

Basketball

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Sports

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In this section:
Comics & Puzzles
Pages B4-5
Classified
Page B8

Section
B
Saturday,
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GAZETTE FALL COACH OF THE YEAR



Highland football coach Mike Gibbons is the 2025 Gazette Fall Coach of the Year.

ARON JOSIECZYK PHOTOS / TRISHA KRAKOWSKI ILLUSTRATION

Chase greatness

Gibbons has led Highland football to consistent success

Albert Grindle
The Gazette

Mike Gibbons no longer bunny-hops along the line of scrimmage wearing jersey No. 40 for Mentor Lake Catholic, but the laser focus that made him a first-team All-Ohio linebacker remains a significant part of his life.

Discipline, structure and embracing the process of greatness consume Highland's 11th-year football coach. The 42-year-old's day-to-day schedule thrives on routine to such an extent that casual conversations almost always feel rushed, because in the back of Gibbons' mind there is always something else to be accomplished.

Gibbons grew up on the Lake Catholic sideline watching his fall of fame father, John, lead the Cougars to consecutive state titles in 1991 and

Gazette Fall Coach of the Year

Mike Gibbons (H)	2025	Doug Gorman (M)	2008
Bill Zula (H)	2024	Jim Vaughn (C)	2008
Doug Gorman (M)	2023	Mike Knox (H)	2007
Larry Mark (H)	2022	John Greenleaf (N)	2006
Larry Lard (M)	2021	Chris Kneip (J)	2005
Simon Spelling (M)	2020	Rick Novak (B)	2004
Brad Wojcikowski (M)	2019	Al Young (B)	2003
Simon Spelling (M)	2018	Rick Novak (B)	2002
Simon Spelling (M)	2017	John Kelly (M)	2001
Simon Spelling (M)	2016	John Hopkins (H)	2000
Doug Gorman (M)	2015	Kerry Hunter (H)	1999
Marcus Lottner (B)	2014	Al Young (B)	1998
Tom Lombardo (H)	2013	Scott Simpson (M)	1997
Mary Maclean (H)	2012	Greg Davidson (H)	1996
Kerry Hunter (B)	2011	Tom Fazio (B)	1995
Larry Lard (M)	2010	John Seewank (M)	1994

1992. He was a state championship linebacker under his brother-in-law, Tom Lombardo, in 2001 and captured two Division III national crowns as a first-team All-American for legendary Mount Union coach Larry Kehres.

Gibbons is quick to point out he still had to pass the school of hard knocks when he transitioned to

coaching. The reality is he knows no other way than how to run a top-shelf football program.

In a matter of five short years, Gibbons has taken Highland to the next level. The Hornets' 59 wins since the chaotic COVID-19 season of 2020 are third among current Ohio D-II schools, trailing only Avon (68),

which beat Cincinnati Anderson 37-20 for its second straight state championship Thursday night, and Archbishop Hoban (60).

The sustained success that included another record-breaking season made Gibbons the Gazette Fall Coach of the Year.

"The No. 1 thing is to be consistent," Gibbons said as his often cliché responses grew more passionate and detailed throughout a lengthy interview. "If you look at our practices or how we lift weights, you have to be consistent and do things the right way. The results speak for themselves. We don't talk about results. It's more of, 'Did you succeed today and, if not, why? If not, you've got to be better tomorrow.' That's how we run every day, one day at a time and be consistent with max effort."

See GIBBONS, B2

OHIO STATE FOOTBALL

Here we go

Bucks, Hoosiers to decide title tonight in Indy

Michael Marot
The Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — Indiana coach Curt Cignetti has been here before. Twice.

His second-ranked Hoosiers, just like first-ranked Ohio State, have not.

For the first time in more than a decade and just the third time since conference championship games were standardized, the nation's top-ranked teams will play for a title.

The two previous top-ranked conference title games were in the Southeastern Conference in 2008-09 when Florida and Alabama went back to back.

Cignetti was on Nick Saban's Alabama coaching staff. And, yes, experience could matter.

"A year later," Cignetti joked after Indiana punched its ticket by routing Purdue, "I had the opportunity to be part of a couple of those at Alabama when we played Florida and (Tim) Tebow and Urban (Meyer) two years in a row. It's going to be a great atmosphere. I think — no I know — you're playing this game for a reason. A Big Ten championship means an awful lot."

The Buckeyes (12-0) and Hoosiers (12-0) are in similar positions. The are playoff locks, with good chances at a first-round bye no matter what happens in Indianapolis tonight.

The contrast between these programs couldn't be starker. Ohio State owns eight national championships, is closing in on program win No. 1,000 and has claimed at least three Big Ten crowns in every decade from the 1930s through 2010s.

Despite the steady parade of players from Columbus to the NFL, the Buckeyes watched the last four Big Ten title games from home — a drought that coincided with their four-game losing streak to dreaded Michigan.

See OSU, B3



Day



TONIGHT

WHO:
Ohio State
vs. Indiana
TIME: 8
WHERE:
Lucas Oil
Stadium
TV/RADIO:
WVA TV-8;
WKRN 850-
AM; WAKR
1590-AM



GIBBONS

From B1

"Knowing what type of kids we're coaching, we have smart kids and we have tough kids. We can put a lot on our kids schematically and they can handle it. As long as they've been developed the right way, they're able to at the end of the day. They want to play hard for their teammates, coaches, family and school. I've gotten all that from all people — my dad, Tom (Lombardo), Larry Kehres. They might have each done things a little differently, but that's what I take from all of them."

The evolution may go unnoticed to casual observers, but the Hornets are clearly Gibbons' program now. There are many layers from the youth level on up that separate them, including aspects many schools can't control such as affluent advanced student-athletes, and few closed-enrollment districts in Northeast Ohio have been able to match up consistently.

Chief among them is player development. Gibbons contractually is a physical education teacher but spends his day teaching a "speed and strength for athletes" class that is required for football players but open to all students. The football boosters club also funds further personal training at a Medina-based business when a player reaches the fifth grade.

That extends to the lower levels with philosophies. The top priority of the youth teams directed by Jason Haney is player recruitment and retention. The seventh and eighth grades are split into equally-balanced "A" and "B" teams to maximize playing time and the junior varsity rotates quarterbacks because added development to the game's most complicated position can lead to late bloomers like 2022 graduate Aaron Philips, who Gibbons praised multiple times for the program's rise.

There also is continuity. Defensive coordinator Chris Meyer, special teams coordinator Mike Nettling, wide receivers coach Jordan Gribble and freshman coach/former offensive line coach Nate Howard have been with Gibbons from the beginning, and former Highland varsity coordinators Tim Snook and Paul Lusher — both are now retired — coached the current seniors at the eighth-grade level.

The former four have impressive backgrounds, as Meyer's father Jim coached Pro Football Hall of Famer Jason Taylor at the University of Akron and LeBron James at St. Vincent-St. Mary. Nettling was the 2008 Ohio Athletic Conference Linebacker of the Year at John Carroll, former Brunswick star Gribble remains one of the most prolific wide receivers in Medina County history and Howard was a tight end at Ashland University.

Last but not least, there is

daily routine. Highland records each practice — these days a drone is used for a bird's-eye view — and calling up old film on Hudl.com from, say, 2018 wouldn't look much different. The Hornets fine-tune plays as conditioning — something Lombardo revolutionized at the school in the late 2010s — and skill players and linemen are split multiple ways throughout to receive specialized instruction.

Motivation is not built around rah-rah speeches or screaming at kids, stuff old-school players romanticize. It's about precision, relentless fundamentals and accountability, aspects that have led to the Hornets going toe to toe with Avon in the D-II, Region 6 championship game in each of the past three seasons.

"It's great to be in that category with those great programs. That's exciting," Gibbons said. "I'm definitely proud of our kids and our entire program. It's awesome, and we want to continue that and push ourselves."

"Ultimately, our goal is to win a state title, so we're going to work really hard to get to that game and win it."

Gibbons inherited the program from Lombardo in 2015 and was initially intent on maintaining the status quo. The Hornets kept the spread-option offense installed for one of the county's first dual-threat quarterback stars, Jerry Scholle, as well as the conservative 4-3 defense designed to limit big plays and the pregame tradition of the head coach sprinting onto the field ahead of his players.

When he first took over, Gibbons, who calls the offense, used the base option runs of inside zone and power read, as well as slot receiver jet sweep, more than 50% of the time. They're still taught heavily at the middle school and freshman levels to get players comfortable with the system, but the varsity has transformed into a more diverse attack with outside zones, counters and deep shot, play-action passes that have helped the Hornets break the school record for scoring in consecutive seasons.

The same has applied to defense, where Highland began the Gibbons tenure using a gap-sound "build the wall" philosophy that rarely blitzed and stayed in four-deep coverage. This season, the Hornets disguised coverages on nearly every play — they often lined up with two deep safeties and rolled one into the box after the snap — and blitzed frequently to take advantage of the athleticism of linebackers Jameson Gordon and Evan Foust.

Gibbons, who behind closed doors has a broad smile with squinted eyes but rarely turns off his intensity when players are around, took credit for little, if any, of that. Football is the ultimate copycat sport, so everyone needs to check their egos at the door. If implement-

ing ideas from rivals is the path, so be it.

Most notably, the Hornets stole the same play Avon used for a 65-yard touchdown against them in 2024, an option concept that can result in a running back sweep to one side or a quarterback counter try to the other. Quarterback Grady Gibb and first-team All-Ohio running back Casey Myser were nearly unstoppable running it this season.

"Whoever makes a suggestion, we're always open ears to it," Gibbons said. "Meyer obviously does an outstanding job and he does have free rein, but he's not stubborn by any means. I feel like we're the same way on offense. We've never been closed-minded and always listen and see if you can pick something up. My background is defense, so now jumping over to the offense side, I tell him, 'This is hard to go against.'"

"Every offseason we try to figure out how do we get better, and it's helped we've been together for 11 years now so we're all speaking the same language. I always tell Meyer how hard it is that not only does Avon have great players, they create so much movement at the point of attack. We studied up on them in the offseason and took their defense into part of ours."

Even with a generational talent like Myser returning to the backfield and despite a winning pedigree at the lower levels, Highland players got tired of hearing they couldn't replace elite linemen Carson Noonan, Ryan Zywioc, Brady Bendau and Ben Coyne and three starters in the secondary. Gibbons has never been keen to buying into the us-against-the-world crutch — almost every top coach doesn't — but he allowed his players to use that as motivation if they wanted to.

The end result was one of the most dominating seasons in school history. The Hornets running clocked 10 of their first 11 opponents, allowed one first-string touchdown in the regular season, broke the school record for scoring average (44.5), nearly topped the 1952 standard for points per game allowed before finishing at 7.5 and surrendered fewer than 200 yards per game for an unprecedented fifth straight season.

Myser broke Medina County career records for points (552), total touchdowns (52) and rushing touchdowns (80), and returning starters Josh Messina (LT), Foust (TE/LB), Gordon (LB), Cody Bendau (DT), Lucas Gerding (WR), Nick Dobkowski (WR), Kallen Whitting (LB) and Chris Meitzger (CB) took the next step.

Gibbons was most proud, however, of first-year senior starters such as Gibb (QB), who completed an incredible 82.8% of his passes, Bendau (RG), Thomas Fearn (RT), Dan Miller (DE), Ryan Zahir (DT), Dobkowski (FS), Cooper Zielinski

(SS) and Liam Zielinski (CB) because quality players often must bide their time in a winning program.

The challenge will be greater next season with only 5-of-22 starters returning as Highland transitions to the deeper Suburban League National Conference. Gibbons knows his players won't back down.

"Coming into this year, we knew we had some really good players back," he said. "That helps, but also we had really good players the previous year, and I felt like the whole off-season people wanted to talk about the people that we lost. That's nobody's fault, but our kids played with a little bit of a chip on their shoulder this past year. They're saying things about Highland that these kids took personal and proved people wrong. That's what stood out most. They did a great job day in and day out."

"I feel like in our situation, we have a lot of mature players. They've been through a lot. It helps we've made some deep playoff runs, so our seniors have been to the regional finals as sophomores and juniors. That's four extra weeks each of those years. That's been really important that these kids got those extra reps."

Something striking happened as tears flowed and hugs abounded after a closer-than-it-appeared 36-19 loss to Avon in the regional finals. Gibbons had finished his rounds, looked to his kids and asked, "Are you ready to go home?" before being interrupted by Foust.

With a calm, calculated tone of voice, Foust asked if the players could dissect film at the fieldhouse the next morning. Gibbons said yes, woke up the next morning and drove from his Montville Township home to unlock the fieldhouse so a players-only session could be held.

A tradition started by Philips was not going to be discarded, even in defeat. The accountability of what it takes to maintain the standard has nothing to do with what Gibbons forces his players to do. They do so voluntarily.

There are few things a coach can be more proud of than that.

"It's pretty cool to see," Gibbons said. "Last year, same thing. We lost in the regional final and they had film session on their own. Now the kids, once the season is over, they're watching film the next day. That's 100% them, but other days they're out there on the field throwing on their own. They definitely want to continue on."

"I think that's the biggest part of our program: player-led leadership. It's one thing for a coach to tell you do something. That's only going to get you so far. We tell them, 'This kid did it the right way, this team did it the right way. Follow them.' They see success and they want to do it themselves."

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