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Sports

## A target on Pottsgrove's back

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Word around the Pioneer Athletic Conference this summer, if not since last Thanksgiving, has been how Pottsgrove's going to win this or Pottsgrove's going to win that. With three (if not more) Division I-A prospects surrounded by a pack of very talented teammates — with noticeable size, speed and quickness throughout the lineup — it would be kind of imprudent to think Pottsgrove isn't favored to repeat as the Pioneer Athletic Conference champion.

Problem is, the Falcons don't want to hear about it.

"We know everybody feels we have it already (won)," said senior Preston Hamlette, an all-state linebacker last season who doubles at fullback. "But we're not the same team as last year. We're a new team. And this team hasn't won anything yet.

"The key for us right now is staying focused, and not getting big heads. We haven't played a game yet, and we haven't won a game yet."

"We're all aware of what people are saying," added junior Terrell Chestnut, an all-state defensive back as a freshman and The Mercury's Player of the Year last season. "We have to stay away from that kind of talk. We can't allow ourselves to get big heads. If we do, someone is going to sneak up on us and then..."

Hamlette, along with Chestnut and running back Maika Polamalu, ran for a combined 2,981 yards last year. Throw in Chestnut's passing yards, and they accounted for exactly 90 percent of Pottsgrove's entire offense. And to think all three are back again.

"But we still have a lot to build on, because we have some new guys up front (on the line)," Hamlette said. "Linemen are the guys who have the hard work ahead of them, and they have to have the heart, the drive to hit someone on every single play."

"We have to stay modest," added Polamalu. "We have a lot of guys who have proven they can play at a high level. But if we don't stay level-headed, if we don't stay focused, we could be in trouble."

Though hard to imagine with the offensive arsenal the Falcons have, the defense — a bit generous at times last season - may be head coach Rick Pennypacker's strong suit this fall. No matter what scheme Pennypacker or coordinator Tim Hughes sets up, it'll be defined by group that gets to the ball in a hurry.

"Pottsgrove is going to be very good defensively," said Owen J. Roberts head coach Tom Barr. "Some people may be overlooking how good (Pottsgrove) can be in that regard."

At this juncture, it's hard to imagine anyone overlooking anything about Pottsgrove.

"We know we can't overlook anyone," Chestnut said. "You can't do that as defending champions because everyone you play is going to give you their best game."

"The difference between last year and this year is that we have a target on our back," added Polamalu.

And everyone in the PAC-10, will be taking aim.

One, of course, will be Owen J. Roberts, whose lone regular-season setback a year ago was a 41-14 setback to Pottsgrove. The Wildcats return all-state running back Ryan Brumfield and a solid group of veterans from a lineup that worked its way into the second round of the District 1-Class AAA playoffs and finished 10-3 overall.

Brumfield set a slew of records by running for 2,254 yards and 20 touchdowns. He was also the Wildcats' leading receiver, taking two passes into the end zone, and scoring one more time on special teams. He has three returning (and very reliable) teammates up front in Sean Moloney, an all-league guard as a sophomore last year; tackle Kyle Moore; and fullback Rich Zazo, a 5-foot-11, 235-pound bruiser.

They'll all be working around new quarterback Nate Walters, who steps in for three-year starter Dan Miller.

"Our concern on offense will be how well Nate takes over our offense," Barr said. "He spent most of the last two years on jayvees, but it's a different speed at the varsity level and he has to adapt to that. Nate is a different style quarterback than (Miller), though. He's more of a drop-back passer, while (Miller) was more of a runner."

The OJR defense, like Pottsgrove, could conceivably upstage the offense. The Wildcats return Moloney up front, Sam Funk and Zazo at two of the linebacking slots, and Kohl Batdorf, Brumfield and Francis Polignano in the secondary.

There's also a lot of experience - and expectations - around the rest of the PAC-10.

Phoenixville may have lost Abdul Kelly and Anthony Nattle, the heart and soul of its last three teams, but head coach Bill Furlong has 15 starters back, including eight on offense. Half of those will be found on the offensive line with Steve Carter at center, Matt Viscuso and Ken Cenci at the guard slots, and Kevin Bohl and Marcus Stokes situated in the tackle spots.

The experience up front should benefit junior quarterback Tom Romano, who threw for 1,076 yards and 11 touchdowns a year ago. Romano has an explosive back in Rick Yenchick to hand off to and a reliable tight end in Vince Ciaverelli to throw to. The Phantoms also boast junior John McNally, one of the league's best kickers the past two seasons.

"We have a good team," Furlong said. "But there are some other good teams. Even if we play well, it might be tough to contend with teams like Pottsgrove and Owen J. Roberts. We don't have marquee players. But I like the depth we have."

Upper Perkiomen has its share of marquee players. Head coach Keith Leamer, who'll be getting some help from former head coach Steve Moyer - now the Indians' offensive coordinator - has a very good one-two punch in the backfield with seniors Shawn Wenhold and Chase Fleming to go along with junior quarterback Casey Perlstein.

Wenhold only carried 83 times in 2007 and 86 times last season, but has averaged nearly seven yards both years. Last season he was the team's leading receiver with 24 receptions for 402 yards. Fleming is more the workmanlike ballcarrier who is very effective inside, but managed to average over six yards a carry last season. Perlstein started the final three games a year ago and showed his ability to throw the football by tossing it for 169 yards and two touchdowns in a non-league setback to Upper Darby.

Perlstein has veteran Nick Hale at tight end and a super-quick sophomore in Ron Gillespie to throw to.

Up front, look for Steven Grover and Dwayne Gillespie to dominate the right side of the line at guard and tackle, respectively. And on the defensive side, Fleming (linebacker) and Andrew Orlick (safety) are coming off superb seasons.

Methacton has its quarterback returning, not to mention a lot of others on both sides of the line. Head coach Bob McNally isn't alone in thinking the second time around the PAC-10 may be a little bit better than the Warriors' inaugural 4-5 run last year.

"We have high expectations this season," McNally said.

And well they should, with James McHugh calling the signals. He threw for 1,285 yards and 12 touchdowns last season, and he has an excellent receiver in tight end Patrick McMichael. Andrew and Dan Cox, 6-foot, 210-pound twins, along with Michael He anchor the interior of both lines that average over the 200-pound mark.

The Warriors did lose their most productive backs in Steve Capizzi and Tim Smith - also the team's leading receiver. But McNally has Rusty Bryant (438 yards and four touchdowns) at fullback to help set up new starters Calvin Givens and Eliot Reisz behind him.

Noticeably big up front will be Pottstown, which features guards Evan Bauer (6-3, 220) and Dave Mackewicz (5-11, 200) and massive tackles William Carter (6-3, 285) and Jacob Slick (6-3, 340). That should make it a little easier of a transition for quarterback Jeff Endy, who showed his knack for scrambling out of trouble late last year.

Endy won't be the only one carrying the football, either. The Trojans have picked up senior David Tyler, a transfer from Spring-Ford, who rolled up over 2,000 yards and 20 touchdowns in his previous two seasons with the Rams. Head coach Brett Myers also has a pair of sophomore running backs in Malik Brinkley and Misohn Coppack, and senior Tymeke Santos who will share the load with Tyler.

For three other teams - namely Boyertown, Perkiomen Valley and Spring-Ford - it'll be an entirely different look this year, or entirely different look as to who is taking the snaps and running the offense.

David Crognale, who became a starter midway through his freshman year at Boyertown and finished with just under 6,700 yards of total offense, has graduated. Zack Zulli, who started midway through his sophomore year at Perkiomen Valley and practically rewrote the PAC-10 record book, has graduated. And Trevor Sasek, who started since he stepped onto the field as a sophomore at Spring-Ford and erased most of its school records, has graduated.

Boyertown was 5-4 a year ago. Three of those four losses were by less than a touchdown, and all four were by a total of 24 points.

"Our big motto in the offseason was that we were 24 points away from the PAC-10 championship," said second-year head coach Mark Scisly. "We lost four games by 24 points, and we have to make up those 24 points to get where we want to be. That's not a long way."

The Bears came into the PAC-10 in 2002 with a bang. They finished second those first three seasons, slipped to third the next, then won the league title in 2006. Scisly guided the turn-around a year ago (from 1-8 in 2007), and has a gifted backfield back this season.

Logan Herb and Ryan Schwager together ran for over 1,000 yards and nine touchdowns and together caught 43 passes for 562 yards and three more scores a year ago. Those two and Chase Stewart, who carried in all but three games last season, will be taking the handoffs and looking for passes from junior transfer Dylan Pasik, who started at St. Pius X before an injury sidelined him for a good part of the season.

The Bears do pack some beef up front, too. Jake Semple and Chris Muller are both over 300 pounds; Wilmer Barndt weighs in at 295; and Aaron Lepre is at 260. The little guy in the group, Jared Giles (195), also doubles at inside-linebacker where he came up with 106 tackles last season.

Perkiomen Valley didn't just lose Zulli, but nearly its entire team from a year ago. The entire offense is gone with the exception of wideouts Ben Carbutt and Pat Catagnus, who will be taking over the quarterbacking chores this time around. And on defense, only tackle Chris Stewart, linebacker Brenden Murray and cornerback Kyle Williams - all juniors - return. Head coach Scott Reed should get a much-needed boost from end Kayo Vakare, a transfer from Glen Mills.

"We're young, very inexperienced, but we're not giving up on the kids," said Reed, who saw last year's team come up short by seven points or less in four of their five PAC-10 losses. "They're working hard, and as long as they work hard and give us the best they can in every practice and in every game, we can't ask for more than that."

At Spring-Ford, James Hoff and Andrew Scanlon were battling throughout the preseason for the departed Sasek's spot at quarterback. Hoff, who had a standout sophomore year at linebacker for the Rams, or Scanlon - whoever is the starter - will have one of the best targets to throw to in Andy Ellison. Now a senior, Ellison was among the area's leading receivers last season after catching 45 passes for

715 yards and six touchdowns. Also back is tight end Mike Horan, who latched onto at least one pass in eight of nine league games.

Up front, the Rams' hopes will be anchored by center Aaron Cummins and the very active and aggressive Matt Krueger and Andrew March at the guards. The defensive line is led by 6-foot-6, 275-pound Mike Yeakle, with Krueger and March teaming up at inside linebacker.

And at St. Pius X, head coach George Parkinson may have one of the PAC-10's most overlooked individual talents in senior Cole Parkinson, his son.

A year ago, after Pasik was injured during the fourth game of the season, Parkinson moved from catching passes to throwing them and amassed 753 yards. He also ran for 658 yards, going over the 100-yard mark in three of the Lions' last four games. He'll return to the quarterback position this season and look to handoff to Mike Matthews or throw to lanky Matt Mehallick.

But one thing Pius has this year that has hampered the program in recent years is experience up front ... and there's plenty of it Kevin Pence, Matt Raymond, Josh Rogers and Martin Shields leading the way. All four weigh in well over the 200-pound mark.

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