

# Ultimate finale

Highland, Aurora to battle in rare showdown of 9-0 teams

Albert Grindle  
The Gazette

On Nov. 7, 1975, Green defeated Hudson 28-6.

On Oct. 29, 1999, Copley wore down Wadsworth 30-7.

The Suburban League has been competing in football since 1949, and those are the only two games featuring 9-0 teams going to battle. That exclusive list will extend to three tonight when Highland travels to Aurora for the de facto American Conference championship game.

Everyone has been looking forward to this one since the preseason. The Hornets are averaging 45.9 points, allowing 7.2 and ranked sixth in Division II by fantastic50.net, while Aurora is at 48.1, 7.3 and sixth in D-III.

Toss in the revenge factor of a crazy 9-7 Greenmen win last season and critical Region 6 playoff positioning for Highland and the stakes are through the roof.

"Obviously to have two teams 9-0 going into a Week 10 game is very special," Highland coach Mike Gibbons said. "It's a testament to Aurora and to Highland's football programs. It's going to be a good battle, and we're excited to be a part of it."

Neither team has played a difficult schedule, though Highland's season-opening win over Hudson gets the edge over the Greenmen's combined opponent record of 28-53. Aurora, in fact, has yet to play a game without a running clock at some point in the second half, but that streak is nearly guaranteed to end tonight.



Gibbons



Myser



AARON JOSEFCZYK / GAZETTE

See **HIGHLAND, C4** Highland wide receiver Nick Dobkowski celebrates a touchdown against Revere.

# HIGHLAND

From C1

The Greenmen, who are 4-4 against Highland since joining the SL in 2015, also will almost certainly be without top player Lucas Manderbach, a 6-foot-3, 230-pound defensive end/running back whose left leg buckled in a gruesome manner while being tackled from behind during a 53-3 victory over Barberton.

Despite the potential loss of Manderbach, who has offers from Youngstown State, Lehigh and Army, Aurora remains incredibly tough and smart defensively, relying on an unselfish, aggressive scheme that has caused Highland's spread-option fits over the years. The Greenmen are particularly athletic in the secondary, and linebackers Tommy Tortabini (61 tackles, 11 for loss) and Cole Watson (46, 6) are fast to the ball.

The Greenmen will have their hands full against the Hornets, who are led by running back Casey Myser



Zywiec



Coyne



E. Foust



Whiting

(151 touches, 1,668 yards from scrimmage, 31 TDs), breakout quarterback Dylan Borla (71-for-94, 1,484 yards, 20 TDs, 1 INT) and a line of Carson Noonan, Josh Messina, Ryan Zywiec, Brady Bendau and Ben Coyne.

Highland also has gone an incredible eight consecutive games without a turnover, and the first-string offense has fumbled only twice all season.

"Defensively they're similar to us in flying to the ball and tackling well and dominating from start to finish," Gibbons said. "I see a lot of similarities."

On the other side of the ball, Aurora has evolved from an I-formation, ball-control attack to a spread option eerily similar to the Highland system.

Last season's hero, Ryan Dwyer, is having a similar season to Borla with 1,144 yards and 14 TDs on just 66 completions and has received complementary support from Ben Lukasiak (18 carries, 153 yards; 20 catches 219 yards), Zach Pannetti (16 catches, 328 yards, 2 TDs) and Quincy John (6, 265, 3).

With Manderbach doubtful, Xavier Board (79 carries, 634 yards, 6 TDs) may get an increased workload since Dwyer is not a threat in the run game. The line boasts 295-pound Matthew Copley, who picked up a Gannon offer last week, 275-pound Brody Markle, a defender for the hockey team, and physical tight end Alex Brooker.

As everyone knows by now, Highland is headlined by the dynamic linemen duo of tackle Zywiec (46 tackles, 15½ for loss, 7 sacks) and end Noonan (37, 12½, 6), but linebackers Evan Foust (61, 6, 3), Jameson Gordon (39, 5½, 1) and Kallen Whiting (35, 3) have come up big in helping the Hornets allow a microscopic 50.4 yards per game on the ground.

Where Highland will be tested arguably for the first time all season will be the secondary, where only safety Garrett Phillips returns from last season.

The Hornets have just five interceptions and 21 pass breakups, though an increased emphasis on blitzing — something Highland had done sporadically under longtime coordinator Chris Meyer — has led to 24 sacks and dozens of passes being simply thrown away.

"They're a lot like us, really," Gibbons said. "You watch film and they run a similar scheme to us, and the quarterback makes really good decisions, throws the ball on time and is accurate. Their ground game, they like

to run the ball not only to (Board), but they have other backs who run really hard as well."

While undefeated small-school powers Marion Local and Coldwater will get the attention in Western Ohio, all eyes in the Northeast will be on Highland-Aurora tonight. The recent news of three teams leaving the American Conference as early as the winter of 2026 only adds to the intrigue, as the highly-respected programs may no longer be playing each other in the near future.

Grab a ticket this morning — if there are any left — and head to Aurora's Veteran Stadium with plenty of time to pregame.

This one has the makings of a classic. "There's been a ton of preparation, and we have been locked in all week long," Gibbons said. "We've been taking it one day at a time and not looking ahead to Friday night, but now it's here and we're excited to get out and play."

Contact Albert Grindle at (330) 721-4043 or [agrindle@medina-gazette.com](mailto:agrindle@medina-gazette.com).