

# Freehold football team surges with three straight victories

By STEVEN FALK and ROBERT ZIEGLER • STAFF  
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It looked like Freehold was down and out three weeks ago after a loss at Monmouth Regional dropped it to 0-2.

However, the old axiom that a season is a marathon, not a sprint, has been borne out by the Colonials' surge over the last three weeks.

Wins over Ocean, Neptune and Saturday's 26-25 overtime win over Red Bank Catholic, which was then ranked No. 3 in the Asbury Park Press Top 10 Poll, have propelled Freehold back into the Top 10 at No. 7. The Colonials' win over Neptune, then ranked No. 6, also came in overtime.

The return to health of senior running back/defensive back Derrick Bender has also made a difference. Bender did not play against Monmouth because of a sprained ankle. The Colonials are 3-1 with Bender in the lineup.

Against RBC, Bender had two TDs, including a 22-yarder in overtime, which, followed by Mike Hembling's extra point, gave Freehold the win.

Bender rushed for 95 yards, caught seven passes for 82 yards and had an interception.

"He's amazing. That's all you can say," Freehold coach Mark Ciccotelli said. "The best thing is he's a great individual. Good things happen to good people."

Freehold's winning streak has put it back in the race for the Shore Conference Class B North championship.

The Colonials are currently a half-game behind first-place Monmouth Regional.

Freehold has also put itself in good position to earn an NJSIAA Central Group III playoff berth should it continue to win.

Also moving back into the poll this week is Neptune, even though it did not play. The Scarlet Fliers' only two losses are to Freehold and No. 8 Red Bank Catholic by a combined eight points. Their loss to RBC came on a TD with 12.3 seconds remaining.

Freehold, Red Bank Catholic and Neptune are ranked based on head-to-head results as are Manalapan, Middletown South and Howell at 4-6.

**1. MATAWAN 5-0.** Last week: No. 1. Even with McArthur Underwood sidelined with a broken rib, the Huskies offense didn't miss a beat in a 34-31 victory against Long Branch. Quarterback Jared Allison rushed for 95 yards and two TDs and threw for 135 yards and a TD, Cassius Williams scored twice, including on a 90-yard kickoff return and Keith Beaty rushed for 64 yards and intercepted

Miles Shuler with 1:09 remaining to ice the win. Matawan, which was exposed in the secondary by Rumson-Fair Haven two weeks ago, could find itself in another shootout next week if Barnegat quarterback Nick SanGiacomo is healthy. Next game: Saturday vs. Barnegat (3-1).

**2. LACEY 5-0.** Last week: No. 2. The Lions scored 28 unanswered points, and Jarrod Molzon returned an interception 95 yards for a TD to secure a 28-7 victory against previously unbeaten Barnegat. Quarterback Craig Cicardo accounted for 164 yards and three TDs for the Lions, who have outscored their opponents by a combined 176-20 and already clinched at least a share of the Class B South title. Their next opponent's losses, one in overtime, came against teams that are a combined 10-0. Next game: Saturday vs. Toms River East (2-2).

**3. BRICK MEMORIAL 5-0.** Last week: No. 4. Five different players scored first-half rushing TDs, and the Mustangs cruised to a 35-0 victory against winless Toms River South. Jihad Howard rushed for a team-leading 66 yards on 13 carries, and Brick Memorial, which did not attempt a pass, ran for 282 yards as a team. Its game against Middletown South at "The Swamp" is the first of four straight against ranked teams. Next game: Friday at No. 5 Middletown South (4-1).

**4. MANALAPAN 3-1.** Last week: No. 5. The Braves, who were idle this week, have won three consecutive games since a Week 1 loss to Jackson Memorial. In their last game, a 20-14 victory against Freehold Township, Josh Firkser rushed for 196 yards and two TDs on 19 carries. Firkser has rushed for at least 162 yards in every game this season and scored at least two TDs in the past three. Next game: Friday vs. Old Bridge (2-2).

**5. MIDDLETOWN SOUTH 4-1.** Last week: No. 6. Andrew Suarez, who carried 17 times for 103 yards, and Kyle Bunge, who rushed for 90 yards on nine attempts, each scored a pair of TDs as the Eagles defeated Marlboro, 42-19. Howie Brey, again playing in place of the injured Scott Meeker, passed for 87 yards and threw a 27-yard TD pass to Taylor Rogers. Up next is a game against a team with a similar offensive philosophy. Next game: Friday at No. 3 Brick Memorial (5-0).

**6. HOWELL 4-1.** Last week: No. 7. Ryan Davies continued his assault on opposing secondaries in a 54-19 victory over Middletown North. The junior quarterback completed 17 of 19 passes for 399 yards and eight TDs, giving him a remarkable 25 TD passes only midway through the season. Mike Clark, who missed last week's loss to Middletown South with a concussion, caught five of those scoring passes and finished with six receptions for 230 yards. Next week's opponent has won three consecutive games and is coming off of its bye. Next game: Friday at East Brunswick (3-1).

**7. FREEHOLD 3-2.** Last week: Not ranked. The Colonials' 0-2 start feels like ages ago. They defeated then-No. 3 Red Bank Catholic, 26-25, in overtime after Derrick Bender scored on a 22-yard run and Mike Hembling kicked the extra point. It was Freehold's third consecutive victory and second in a row in overtime against a ranked team. Freehold beat then-No. 6 Neptune, 24-21, last week on Hembling's 33-yard field goal. Against Red Bank Catholic, Bender ran for 95 yards, caught seven passes for 82 yards and had an interception on defense. Next game: Friday at Long Branch (2-3).

**8. RED BANK CATHOLIC 3-1.** Last week: No. 3. Andrew Casten scored on a 6-yard run, but Jahree Whiting blocked the extra point, opening the door for Freehold to score seven points on their offensive possession to steal a 26-25 victory. The Caseys never trailed until Mike Hembling's extra point gave Freehold the victory. Casten, who was held 100 yards for the first time this season, gained 94 and three TDs on 15 carries. Next game: Saturday at Colts Neck (1-4).

**9. TOMS RIVER NORTH 4-1.** Last week: No. 9. Demetri Davis exploded for 133 of his 159 rushing yards and scored two TDs in the second half to lead the Mariners to their fourth consecutive win, a come-from-behind 14-6 victory against Colts Neck. Davis also intercepted two passes, including one in the end zone late in the fourth quarter after the Cougars drove to the Toms River North 1-yard line. Next game: Friday at Southern (3-2).

**10. NEPTUNE 2-2.** Last week: Not ranked. The Scarlet Fliers, who are coming off their bye, rejoin the rankings after a one-week hiatus. Neptune lost its last game, a 24-21 defeat to Freehold in overtime on Oct. 2, and it suffered a heartbreaking loss in the final seconds to Red Bank Catholic earlier in the season. Neptune resumes its drive toward the NJSIAA Central Group III playoffs with divisional games against Monmouth and Ocean before hosting No. 2 Lacey. Next game: Saturday at Monmouth (3-1).

**Dropped out:** Manasquan, Monmouth.