

NJ Football: The final Star-Ledger Top 20 for 2010

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Mike Kinney/For The Star-Ledger

FINAL STAR-LEDGER TOP 20 FOR 2010

- 1-Don Bosco Prep (12-0)
- 2-Bergen Catholic (10-2)
- 3-Cherokee (12-0)
- 4-Holy Spirit (12-0)
- 5-Lacey (12-0)
- 6-Piscataway (12-0)
- 7-Sayreville (11-1)
- 8-St. Peter's Prep (9-2)
- 9-Seton Hall Prep (10-1)
- 10-St. Joseph (Mont.) (8-4)
- 11-Wayne Hills (11-1)
- 12-St. Joseph (Hamm.) (10-1)
- 13-Randolph (11-1)
- 14-Old Tappan (11-1)
- 15-Hunterdon Central (10-2)
- 16-Phillipsburg (9-2)
- 17-Pope John (10-1)
- 18-Haddonfield (11-1)
- 19-Freehold Borough (10-2)
- 20-Madison (12-0)

This remarkable run of success that Don Bosco Prep is experiencing has not desensitized veteran coach Greg Toal in the least.

“This never gets old. It’s a great achievement for these kids,” Toal said not long after his squad defeated Bergen Catholic, 37-27, last Friday night to win its fifth consecutive NJSIAA Non-Public, Group 4 championship and, in the process, claim a fifth straight Star-Ledger Top 20 Trophy as the state’s No. 1 football team.

“We had great leadership from our four senior captains,” he said of Gary Nova, Lars Larsen, Paul Canevari and Andrew Benvenuto. “They brought the young guys along and helped us mature as a team. We’ll enjoy this.”

But don’t expect the veteran coach to linger too long in this moment.

Those young guys Toal mentions were both plentiful and prodigiously talented. And though he doesn't come right out and predict even better days ahead, he can hardly disguise his excitement.

He shouldn't.

Don Bosco completed its second straight 12-0 season and raised its state-leading winning streak to 35 games despite having only one senior starting on defense, the diligent Larsen at inside linebacker. The offense featured six seniors, but only two—Nova at quarterback and Benvenuto at right guard—were starters in 2009. The hard-running Canevari moved to running back after playing the previous two seasons at defensive end.

They'll be missed. Canevari plowed his way through defenders for 1,757 yards and 36 touchdowns. Nova passed for 1,696 yards and 18 TDs behind the protection of Benvenuto. And there is hardly a moment on game film that does not capture Larsen either on the football or in its immediate vicinity.

The seniors should be recalled as prized mentors on the subject of winning; as the foundation of a group sure to be considered in 2011 as a contender for a second national title in three years.

"I think so. It's a talented group," Toal said when asked if the 2011 squad projects as a possible national championship. "I'm hoping we'll get some pleasant surprises like we did last year, and of course you have to avoid injuries and things like that. But it should be fun."

And challenging. Toal expects the season to start with games against national powers Mission Villejo of California and St. Thomas Aquinas of Fort Lauderdale, Fla. A similar scenario to the 2009 season opens against DeLaSalle (Calif.) and Pratville (Ala.).

Darius Hamilton, a 6-3, 240-pound junior, is one of those 2011 returnees and is already one of the most feared defensive linemen in the state. Junior wideout Leonte Carroo, had over 1,000 yards in receptions this season and, like Hamilton, is a surefire Division 1 prospect. Junior Elijah Shumate had an outstanding season at strong safety, as did classmate Sal Mastriani at linebacker. Cornerback Jabrill Peppers may be one of the most talented freshmen in the nation.

As talented as the non-seniors proved to be, their lack of experience was cause for great concern among Toal and his staff. As preparations were underway for opening day against a fast and experienced Gilman team from Baltimore, Toal worried.

"Watching them on film, we said to each other how are we going to stop these guys? They've got great speed and power," Toal said. "We really weren't sure how our guys would stand up to them."

Benvenuto and his crew basically put Gilman defenders on their backs to help Canevari rack up 326 rushing yards and three touchdowns in a 33-6 victory. He rushed for 165 yards and two TDs the following week against Ridgewood, 35-14, and compiled 268 yards and scored twice Sept. 25 to help carry Don Bosco to 3-0 with a 33-6 victory over St. Ignatius of Ohio.

"I'm pleased with the way the kids grew and developed. That was because of great senior leadership and hard work by my coaches," Toal said. "Our playbook had to be a lot leaner than the year before, but we expanded it as the season went on."

Coming in at No. 2 in the final rankings is Bergen Catholic (10-2), which suffered both losses to Don Bosco.

At No. 3 is Cherokee, which capped its 12-0 season with its second consecutive South Jersey, Group 4 playoff championship.

Rounding out the top five: No. 4 Holy Spirit (12-0), which won the Non-Public, Group 3 title; and No. 5 Lacey (12-0), the South Jersey, Group 3 champion.