

PLAYOFF FOOTBALL: HIGHLAND VS. AVON



RUSS GIFFORD / GAZETTE

Right guard/defensive tackle Cody Bendau is one of only three two-way starters for Highland.

Always ready

Bendau's work ethic key to Hornets' success

Albert Grindle
The Gazette

Highland has reached a stage as a top Northeast Ohio football program to where two-way players are a luxury and not a necessity. H-back/linebacker Evan Foust and wide receiver/safety Nick Dobkowski grab plenty of headlines as skill players, but a 5-foot-11, 245-pounder in the middle is the clear glue guy.

C. Bendau

His name is Cody Bendau, a senior who learned the varsity game through the school of hard knocks. He had no choice, because one of the greatest

NEXT UP

WHO: Highland (12-0) vs. Avon (11-1)
WHAT: Division II, Region 6 final
WHEN: 7 p.m. Friday
WHERE: Brunswick Auto Mart Stadium
TV/RADIO: OHSAA.tv; Spectrumnews1.com

offensive lines in Medina County history that included older brother Brady would have ground him into mince meat if he hadn't brought his A-game in practice.

Bendau will be in another fight — this time for his high school career — Friday at Brunswick Auto Mart Stadium when the top-seeded Hornets (12-0) battle third-seeded Avon (11-1)

in the Division II, Region 6 championship for the third consecutive season.

"This community and this team, this is almost like life or death when it comes to our football careers," he said. "It's got to be empty the tank this week."

Gregarious, mature and well-spoken, Bendau had played center most of his career but wasn't blind to the depth chart heading into last season. There was no way he'd start ahead of Carson Noonan (Miami of Ohio), Josh Messina, Ryan Zywiec (Ashland), Brady Bendau and Ben Coyne — the latter two had college offers but elected not to play — so he approached the coaching staff about playing defensive tackle for "the first time in years."

See BENDAU, B2

BENDAU

From B1

Surrounded by Noonan, Zywiec and Caleb McKeen, Bendau's job was to simply hold his ground, do the dirty work and make plays when he could. He finished with 15 tackles and three fumble recoveries, but arguably had just as much fun in practice for a simple, understandable reason.

He got to annoy his 6-0, 285-pound brother every single day as a member of the scout team.

"It was honestly amazing," Cody Bendau said. "(Zywiec and Noonan) held me to a very high standard. Just playing with them, I wanted to be on the podium they were on. I wanted to give effort, effort every single play to be on their level, basically."

"I went against Brady every single day. He'd get very mad at me sometimes whenever I would try too hard against him. Especially last year if I was playing scout team against him, that made me so much better going against Brady, Ben Coyne, Ryan Zywiec every single day. That carried over a lot to our games."

Bendau has remained at defensive tackle this season and owns 25 tackles (4½ for loss, 3½ sacks) for a first-string defense that has sur-

rendered one touchdown, on a 31-yard drive in Week 3 against Avon Lake. The Hornets allow 4.9 points on 155.4 yards per game — both would be school records by a mile — and will battle against an Eagles offense that puts up 41.0 and 378.4.

Bendau has become stout at using his frame and wrestling background to create leverage, and his off-the-snap quickness has improved tremendously. He forced his way into the backfield on back-to-back plays last week against North Ridgeville, resulting in a goal-line stand with Highland clinging to an early 14-0 lead.

On offense, Bendau is arguably the most improved player in Medina County. Replacing his brother at right guard, No. 65 is a key cog for an offense that averages 46.8 points — another school record if it stands — and has put up no fewer than 32 in each game despite breaking in four new starters up front.

"It's honestly kind of surreal to think about how it's been one Bendau after the other," he said. "We always talked about it right at the beginning of the year. (Brady) was always walking me through it watching film at right guard. I'm just doing my thing at right guard. It's fun."

Bendau also takes great pride in blocking for his stepbrother, Casey Myser, Medina County's career

leader for points (540), total touchdowns (90) and rushing touchdowns (79). They've lived together for approximately half of their lives, and Bendau smiled when he said Myser's incredible vision and power make the O-line's job "easier than it has to be."

Few are more proud of Bendau's transformation than Myser, a first-team All-Ohioan who was named Northeast Inland District D-II Offensive Player of the Year this morning.

"I mean, I just think of the little kid I met in third, fourth grade, and now he's turned into a beast," the normally stoic Myser said with obvious excitement. "He's always just been a kid I've been around for most of my life. He's my stepbrother. We fight just like brothers, we love each other like brothers, we're family. It's awesome. I'll fight for them and they'll fight for me."

"He definitely took the offseason and got so much stronger in the weight room. Going in there day in and day out, that dude turned into a monster. I'm talking about one of if not the strongest dude on our entire team. This is something he worked and grinded for all offseason, and him turning into a two-way star is amazing to see. I'm so proud of him."

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