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## Central League Is Wide Open As Season Kicks Off

By **BRENDAN F. QUINN**, The Bulletin

Nearly every year around this time, Ridley sits proudly as the favorites to win the Central League.

This year, that seat is empty.

Some coaches say Conestoga and their high-power offense is the favorite.

Others say that Marple Newtown, led by Penn State recruit Pete Massaro, will win the league.

But there are still those who say Ridley is the favorite until someone else takes the crown.

The Central League is well balanced and has its fair share of strong teams, but one of the big three will sweep the other two and that team could very well be the favorite take to the District One championship.

### Conestoga

Last Year: 7-5, 5-4 (5th)

Coach: John Vogan

Key Returning Starters: Nihja White (WR, sr.); Steve Richter (QB, sr.); Tyreek Clark (RB, sr.); Jake Crooks (OL/DL, sr.); Matt Kaminskas (OL/DL, sr.).

Strengths: Conestoga is a team that will score - a lot. Vogan's highly potent offense is led by the triumvirate of Richter, Clark and White. A First Team All-Central League selection at running back, Clark will run through you or around you. Behind center, Richter might be the best unknown quarterback in the area. In addition, White is an athletically gifted 6-foot-3 wideout being recruited by Pitt, Northwestern and Duke.

On defense, Kaminskas has a knack for getting off the ball quickly and is very disruptive at defensive tackle.

Weaknesses: While the Pioneers have a strong defense, it is not out of the realm of possibility that they could run into a team who can out score them.

Forecast: Conestoga should challenge for both the Central League title and the District One championship. Wherever the Pioneers go, they will be one of the most enjoyable offensive shows to watch.

### Haverford High

Last Year: 4-7, 3-6 (7th)

Coach: Joe Gallagher

Key Returning Starters: Brian Diiorio (RB/SS, sr.); Dante Pergolese (RB/CB, jr.); Zachary Riley (LB/TE, sr.); Jeff Matteis (DE/FB, sr.); Bryce Collymore (LB/TE, jr.).

Strengths: The Fords are a very good tackling team and should stay in every game on the basis of their defense. On offense, a balanced running game of Diiorio, Pergolese and speedy junior quarterback Liam McGrath can control the clock and pick up yards.

Weaknesses: McGrath has an untested arm and the Fords will not be able to stretch the field. If Haverford runs into a team that specializes in stopping the run, the Fords could be in trouble.

Forecast: Haverford is not well-rounded enough to finish higher than fifth in the standings.

### Lower Merion

Last Year: 0-11, 0-9 (10th)

Coach: Ed Cabbage

Key Returning Starters: Kahlil Smith (OL/DL, sr.); Joe DeCleene (OL/DL, sr.); Dan Rubin (OL/DL, sr.); Mike Brown (QB/DB, sr.); Travis Foote (TE/LB, sr.).

Strengths: The offensive and defensive lines are both big, strong and experienced. The Aces will dress 20 seniors this season, so leadership shouldn't be an issue.

Weakness: Lower Merion's lack of success in recent years has pulled the program down. According to Cabbage, the interim coach at Radnor last season, the team doesn't understand how to win a ballgame and doesn't know how to close the deal late in a game. Along with that, the Aces' depth chart isn't exactly deep.

Forecast: This is a season for Lower Merion to learn Cabbage's system and learn how to win games. Success breeds success and Cabbage has a long road ahead of him.

#### Marple Newtown

Last Year: 8-3, 7-2 (2nd)

Coach: Ray Gionta

Key Returning Starters: Pete Massaro (DE/OT, sr.); John Rutecki (FB/OLB, sr.); John Gallagher (RB, sr.); Steve Giordano (QB/DB, sr.); Jay Trio (OT/DE, sr.).

Strengths: Massaro is the unquestioned leader of the Tigers. The Penn State-bound lineman is a nightmare for opposing defenses as a pass rusher and is very quick, despite checking in at 6-foot-4, 240-pounds. The running game is the engine behind the offense. Rutecki was a First Team All-Central League selection last season, rushing for 900 yards, while Gallagher amassed 700 yards, good enough for Second Team honors.

Weaknesses: Other than Massaro and Trio, the Tigers are inexperienced on both the offensive and defensive line. In addition, they will be replacing both their kicker and their punter.

Forecast: Marple Newtown is a contender in the Central League, but not the favorite.

#### Penncrest

Last Year: 5-6, 4-5 (6th)

Coach: Tom Durant

Key Returning Starters: Eric Volpe (WR/DB, sr.); David Grega (G/LB, sr.); Kevin Tierney (OT/DL, sr.); Mike Woody (QB/DB, sr.); (Nick Stephens, RB, jr.).

Strengths: Grega is a force on defense, having registered an eye-raising 10.5 sacks last season, while finishing fourth on the team with 42 tackles. Tierney finished right behind Grega with 40 tackles, five for a loss of yards. The pair should once again create some havoc in their senior seasons.

Weaknesses: With 17 carries, Stephens made a small contribution to the Lions' running game last season as a sophomore and Penncrest is hoping this will be a breakout year. If they're wrong, much will be expected of Woody, who did not see any action last season.

Forecast: The youth movement on offence will hurt the Lions' chances to make noise in the league.

#### Radnor

Last Year: 3-7, 3-6 (8th)

Coach: Tom Ryan

Key Returning Starters: Nick Finger (OL/DL, sr.); Ryan Kraus (TE/ILB, sr.); Jordan Kingston (OL/DL, sr.); Mark Ducceschi (FB, sr.); Elliot Serber (WR, sr.).

Strengths: Ryan, a first-year head coach, is instilling a Wing T offense around a trio of similarly tough, senior running backs: Mike Hobson, (6-foot-2, 180 pounds), Dave Harman (6-0, 180) and Brandon Banky (5-11, 170). Tyler Anderson, a junior lefthander, will line up behind center and is advertised as an athletic quarterback who is a leader by nature. The Kraus-led defense should be stellar throughout the season.

Weaknesses: The offensive line is not as strong and experienced as Ryan would like and might have difficulty with pass protection. If they do, the young Anderson could get rattled early on.

Forecast: Radnor is pretty solid all around and might finish in the top half of the league standings.

#### Ridley

Last Year: 13-1, 9-0 (1st)

Coach: John Waller

Key Returning Starters: Andrew Hodges (OLB/RB, sr.); Mark Kane (OG/OLB, sr.); Steve Gregg (WR, sr.); Matt Tassoni (S, sr.).

Strengths: After taking a year off to focus on a promising basketball career, Steve Egee is returning to the quarterback position. Waller says Egee could have been a Division I quarterback instead of a Division I point guard due to his strong arm and athleticism.

The Green Raiders' defense is in good hands with Kane and Hodges at the two OLB positions. Both are physical, hard-nosed, three-year starters.

Weaknesses: Ridley is young in experience, but not age. Waller lost eight starters on defense and seven on offense, but is replacing them primarily with seniors and juniors who have had little playing time.

Forecast: The Green Raiders are the Central League's defending champion and the winningest program in Delaware County for a reason. Year in and year out, Ridley is the favorite.

#### Springfield (Delco)

Last Year: 1-10, 1-8 (9th)

Coach: Chris Bell

Key Returning Starters: Sean Saylor (QB, sr.); Stephen Jones (RB, jr.); Matt Kelly (HB, sr.); Mike Archibald (ILB/FB, jr.); Ryan O'Shea (OLB, sr.); Pat Leahan (LB, jr.).

Strengths: The running game will carry the Cougars this season. Jones started at halfback as a sophomore and was voted as a co-captain, despite not being a senior. According to Bell, he is the hardest working player on the team and, pound for pound, is the strongest player on the team.

Weaknesses: Saylor is coming off an injury to his thumb that landed him on the sidelines last season. He is a good leader but unproven as a starting quarterback. The team as a whole is young, with only a few seniors getting significant minutes and many juniors and sophomores being expected to contribute.

Forecast: Last season, Springfield lost five games by a combined 10 points and only won one game. If the running game can control the ball, they might be able to flip-flop those numbers.

#### Strath Haven

Last Year: 7-3, 7-2 (3rd)

Coach: Kevin Clancy

Key Returning Starters: David Alyanakian (FB/LB, jr.); Willie Curry (HB/DB, sr.); Carl Ballard (FB/LB, sr.); Ryan McCann (FB/LB, sr.); Jon Huestis (FB/LB, sr.).

Strengths: Like most years, the Panthers will rely heavily on running the ball with a plethora of ball carriers and letting their defense do the rest of the work. The recipe has worked in the past, as Strath Haven has consistently been among the top teams in the area for over a decade.

Weaknesses: Of all the Strath Haven running backs, only one had over 25 touches last season (Alyanakian with 31). For a team that will have games where McCann has single-digit pass attempts, a more experienced backfield would be preferred.

Forecast: A top three finish should be the goal for this team, but a top five finish might be more likely.

#### Upper Darby

Last Year: 7-4, 6-3 (4th)

Coach: Rich Gentile

Key Returning Starters: Aaron Duncan (RB, sr.); Chris Green (RB/CB, jr.); Victor Rios (RB/CB jr.); Dan Behneke (DL/OL, sr.); Dominic Pinkston (LB, sr.).

Strengths: The Royals will pound the ball over and over and over again. That's it, plain and simple. Clock management and keeping the score down will be the recipe for success. On defense, Upper Darby will try to control the opposition's running game and force teams to beat them down field.

Weaknesses: Duncan, the best of the team's three running backs, is beginning the season with a four-game suspension for academic reasons and has been replaced by Sekela Mwantembe (FB, sr.). Senior quarterback Brian Thompson is not going to beat teams with his arm. If a defense puts 11 defenders in the box, the Royals will have difficulty gaining yards.

Forecast: Upper Darby will be in a lot of close games this year and should finish above .500.

Brendan F. Quinn can be reached at [bquinn@thebulletin.us](mailto:bquinn@thebulletin.us)

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