

Top 20 High School Football Preseason Rankings

Southeastern Pennsylvania Football

Featuring District 1, 12, the Philadelphia Catholic League and the Inter AC

(Won-loss reflects last year's performance)

1. Neshaminy (13-2) Neshaminy bounced all the way back from a 3-7 season in 2003 to a 13-2 season last year, topped off by a 4A Finals appearance in Hershey. Wow! The outcome was a disappointing loss to powerful Pittsburgh Central Catholic (16-0) 49-14, but what a ride! This season most pundits across the state including some throughout the country expect the Skins to do it all over again, return to Hershey but this time coming home with the gold. With last years team returning *huge* numbers that's possible. Remember, they started 15 non-seniors last year. And a schedule showing the majority of their toughest opponents coming to Heartbreak Ridge including Saint Joseph's Prep, North Penn and Bensalem (Pennridge on road), says it could happen. Regardless of all that, the season kicks off this Friday (9/2) at home against another great team when historic juggernaut and tradition rich Saint Joseph's Prep comes to town. What a season opener because the Hawks are just as loaded as the Skins. But the Skins have a developed QB in Andrew Fogel who can motor as well as he passes, plus a brute on the line in Tom McEowen (6-4, 269) to help rebuild a line that saw 3 starters graduate. Now, if Coach Schmidt can just find another wide receiver to move to tailback to replace superb running back Georg Coleman, it's in the bag. Seriously, last year's young group got all the big game experience needed against North Penn twice, and during the 5 game playoff run to prepare them for serious things this year.

2. Saint Joseph's Prep (10-3) St. Joseph's "*slipped*" to 10-3 last year, after going 12-0 in '03 and 13-0 in '04. Remarkably, the Hawks have not lost a regular season Catholic League game since 1999. Last year's CL loss to O'Hara occurred in the Red Final. And it doesn't look like they'll lose one this year with 18 starters back. Roman is improved and O'Hara strong, but no one in the league has the horses St. Joe's has. For that they'll have to go to the renowned Suburban One League for a game against Neshaminy. Friday night's alright for a fight, but don't you wish it was maybe the 2nd or 3rd game of the year? The match-up should mimic last year's titanic struggles with Cardinal O'Hara, unless Fogel loosens things up early, putting the Hawks in a hole to neutralize talented RB John Shaw. Favoring the Hawks is a veteran DB returning intact and solid line play. This will be a classic.

3. North Penn (10-3) After winning the 4A championship in 2003, the Knights came back to the pack last year with a 10-3 W/L. A quick review: The 21-20 OT loss to O'Hara in Springfield was anyone's game. O'Hara's Greg Smith blocked a Jon Stiefsky extra point attempt to end it. Then at the end of the season the 51-34 playoff loss to Neshaminy occurred with many starters suspended for reasons that don't need restated here. The surprising loss was to Pennridge 35-27, with no disrespect to the Rams. The Knights held a 27-14 3rd quarter lead in that one, but self destructed to the tune of 9 penalties for 55 yards and two fumbles, one inside the 4 yard line. That game followed the O'Hara loss and suddenly the Knights looked very ordinary at 2-2. They won the next 8 games before losing in the playoffs, but they weren't the same team that played

O'Hara 10 weeks earlier. The swagger was gone. That should not be the case this year with 16 of 22 starters returning. The big back Stoll returns, along with the lines. QB Hearn will be missed. An understated loss will be Kicker Striefsky. You hate losing exceptional special teams players. One thing for sure, with a 62-15 W/L since 1999, you know the Knights will show up strong. They open Friday at Glen Mills, then are home against O'Hara for some redemption, maybe. The 3rd week of the season sees them at Archbishop Carroll. Then it's a homer against Pennridge. That's a winnable but respectable slate of opponents. The Bulls while typically overrated, are nevertheless dangerous, with athleticism all over the field. And O'Hara is O'Hara. Archbishop Carroll is one of the favorites to win the Catholic League Blue Division and Pennridge will compete with decent numbers returning.

4. Cardinal O'Hara (11-1) 5 points is all that kept the Lions from going 12-0 last year. 5 points! The loss came in the 8th week of the season against Red Division rival St. Joseph's Prep. The final score was a 12-7 heartbreaking loss at home. O'Hara dominated most of the statistics, except for the most important one, the stat on the scoreboard. In 1st downs they prevailed 14-9. In rushing yardage they held a 229-100 advantage! Total yardage saw the Lions with a 236-175 edge. What does not show up there is the all important passing stats where the Hawks won in spades, out dueling the Lions 5-11-2 (completions, attempts, interceptions) for 75 pass yards, to 1-9-2 for 7 pass yards. With a running back like John Shaw (21-120), the Hawks attack kept the Lions defense off balance enough to slip in 2 TD tosses from Jim McCormick, and that's what spelled the difference between an 11-1 season and an undefeated season. This year sees the Lions filling a lot of holes. But last year's success provided playing time for many, and there is experience at QB where Anthony Walters saw time last year. The front end of the schedule is difficult, 4 consecutive road games beginning with Archbishop Wood Saturday, followed by North Penn, West Catholic and Father Judge. The home opener is 10/1 against North Catholic.

5. Strath Haven (8-2, 3A) Did the Panther's fall from the ranks of immortals to mortals by having a 8-2 season? Some really believe that. But the fact is they always were mortal. They really don't have any special advantages or unusual talent pool to draw from. What they do have that exists in a short supply across the state is stability in the coaching staff, and quality coaches within that staff. That typically generates a lot of wins at any level. Thereon success begets success so long as the staff keeps themselves and the players focused to the task. Last year's team did just that by recovering their balance following a 1-2 start to go 7-0. There wasn't a better district 1 team at the 3A classification by the end of the season. But an unimaginative and poorly conceived playoff format disallowed the best teams from representing the district. In fairness to the teams that did go, Ridley's and Conestoga's wins over the Panther's were not flukes. This year will see Strath Haven at least at last year's level and then some with a swift and powerful backfield leading the way. When they need to pass the new quarterback has the tools to get the job done. A program like Strath Haven's which has won 79 games while losing just 5 since 1999 knows how to reload. And they'll need a quick one with Frankford, Conestoga and Ridley on 3 consecutive weekends. First up is a good Frankford team this Friday in Philly.

6. Coatesville (11-1) How about Coatesville bouncing back from a 4-6 season to finish 11-1 after losing to Neshaminy 23-20 in the 2nd round of playoffs. Despite heavy graduations especially on the D side, they still have running back C.J. Gray (5-6, 160) to carry the load. Not that CJ needs a line but there are a number of large bodies moving into vacated spots along the line. What they may not replace is underrated QB Jeff Cellucci who doubled as linebacker. Whenever he ran with it, particularly on draws, at 6-1, 194 he was quite a force, especially with everyone looking for CJ to get the ball. Back to Coatesville and the Ches-Mont: With Henderson improved, Downingtown East's QB Devlin lighting up the scoreboard, Bishop Shanahan improved, Downingtown West with a good nucleus of young linemen and West Chester East having some quickness-speed at the skill positions, the Ches-Mont will again be one of the most exciting leagues in the area. Coatesville has the team speed to run right past many of those opponents. But they have a difficult start with Archbishop Carroll up first Friday in Coatesville. Then they head to always tough Bethlehem Catholic followed by another road trip to Lancaster's J.P. McCaskey High.

7. Pennridge (10-3) What a successful and dramatic season Pennridge had last year. A surprising win over North Penn (see NP above) that few of us expected served as impetus to catapult the Rams onto a fine year, one that saw them tie North Penn and Neshaminy for the SOL National Conference title. A 14-6 playoff win against Ridley in the opening round of playoffs was followed by a tough loss to North Penn 24-21 in the 2nd round. Then an upset by always dangerous Quakertown slammed the door shut (final regular season game) on the frustrated Rams who enter the year on a 2 game losing streak. That's never a positive but there were enough blowouts and circumstance that allowed many reserves playing time last year. And the offense returns QB Hughes while the defense returns 7. Add to that new Coach Cuthbert moving in following an outstanding year at Central Bucks West and the picture looks pretty good. The schedule opens favorably this Friday at home against graduation depleted Hatboro Horsham. Then it ratchets up a notch on the road against Central Dauphin (suburban Harrisburg). It's always difficult beating a Mid-Penn power on their home turf. The 3rd game is home against Monsignor Bonner. The point being, Pennridge could be 3-0 heading into Lansdale against North Penn October 7th.

8. Central Bucks West (9-2) After what is perceived to be ultra powerful teams at Neshaminy and St. Joseph's, perhaps North Penn, the drop off in talent *seems* severe, meaning you'll probably see a Top 10 (4 through 10) that is very fluid. Last year we were calling these Bucks and others like George Washington and Great Valley the real deal, and they didn't disappoint. They lost in the first round but represented well. Although West lost Coach Cuthbert, they promoted from within making DC Chris Felton the new Head Coach. So this is one team we expect to remain strong and again take the SOL American, just not as easily as last year with real competition coming from Plymouth Whitemarsh, Cheltenham, Upper Merion, perhaps Wissahickon. They return 9 starters to the offense with FB Brandon King solidifying the group, and 6 to the defense. The Bucks broke out of the funk of consecutive 6-4 seasons by going 9-2 last year, with narrow-winnable losses to Easton in the opener 17-12, and Neshaminy in the playoffs 38-

34. If they can get past Quakertown in the opener (Q-town closed '04 with wins against Chelty and Pridge), and the other two Central Bucks teams, they'll be home for what could be a big game against Cheltenham.

9. Ridley (9-3) Doesn't it seem *every* year Ridley graduates nearly *everyone*? Again this year they look depleted. In Coach Waller's system that's ok, because there is always an experienced player awaiting his turn. Ridley's last 3 campaigns of 9-3 (04), 9-3 (03) and 10-3 (02) suggests they'll have no trouble maintaining their tradition as one of the finest programs in the state. They'll be undersized, pass oriented, aggressive defensively, and quick, doing just fine until they run into a brute such as Pennridge in the playoffs last year, or North Penn the 2 years before that. They did stun Neshaminy in 2002, but typically they fall to larger, equally quick and just as proud SOL teams. The Green Raiders do have some younger sizeable lineman moving through the system. For the opener Friday in Folsom they'll need all the speed they can muster on the D side with Bensalem's featured back Reggie Carter in town. They shut him down last year, 9 carries for 10 yards, and still needed a TD toss from QB Ray Rodden to WR Anthony DiOstilio with 42 seconds left in the game to pull out a 21-14 win. The stats were dead even so they'll have to contain again to beat what should be an improved bunch of Owls. It's home but it's a tough opener for both teams.

10. Downingtown East (8-2) The Cougars raced out to a 6-0 start last year, beating up on Governor Mifflin, Saint John's, Elizabethtown, Malvern Prep, Downingtown West and a solid Interboro team. When they ran into a more veteran, physical, power football team they were blanked, 10-0 by Coatesville, and mother nature in a torrential downpour that effectively blunted both teams showcase players, Pat Devlin for East and C.J. Gray for Coatesville. Although the Cougars scored 44 points a game last year, going 8-2 in the process, they allowed 22 points a game against a less than formidable schedule. In fairness, the quick striking offense didn't give the D many breathers. Still, for significant improvement and advancement to the next level, the playoffs, they'll need to tighten up the defense against an upgraded schedule. St John's was dropped for William Tennett, and an 11th game was added at Glen Mills. Following 6-5 and 8-3 seasons, Tennett can't be overlooked. It all starts this Friday at Governor Mifflin, followed by their home opener with Tennett. QB Devlin and running back Richie Walls (excellent punt returner) need to stay healthy, and the defense that was quick enough and well conceived, especially against Coatesville, needs to mature.

11. West Chester Henderson (7-5) Henderson went 7-5 last year with a young team, scoring and yielding 24 points a game on both sides of the ball. With big numbers returning this year, and Coatesville, Downingtown East and West Chester East graduating significant numbers on the D side (Shanahan is improved, probably a year away) they'll be space for the Warriors to make a move. The schedule favors a 5-0 start with the first 3 at home against Chester, Governor Mifflin and Malvern. Then it's on to St. Mark's (DE), then home for Penn Wood. St. Mark's is the wildcard. And Malvern Prep will be much improved. There is always a dark horse or two and we're getting on this one early.

12. Plymouth Whitmarsh (6-5) These Lower 10 teams are in some ways more exciting than the Top 10 because of all the turbulence down here. You know there's going to be considerable change as the season develops with surprise teams moving into the group while others disappoint and drop out. The Colonials are here because of their SOL pedigree and large numbers of return starters and others who got game experience last year. About last year, they performed true to form except in the season finale loss to Norristown, which prevented a 3 game winning streak entering '05. And the Abington loss, 38-10, was a surprise. Last year's group scored on average 23 point a game while yielding the same for a 5 point improvement defensively. Another 5 point upgrade there puts them in contention for the SOL American. The early schedule lends itself to that with a home opener to LaSalle Friday followed by road trips to Abington and Hatboro Horsham. Last year's scores in those games will provide some extra incentive (Hatter's beat them 42-21). After Hatboro comes a home game with Methacton then a road game at Upper Moreland preceding the big one at Central Bucks West.

13. Roman Catholic (8-4) Like PW above, Roman played a lot of younger players last year and were involved in a number of tough losses against quality teams. In the opener they were shutout by West Catholic 14-0, then went on a 5 game winning streak before losing to St. Joe's 7-0. 2 more wins got them to Cardinal O'Hara where they again lost a narrow one, 24-21. In the 1st round of the CL Red playoff, they had nothing left and lost to Bonner 16-12. With good numbers returning this year it could really get exciting, in light of statistical improvement made from the '03 season to last year. The '03 squad also went 8-4, scoring 23 points a game while allowing 17. Last year's team dropped offensively to 17ppg, while the defense yielded just 11 points a game. That's how they stayed on the field with St. Joe's and O'Hara. SJP may evolve to another level this year but Roman can still make noise in the Red Division and beyond based on last year's performances. They open Saturday at home against West Catholic. Should be a low scoring affair with WC's offense graduated and the defense returning most starters. Then it's another home game against Germantown Academy followed by a road trip to Valley Forge Military Academy. Then the Hawks are up.

14. Conestoga (10-1) Conestoga's 16 game winning streak came to an abrupt halt last year with the 28-13 1st round loss to North Penn in the playoffs. The Knights ground attack hurt the Pioneers from the very start with RB Shane Gallagher getting 214 yards on 27 carries and FB Peter Stoll adding another 92 yards on 14 carries. Still, Stoga had a great run. Now that outstanding QB Josh Cohen and most of his supporting cast are gone, it seems the cupboard is bare. It's certainly thinned but there's enough talent here to be more than competitive. Outstanding Dwuann Clarke, 5-11, 179, is back to light it up on kick offs, and handle whatever offensive responsibility Coach asks for. The lines return tackles Andrew Tyshovnytsky, 6-4, 267 and Sam Kennedy, 6-2, 230. Whatever gets through will be swept up by returning linebackers Brandon Winter 6-2, 227 and big Mark Herzlich, 6-4 234. The secondary returns 2. That's a nice core to build around, particularly with offenses always a few steps behind the D early in the year. This group allowed just 13 points per game last year. The season kicks off Friday at West Chester against East High, a team they handled last year 34-8.

15. Interboro (9-3, 3A) Interboro is a clone of their bitter rival Ridley just down MacDade Blvd in that they continually replace seemingly irreplaceable personnel. This year they won't have 6-1, 217 FB/LB Sean Wasson, lineman Zach Anderson, 6-5, 262 and others. But last year's team had many new faces, so there are people returning to again give the Bucs a nucleus. The thing about programs like Interboro, Ridley, Strath Haven, North Penn, Neshaminy, SJP and others is they expect to win. Going 61-13 (Bucs), 52-17 (Ridley), 79-5 (Haven), 62-15 (NP), 53-18 (Neshy) and 64-12 (St. Joe's) since '99 will do that! So we again expect Interboro to be just fine. Last year's group stumbled out the gate to a 3-3 start, with losses at West Chester East, 10-0, home to Downingtown East 45-33 and at Penn Charter where the wheels fell off 29-7. But they ended on a 6 game winning streak featuring a season ending satisfying pounding of Ridley 33-0. Nice momentum for 2005 where they open with 3 consecutive homers against Garnet Valley (Friday), Monsignor Bonner and Council Rock South.

16. Central Bucks East (4-6) With Tennett, Hatboro and Souderton fielding surprising strength last year, there was no where for the Patriots to go but down, and down they went to a 6th place finish in the SOL Continental. All of that followed a 2nd place finish in the National Conference, Patriot Division the year before, 1 game behind 4A state champ North Penn. Because so many conference foes suffered significant losses to graduation, particularly the aforementioned teams above, there's a lot of room for this team to maneuver upwards, especially with the nucleus of another good offensive line on the field. Two starters, John Pfund, 6-2, 263, and Rocco Bocutti, 6-3, 249 provide that nucleus as well as senior leadership. The schedule is a plus with their first 3 at home, Dobbins, Council Rock South and Central Bucks West. A road trip to Hatboro will tell us a lot as will the homer to Souderton in week 5.

17. Upper Merion (10-3, 3A) Upper Merion typically does a good job of reloading over the years as evidenced by their 5 year streak of winning seasons where they went 45-15. Not bad! Last year's 10-3 edition played out about as expected except for the hiccup at home in game # 3 against Quakertown where they lost 21-15. In the playoffs they beat Upper Perkiomen 40-14 and Great Valley 20-19, then fell hard to Berwick 47-16. But they got their first District One championship and that ain't bad. This year's team probably will not mimic that effort but they can be competitive with many returning experienced players. It'll be more difficult without Quarterback Charles DiNolfi and underrated Wing Back Sean Donovan. The opener is Friday in Norristown, then home for a tough one with Archbishop Carroll followed by a road game at Quakertown.

18. Pottsgrove (6-5, 3A) Pottsgrove started hot last year, winning 4 of their first 5 games. Then the injury bug hit, slowing them down to a 6-5 ending. The 2-4 finish dropped them to 3rd in the PAC. But a year ending 40-6 pasting of conference member Pius X helped sooth the pain enough to put a positive spin on things. Last year's inexperienced defense dropped in efficiency from '03's 13 points per game average to 22 ppg. That should improve. If it does and they can achieve last year's offensive production of 25 ppg, they'll be back in the playoff picture. 2 starting linemen return plus experienced backups. That plus health is all running back Brent Carter needs to have

a fine senior season. The Falcons kick off '04 Friday night at Radnor. Then 3 straight homers against Perkiomen Valley, Boyertown and Lansdale Catholic will tell us whether these Falcons can contend. Then we'll see if they can survive the last 5 games of the season that are all on the road.

19. Cheltenham (6-6) The Panther's replaced most of their lineman and defense *last year* to provide for good numbers returning this year. A key loss is RB/DB Deron Barrett, whose loss will be felt as much for his defensive prowess as for his offensive abilities. For a group that was largely new last year, the numbers weren't all that bad. 6 wins with 3 narrow losses by 1, 3 and 2 points to Upper Merion, Plymouth Whitemarsh and Quakertown respectively. That's how close they were to a 9-3 season. The numbers dropped off precipitously from '03 stats but were positive at 25 ppg, while allowing 22. Not bad for a 6-6 team but nowhere near the levels reached with '03's stellar 10-2 unit scoring 34 ppg and allowing 11. The schedule provides for a decent beginning with 4 of 6 at home. The opener is Friday against Tennett, a team the Panther's lost to in a tough one last year in the opener 35-28.

20. Lansdale Catholic (14-1, 2A) Last year saw Lansdale Catholic bring home the first district one PIAA state title in the 2A classification after pounding Grove City in the final 40-17. LC made it look easy, it was easy, as they won 5 playoff games by an average score of 35-9. Whatever they accomplish this year, it's unlikely to come as easy with the graduation of running back R.C. Lagomarsino. Still, good things are expected with the return of 8 starters. And the Crusader's have considerable talent coming up so don't feel too bad for them. On top of all that they have unusual team speed. Remember how they flew to the ball last year. Granted, there's a lot of payback waiting for them in the PAC, but this is a great staff with experienced players that know how to win. The schedule makers have them on the road in 5 of their first 6 games. Their only slip up last year was to Boyertown 28-16. This year they get the Bears, who are no pushover in game 2 at Boyertown. In fact, the Bears who will contend for league honors, have their typical big-physical bunch waiting to knock some heads. The opener is at Methacton this Saturday. Then Pottstown Pius X is next, away, followed by their home opener against Springfield. Then it's back on the road for what should be a critical game with Pottsgrove that could have playoff implications in the 2A and 3A classes.

Honorable Mention

Bensalem (6-5)

Malvern Prep (3-8)

Archbishop Wood (8-4)

West Catholic (11-2)

Frankford (6-4)

Springfield, Delco (5-5, 3A)

Upper Darby (5-7)

Bishop Shanahan (3-7, 3A)

Great Valley (11-1, 3A)

Boyertown (9-3)