



# County Football Week 14



Albert Grindle

## In the middle of the action

### Avon has stout linebacking duo

Chris Sweeney  
The Gazette

Owen Garcia and Ryan Stolarski make a pretty formidable duo in the middle of Avon's defense.

The Eagles' top linebackers and two leading tacklers always seem to find the ball, breaking through offenses to cause havoc and set the team up for success. The pair have a friendly competition to make a play, and it's a driving force for each of them on the field.

"I'm good friends with Owen, together we play for each other," Stolarski said. "We both do our assignments, fly around. It makes it more fun playing for a friend and it makes our chemistry that much better."

No. 1-seeded Avon (13-0) will need its linebackers to be on point against No. 2 Highland (13-0) in the Division II, Region 6 championship tonight. The Hornets have piled up rushing yards behind stand-out running back Casey Myser and a big offensive line that features multiple players receiving college looks.

The teams are meeting in the playoffs for the eighth time since 2011 and the third time in a regional championship. Avon leads the series 6-1, but the teams split their regional championship meetings with Highland winning in 2013 and Avon in 2023.

"We're excited," Eagles coach Mike Elder said. "We have pretty high goals and we try to celebrate all the check points along the way. One of them is obviously to win the Southwestern Conference championship and beat our rivals, those have been accomplished. Now what we talk about is a regional championship, Thanksgiving breakfast with each other and a state championship. We can accomplish two more goals with this game. If you're still practicing

with 91, including 8½ for loss, 3½ sacks and four quarterback pressures. He's also forced a fumble, recovered two more and recorded his only interception during a critical juncture of Avon's 13-12 win against Glenville.

He had 15 tackles in a 41-10 regional semifinal win against Wadsworth and didn't even play the fourth quarter. Elder described the senior as the heart and soul of the defense, always flying around the field and tracking the ball exceptionally well.

"He's really physical," Stolarski said. "He's a great tackler, he has great instincts. He's just an all-around good player."

Stolarski is right behind Garcia with 70 tackles, including three sacks and five others for a loss. He's broken up three passes and been credited with five quarterback pressures. Elder said Stolarski is key in plugging gaps against the run and has great instincts in identifying cues and making the right decision.

He also had a big game against Wadsworth with eight tackles while only playing two quarters. At 6-foot-2 and 220 pounds, the junior already is drawing interest from a number of D-I schools, predominately in the Mid-American Conference.

"He's got a quick trigger," Garcia said. "He shoots gaps really well. He tackles well, he bites the knees. He's really physical. He's strong, assignment sound. And once you're assignment sound you can play fast. He's a great example of that."

Rounding out the unit is senior Andrew Falasco, who has piled up 32 tackles and three pass breakups. Both Zack Murray (senior) and Vincent DeTillio (junior) rotate in regularly. Murray has 32 tackles and a sack while DeTillio had 24 tackles, including one for a loss.

Avon's defense as a whole has allowed just 12.2 points, 96.1 rushing yards and 99.3 passing yards per game.

"We're close," Garcia said. "Same thing with last year. The whole linebacking core is together all the time. We go out, get food all the time. We just have a close bond as a brotherhood. We're a good fit for this game.



Garcia



Stolarski

## HIGHLAND HORNETS (13-0)

**COLORS:** Green and black

**CONFERENCE:** Suburban League American Conference (champion)

**COACH:** Mike Gibbons (10th season, 84-29 record)

**PLAYOFF APPEARANCES (19-13 record):** 2024, 2023, 2022, 2021, 2020, 2017, 2015, 2014, 2013 (D-II state semis), 2011, 2009, 2008, 2001, 2000

**NOTEWORTHY:** Casey Myser now holds Medina County season records for points (258), total touchdowns (43) and rushing touchdowns (36). The junior needs 154 yards from scrimmage (rushing/receiving) to break the county record of 2,679 set by Black River's Andrew Vaughn over 11 games in 2013.

• The Hornets need four points to break the county record of 589 set by Wadsworth over 12 games in 2017. Of Highland's 566 points, only 74 have come from seniors.

• Ten of Dylan Borla's 13 completions last week against Whitehouse Anthony Wayne resulted in first downs. The senior has completed 24-of-34 passes (67.6%) for 526 yards, six touchdowns and one interception during the postseason. That's 21.9 yards per completion and 15.5 per attempt.

• Ryan Zywiec led the defense against Anthony Wayne with six tackles (2 for loss, sack). Carson Noonan had a strip-sack recovered by Cody Bendau, Colton Foust had interception in the end zone and Garrett Phillips, Evan Foust and Kyle Williams broke up passes. Caleb McKeen added a 9-yard tackle for loss on a flea-flicker screen.

• Subtract 69- and 30-yard gains to open the Generals' first two possessions and Highland allowed only 102 rushing yards on 26 attempts (3.9 average). The Hornets are allowing 59.6 yards per game on the season.

• While Highland's 190 rushing yards against Anthony Wayne was its third-lowest total of the season, 23 of the 42 carries covered between 4 and 9 yards. The long was a 20-yard TD by Borla.

• Lucas Gerding surpassed 1,000 all-purpose yards on the season last week. The junior now has 333 rushing, 445 receiving, 107 on kickoff returns and 124 on punt returns for a 1,009 total.

• Jonah Kowza had five more touchdowns last week, pushing his school-record season total to 45.

• Highland never lost to Avon when the schools were members of the Inland Conference from 1966-75. The Eagles came close in 1966 (26-20), 1968 (22-14), 1969 (16-14) and 1970 (22-18).

## AVON EAGLES (13-0)

**COLORS:** Purple and gold

**CONFERENCE:** Southwestern Conference (champion)

**COACH:** Mike Elder (19th season, 199-31 record)

**PLAYOFF APPEARANCES (38-17 record):** 2024, 2023 (D-II state semis), 2022, 2021 (D-II state semis), 2020 (D-II state semis), 2019 (D-II state semis), 2018 (D-II state semis), 2017 (D-II state semis), 2016, 2015, 2014, 2013, 2012, 2011 (D-II state runner-up), 2010, 2008, 2004, 1996 (D-IV state semis)

**NOTEWORTHY:** The Eagles' spread offense is very well-balanced, but everyone knows the conductor is Kent State recruit Nolan Good (6-foot-1, 200 pounds), who has 52 rushes for 528 yards and nine touchdowns while completing 176-of-270 passes for 2,908 yards, 28 touchdowns and seven interceptions. Avon career receiving leader Matt Maxey is a terror in the slot with 79 catches for 1,212 yards and 10 scores, while No. 2 Cole Kepner (29, 604, 7) has good numbers as well. The running game is by committee, as Good, speedy Quiante Smith (57 carries, 450 yards, 9 TDs), Tyler Kaufmann (87, 607, 10) and Cam Wendell (70, 393, 5) all have at least 300 yards. Kicker Owen Warrick is another threat, having made 64-of-65 extra points and 5-of-8 field goals, though Wadsworth blocked an extra point and field goal last week.

• The offensive line features Jeremiah Kelly, a 6-3, 295-pound Cincinnati recruit who is nine spots ahead of Noonan in the Ohio Class of 2025 ranking (76th), according to 247sports.com. Guard Max Hauck (6-3, 270) and center Connor Bingham (6-1, 270) form a formidable left side, though the other side goes 6-2, 240 and 6-0, 235. Tight end Tyler Beerbohm is another matchup problem at 6-4, 245.

• The defense features Kelly and free safety Jakob Weatherspoon, a 6-0, 176-pounder whose 17 offers from Ohio State, Michigan, Michigan State, Notre Dame, Pitt, Syracuse and Wisconsin. Linebacker Ryan Stolarski (6-2, 220) holds offers from Akron, Lehigh, Buffalo and Toledo. Impressively, the Eagles have 91 tackles for loss, but no player has more than 10.

• Good, Maxey, Kelly, Weatherspoon, Beerbohm, Bingham, Sam Toniolo (DE, sr.), Jason Gillespie (DT, sr.), Owen Garcia (LB, sr.) were first-team D-II All-Northeast Lakes District.

• Avon's non-league schedule is as good as any public school in Ohio. The Eagles opened with a 42-21 win over St. Ignati before beating Canton McKinley 21-14 and defending D-IV state champion Glenville 13-12. Avon then cruised through a Southwestern Conference that had six of its eight teams reach at least five victories.

• For being considered a state title contender, Avon interestingly is minus-1 in turnover margin. Highland is plus-17.

## SCOUTING REPORT

As if Highland-Avon being arguably the top game in the state wasn't enough, Mother Nature could decide she'll have a say in how tonight plays out with a 45-degree temperature, winds pushing 25 mph and a 50% chance of rain. Conventional wisdom says that favors Highland given its running strength and Avon's passing strength, but don't forget the Hornets prefer to pass intermediate or deep off play-action and a large chunk of Maxey's yards come after short catches in the slot. Regardless of weather, this one is like to come down to two critical matchups: Highland's offensive line vs. Avon's talent-rich front seven and the Eagles' passing attack vs. the Hornets' secondary that will again be without starting safety Josh Arvanetes. The Hornets have to get Myser established or else the play-action game is far less effective. Avon knows this and will use Weatherspoon in support, but the Eagles also do an excellent job of mixing coverages and blitzes to keep QBs guessing. This is where slot receiver Lucas Gerding comes in after he excelled running power options off jet motion while also exploiting the intermediate sidelines with catches last week against Anthony Wayne. On the other side, Highland simply can't match up one-on-one with Maxey, who has an offer to join Good at Kent State, though the Hornets do match up in the box and have a good chance to limit the Eagles' rushing attack as long as they can keep Good from busting a big one. While Highland has not fared well against Avon in the playoffs, this represents its best opportunity due to matchup reasons. The Eagles are more prone to penalties and turnovers than the Hornets, so that may come into play as well.



H-back  
Evan Foust