

When it comes to QBs, it's a tossup at Neshaminy

It isn't easy to distinguish between Neshaminy quarterbacks Dan McClave and James Franklin when they aren't wearing football jerseys.

McClave, a senior, is 6 feet tall and weighs 160 pounds. Franklin, a junior, is 6-1, 172.

It also isn't easy to distinguish between the two players when they are suited up. Both run Neshaminy's multiple-I offense with superb efficiency. Both are solid option runners and outstanding team leaders. And both had thrown exactly 38 passes before Friday night's game against Harry S. Truman.

It's obvious that both quarterbacks are good enough to be the Redskins' starter.

The problem for Neshaminy head coach John Chaump is that only one quarterback can play at any given time.

To solve the problem, Chaump broke one of the cardinal rules of football coaching: He platooned quarterbacks.

By GARY MILES



Chaump has developed a system that gives considerable playing time to both McClave and Franklin without fracturing the cohesiveness of the offense. McClave, since he is the senior, had started seven of the Redskins' eight games prior to Friday night. Franklin, however, ended up playing about half the game.

The system has worked. Neshaminy is 8-0 and ranked No. 2 in The Inquirer's Southeastern Pennsylvania Top 10 Poll.

"The only reason it works is because both kids are unselfish people," Chaump said. "Without their

maturity and understanding, things would be a lot harder."

Although Chaump said he never made a conscious decision to alternate the two quarterbacks until the season began, he said he sensed the situation developing last year after McClave broke his arm midway into the season. Franklin, then a sophomore, took over McClave's position as the junior-varsity quarterback and led the team to six straight wins. This season, the coaches noticed that Franklin had made exceptional progress and that he and McClave were nearly interchangeable.

"Usually, a junior won't have the on-the-field awareness of a senior," Chaump said. "But, somehow, James developed it early. Some people say that it would be wiser to go with him, since he'll back next year. But Dan has been part of this program for a long time, and he has done everything we've asked of him. He deserves the spot as much as James."

In the beginning of the season,

Chaump had the two quarterbacks play alternate series or quarters. But he found that the subtle differences in their games — handoff techniques, count cadences, pass deliveries and even how fast they ran to the line of scrimmage — disrupted the other players if the quarterbacks switched too often. So, Chaump has allowed McClave to play the first half as long as the offense is rolling.

In practice, the two players alternate with the first and second teams every five plays.

"If it can work for the 49ers and Washington Redskins, I guess it can work for us," McClave said, referring to two celebrated quarterback battles in the NFL this year. "This way, if one of us gets hurt, the other will already have the experience to come in and keep the team winning. I haven't heard a complaint yet."

It's tough to complain when the two players produce the way McClave and Franklin have. McClave has completed 18 of 38

passes for 293 yards and one touchdown, and Franklin has completed 25 of 38 for 329 yards and three scores.

Against Downingtown, Franklin completed 10 of 11 passes in one series at the end of the first half. Against Council Rock, McClave teamed with running back Jon Hall to pull off a perfectly executed 61-yard touchdown play on a quarterback option.

"We've found that, despite our differences, it's up to us to work with the team," Franklin said. "It's not up to the team to work with us. We make an effort to correct the things the other guys find uncomfortable."

Of course, there are occasional down sides to the arrangement. Sometimes, Chaump will wait until just before game time to announce the starter. Sometimes, the quarterback will get yanked just when he's starting to feel comfortable. And sometimes, the quarterback will foul up the last play of his designated series, leaving him with a sour taste

in his mouth as he watches his challenger from the bench.

"Sometimes I get frustrated," said Franklin, who honed his passing skills at a Penn State camp over the summer. "But when that happens, I think about the team and how it's better off because of having two good quarterbacks, and I don't worry anymore."

If McClave feels slighted in any way, he doesn't express it.

"I like to think we're both like Steve Young of the 49ers," he said. "We can both run and pass and we've been sharing time, like (Young) and Joe Montana."

Fortunately for Chaump and the rest of the Redskins, McClave and Franklin have been playing like Young and Montana, too.

"I can't sit either one of them, even if I wanted to," Chaump said. "They don't make mistakes. If one was better than the other, I'd certainly sit one. It's a dilemma, but a nice one."