

## High school football: Highland poses physical, talented challenge for Avon in renewal of postseason rivalry

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[The Gazette](#)

Nov 20, 2024 4:30 AM

When Avon and Highland line up for the Division II, Region 6 final Friday, don't be surprised if they confuse it with another practice.

The Eagles and Hornets have massive talent on both of their lines, which should make for some intriguing matchups in their regional championship rematch.

"They're very similar to us in that respect," Avon coach Mike Elder said of the Hornets. "I think the strength of our football team also is in the trenches. It's going to be a great challenge. We've played great competition and we've seen some guys down in the trenches. It's tough sledding, we know how hard it is, but I think the strength of our team is the strength of their team. We're very similar to each other."

Top-seeded Avon (13-0) is seeking its seventh regional title in eight years while No. 2 Highland (13-0) is trying to get past the Eagles, who have vexed them plenty of times since 2011. Friday will be the eighth playoff meeting between the teams in the last 14 seasons with Avon leading 6-1.

This is the third time the teams will meet in a regional final during that span with Highland winning in 2013 and Avon winning last season.

"They are extremely well-coached," Elder said. "They're big, strong and physical. I think anybody left in the playoffs at this point has done the work in the weight room. There's a physicality to them both offensively and defensively. The thing that sticks out to me most is how physical they are on both sides of the line. When you're as physical as they are, well-coached and put those players in position to succeed, you get to the regional final."

Carson Noonan, who is receiving looks from Division I colleges, anchors the offensive line along with Ryan Zywiec, Ben Coyne, Brady Bendau and Josh Messina. Evan Foust serves as the team's H-back while Caleb McKeen also helps out at tight end. Together the unit has helped Highland average 45 points and 434.3 yards per game.

Foust, Noonan and Zywiec also make a major impact on defense. Foust is the team's leading tackler with 81, including three sacks and seven others for a loss. Zywiec is right behind him with 70 tackles and is tied with Noonan for the team high in sacks at 9.5. The pair are one-two in tackles for a loss, too, with Zywiec at 21.5 and Noonan at 18.

"We faced some tough teams along the way and Highland is going to be a tough game," Avon senior linebacker Owen Garcia said. "Their offensive line and run game is really strong, so we have to be

prepared for that. We've just got to be really physical and assignment sound up front. They can really move guys around and their running back is a hard runner."

Running behind that offensive line is Casey Myser, who's piled up 258 points on 43 total touchdowns. He's rushed for 2,024 yards and 36 touchdowns, losing just one fumble, while also catching 16 passes for 502 yards and seven touchdowns with 385 of those yards coming after the catch.

While Myser is the focal point, the attention he receives opens things up for others. Quarterback Dylan Borla has completed 74.8 percent of his 131 pass attempts for 2,116 yards and 27 touchdowns to just two interceptions. Foust leads the team in catches with 26, accounting for 537 yards and a touchdown, while Lucas Gerding is second with 23 catches, 445 yards and three touchdowns.

"You can't completely stop a back like him," Elder said of Myser. "He's very strong, physical and breaks tackles. He always falls forward. And then you throw that big, tough offensive line in front of him and their play-action passing game is really good, you have yourself a problem. For us to contain him, we have to win up front at the line of scrimmage. If they get a push and knock us off the ball all day long it's going to be hard to stop him once he gets going. I think the key to stopping the run against anybody, but especially against a back like this, is to make sure you're not getting pushed backwards on the defensive line."

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## **RIVALRY RENEWED**

Friday at Elyria will be the eighth time in the past 14 seasons Avon and Highland have met in the Division II postseason. The Eagles have won six the previous seven meetings, including five straight. Here's a rundown of the previous meetings.

### **2023: Avon 28, Highland 14**

WHERE: Strongsville

WHEN: Nov. 17

ROUND: Region 6 championship

SUMMARY: This one was a slugfest as Avon was playing without star quarterback Nolan Good, but rode a dominant defense to victory. Highland mustered just 124 team rushing yards — with no runner gaining more than 43 — and 252 total yards. Avon, however, was held to 273 yards as the Hornets cut the Avon lead to 14-7 in the third quarter and 21-14 in the fourth, but quarterback Blake Elder and wide receiver Matt Maxey put together some clutch plays to seal the win. Maxey was the only Avon player to record a catch, finishing with nine for 130 yards and a touchdown. Eagles running back Jakorion Caffey, now playing for Cincinnati, piled up 133 yards and three touchdowns.

### **2020: Avon 35, Highland 14**

WHERE: Avon

WHEN: Oct. 24

ROUND: Region 6 quarterfinals

SUMMARY: Avon took a 21-0 lead, but Highland responded with 14 unanswered points and received the second-half kickoff. That's when Devon Hunter took over, securing a huge stop on third down then

blasting through the Hornets defense on the ensuing possession for a 15-yard touchdown. Hunter finished with 112 yards and three touchdowns on 12 carries, also adding a catch for 19 yards.

**2017: Avon 28, Highland 10**

WHERE: Strongsville

WHEN: Nov. 10

ROUND: Region 6 semifinals

SUMMARY: Avon was without starting running back Tony Eberhardt because of an illness, so the trio of Aaron Endrizal, Mark Steinmentz and Nick Perusek along with quarterback Ryan Maloy combined for 143 rushing yards and all four touchdowns. The Hornets scored first and led 10-7 at halftime, but Avon responded with 21 unanswered points.

**2015: Avon 49, Highland 20**

WHERE: Avon

WHEN: Nov. 6

ROUND: Region 4 quarterfinals

SUMMARY: The Eagles held Highland to just 64 rushing yards as they built a 28-6 lead and never looked back. Senior linebacker Alex Rimko piled up a career-high 23 tackles, four for a loss with one sack, while senior defensive lineman Vince Garago dominated the line of scrimmage, adding 11 tackles.

**2014: Avon 42, Highland 21**

WHERE: North Royalton (Highland as host)

WHEN: Nov. 7

ROUND: Region 4 quarterfinals

SUMMARY: Running back Gerett Choat returned to Avon's offense with a bang, rushing for 95 yards and scoring all three of his touchdowns in the second half after Highland tied the game at 14. Choat had not carried the ball since Week 5 when he tore the AC joint in his right shoulder against Midview, but he continued to play defense during that span.

**2013: Highland 24, Avon 21**

WHERE: Brunswick

WHEN: Nov. 23

ROUND: Region 4 championship

SUMMARY: Highland's one win also was the series' most thrilling game so far. The Hornets played keep away from Avon and it worked to perfection, milking a combined 15:29 off the clock on two long second-half drives as they took a three-point lead with 6:56 left. Highland stopped Avon three times on defense to hold on.

**2011: Avon 45, Highland 24**

WHERE: Avon

WHEN: Nov. 4

ROUND: Region 6 quarterfinals

SUMMARY: Justin O'Rourke carved up the Hornets, completing 19 of 24 passes for 338 yards and four

touchdowns as the Eagles began their march to the Division II state tournament, finishing as runner-up to Trotwood-Madison.