific instincts, and impressive closing speed. Benson, also a bullsh runner, notched 11 tackles, including nine solo stops, in the Ford's over time at Chestnut Hill Academy.

2. Mike Labor, St. Joseph's Prep, senior, 6-2, 215. Tall and equipped with a quick initial burst, Labor goes sideline to sideline to corral ball-carriers. He is hearing from Division I-A schools (Virginia, Boston College) and I-AA programs.

3. Jerry Boyer, Penncrest, senior, 5-10, 205. Coach Paul Graham said he is "one of the most instinctual linebackers" he has ever coached. Also a threat at running back, he netted 180 yards and two touchdowns last week against Garnet Valley.

4. Preston Hamlette, Pottsgrove, senior, 5-10, 210. Powerful and fast, Hamlette, who has been slowed by an ankle injury, was an Associated Press Class AAA first-team all-state selection last year.

5. Ralph Reeves, North Penn, sophomore, 6-0, 215. Because of his versatility and toughness, he should be a top-flight recruit next year. At tight end, Reeves is a valued blocker for Craig Neidhammer and company.

6. David Williams, North Catholic, senior, 6-1, 215. Producing 11 tackles (nine solos), he showed his aggressiveness,

work ethic, and skills in last week's playoff loss to Archbishop Wood.

7. Bob Basile, Quakertown, senior, 6-1, 215. With one game to go, this ball-hawking defender has registered 237 career tackles. Army, Penn, and Princeton are college possibilities.

8. Shane Brady, La Salle, senior, 6-2, 195. Also quite capable at filling the gap at end, Brady earned first-team all-Catholic League Class AAAA honors.

9. Chase Fleming, Upper Merion, senior, 6-0, 210. With his rugged tackling and closing speed, the third-year starter helped the Indians earn a PIAA District 1 Class AAA playoff berth.

10. Steve Stemma, Neshaminy, senior, 5-11, 190. Also a part-time fullback, he has emerged as the Redskins' defensive headliner. Stemma will need to show his range tomorrow night against North Penn.

11. Byron Ross, Wissahickon, senior, 6-1, 200. Headed to Vanderbilt, where he is projected as a running back, Ross could also deliver the hits and easily chase down ballcarriers.

12. Kevin Bree, Pennsbury, senior, 6-0, 220. As one of the Falcons' surest tacklers, he was key in the drive to a Suburban One League National Conference title.

13. Mike Huff, Cardinal O'Hara, senior, 6-3, 225. His fierce and smart play as a linebacker and tight end helped keep the Lions in the thick of the Catholic League AAAA title race.

14. Eric Warden, Garnet Valley, senior, 5-10, 195. Headed to Fairfield for lacrosse, he was an underdog force from the middle position. Warden regularly stormed into the backfield.

15. Anthony Petrucci, Downingtown East, senior, 6-1, 220. He defends the pass and run equally well. Petrucci is mostly getting interest from Division I-AA schools, with Liberty as the front-runner.

Others to watch, listed alphabetically: Max Bause, Downingtown West, senior, 6-0, 220; Ronnie Brintingham, Unionville, senior, 6-0, 215; Jake Butts, Episcopal Academy, senior, 6-1, 230; Brandon Cope, Penridge, junior, 6-0, 210; Mike Culbreath, North Penn, senior, 6-1, 240; Casey Decker, Ridley, senior, 5-7, 170; Tom Devlin, Chestnut Hill Academy, senior, 5-11, 220; Dante Dickens, West Catholic, senior, 6-0, 185; Vernon Dupree, George Washington, senior, 6-0, 225; Sam Funk, Owen J. Roberts, junior, 6-2, 190; Pat Glenaser, Archbishop Wood,



Rick O'Brien



Mike Labor of St. Joe's Prep is fast off the ball.



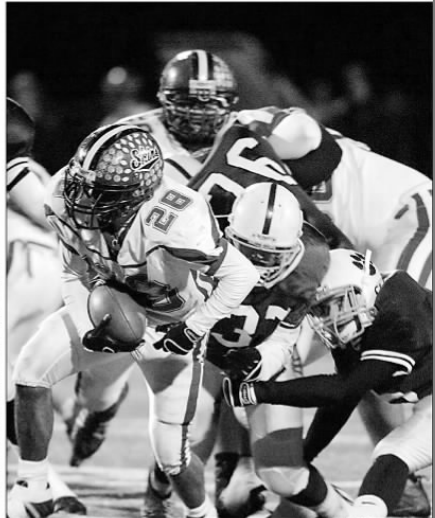
Jerry Boyer, Penncrest.



Downingtown West quarterback Bret Gillespie is sacked by Downingtown East linebacker Anthony Petrucci. The 220-pound senior, who defends the pass and run equally well, is getting interest from Division I-AA schools.

More Friday Night Football

It's another big football Friday night in Southeastern Pennsylvania, and Rally, as usual, will be on the case. Look for Rick O'Brien's live blog from the 7 p.m. St. Joseph's Prep-La Salle Catholic League Class AAAA final, live scoring updates from the North Penn-Neshaminy and West Chester-Rustin-Pottsgrove playoff games, and extensive reports online minutes after the games.



Neshaminy ballcarrier Bryan Dean struggles to elude the clutches of Garnet Valley linebacker Eric Warden (37). The 195-pounder is an undersize force from the middle.

Contact staff writer Rick O'Brien at 610-393-8009 or robrien@phillynews.com.

The Inquirer TOP 10

FOOTBALL

Team	Record
Last week's top 10 performances	
1. North Penn (1)	11-0
In a rematch of last year's PIAA District 1 Class AAAA final, the Knights will try to beat Neshaminy again.	
2. St. Joseph's Prep (2)	9-1
The Hawks' defensive line features Bill Mancini, Mike Zickoli, and Sean McGinn. Next is archival La Salle.	
3. La Salle (3)	9-1
In tomorrow night's Catholic League Class AAAA title game, the Explorers will seek their third crown in four seasons.	
4. Neshaminy (8)	9-2
To knock off the Knights, end Kevin Magee and company will need to put pressure on quarterback Todd Smolinsky.	
5. Ridley (9)	10-1
The Green Raiders' offense is fueled by Bob Colin Masterson and running backs Shaheed Smith and Jaion Randolph.	
6. Downingtown West (NR)	10-1
The Whippets are primed for a rematch with Avon Grove. The Red Devils triumphed, 35-21, on Oct. 16.	
7. West Chester Rustin (10)	11-0
The defensive stalwarts include tackle Derrick Miles, linebacker Luke McGreevy, and free safety Rahmier White.	
8. Downingtown East (NR)	9-2
Against Norristown, sophomore workhorse Drew Harris carried 48 times for 287 yards and four touchdowns.	
9. Avon Grove (NR)	10-1
Brendan McLaughlin, Jordan Harris, and Brandon Monk make up a potent backfield. Kyle Kush is a savvy QB.	
10. Pottsgrove (NR)	11-0
When Terrell Chestnut and the Falcons meet fellow unbeaten West Chester Rustin, expect offensive fireworks.	
Under consideration (listed alphabetically): Cardinal O'Hara (8-3), George Washington (8-2), Interboro (11-0), Penncrest (8-3), Owen J. Roberts (10-1), Unionville (8-3).	

—Rick O'Brien



Cardinal O'Hara linebacker Mike Huff tackles Roman Catholic's Dennis Regan. The 235-pound senior also plays tight end.