

OHSAA Division II football state rankings: After Avon's title run, is Hoban again the favorite?

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Avon hoisted the state championship last year, becoming the Northeast Ohio's only football team to take home an OHSAA crown.

The defending champs enter this season among the favorites again. They face some traditional road blocks on the way to Canton and the Division II state finals that usually kick off the last weekend of the high school season at Tom Benson Hall of Fame Stadium in Canton.

Who are Avon's top threats to the throne? Find out with this countdown of cleveland.com's preseason top 10 in Division II:

10. Columbus Walnut Ridge (10-1 last year, regional qualifier): The Scots fell by a field goal in the first round of the playoffs to Worthington Kilbourne, but they return All-Ohio quarterback Marquis Lucas and defensive back Lee'Sean Saunders.

9. Cincinnati LaSalle (11-3, regional finalist): One of the state's most-improved teams, the Lancers won seven more games than they did in 2023. Of course, it's tough to find a reprieve in the Greater Catholic League South with Division I powers Moeller, Elder and St. Xavier. They must replace All-Ohio quarterback Patrick McLaughlin, who threw for more than 2,000 yards and rushed for another 750 yards.

8. Highland (13-1, regional finalist): The Suburban League American Conference champions graduated some defensive stalwarts up front in Carson Noonan and Ryan Zywiec, but they return leading rusher Casey Myser and versatile junior playmaker Evan Foust. Highland fell to Avon in each of the last two regional finals. Coach Mike Gibbons has built a program that's capable of taking the next step.

7. Walsh Jesuit (13-1, regional finalist): Coach Nick Alexander has college recruits at plenty of positions, including a pair of Ohio University-bound seniors in cornerback James Brewer III and lineman Colton Crosley. Iowa State recruit Milan Parris is one of the biggest targets around at 6-foot-5, and that should help junior quarterback David Ternosky as he steps in for graduated All-Ohio standout Keller Moten.

6. Wadsworth (11-2, regional semifinalist): The Grizzlies ran into the Avon buzzsaw after winning a share of the Suburban League National Conference championship. Only a Week 10 upset by North Royalton kept them from an undefeated season, and most of coach Justin Todd's squad is back with senior two-way standouts Gavin Madigan (an Army commit) and linebacker/tight end Jacob Earnest. Sophomore Brysen Hall impressed as a ninth-grader and should continue to grow at quarterback for Wadsworth, which could be even better this year.

5. Massillon (11-3, regional finalist): While the Tigers graduated plenty, including quarterback Jalen Slaughter, their defense could carry them. Senior linebacker Ja'Dyn Williams is a three-star prospect, as is cornerback Demari Clemons. Senior Lennox Lemon holds a dozen offers in the secondary. In fact, the secondary should be a major strength for coach Nate Moore's team with junior cornerback Deontay Malone and senior safety Trayon Williams holding Mid-American Conference offers. Junior Savior Owens is among the ones to watch at running back.

4. Cincinnati Anderson (15-1, state finalist): Had it not snowed on Dec. 5 last year in Canton, would Avon's [20-13 win](#) against Anderson turned out differently? The Raptors flashed speed and athleticism that impressed all of Ohio, but they found themselves stuck in neutral against the Eagles on that fateful night. All but one starter from coach Evan Dreyer's offense has graduated, but the defense is led by junior linebacker and edge rusher Antwoine Higgins, whose offer list as a four-star prospect includes Ohio State, Alabama and Oregon. Senior linebacker Reid Baker and cornerbacks Ace Alston — another four-star prospect in the Class of 2027 — and Ke'Maury Tye also are back.

3. Sunbury Big Walnut (13-2, state semifinalist): Quarterback Eli Stumpf made the All-Central District second team as a sophomore, and Big Walnut nearly beat Anderson to reach Canton. Fellow junior Nolan Buirley made the All-Ohio first team as a sophomore and senior linebacker Eli Helton did the same as a junior. Defensive back Brody Hatfield also is back after an All-Ohio season. The Golden Eagles should be loaded.

2. Avon (16-0, state champion): Quarterback Nolan Good is now at Kent State, but Avon is accustomed to reloading and coach Mike Elder's son, Blake, is set to take the controls as a senior signal caller. Ohio State recruit Jakob Weatherspoon is back in the secondary, while Quiante' Smith emerged down the stretch to pace the running game. Miami (Ohio) commit Ryan Stolarski is back at linebacker, too. Avon has reached the state final four — or better, in the case of last season — in seven of the last eight years. The Eagles will be playing with heavy hearts, following the death of lineman Jeremiah Kelly after he enrolled early at the University of Cincinnati.

1. Archbishop Hoban (12-3, state semifinalist): Think Hoban has reason to be motivated? Its season ended last year with a [35-10 loss](#) to Avon in Akron for a trip to Canton. Now, Ohio State-bound tackle Sam Greer and USC commit Elbert "Rock" Hill IV with fellow receiver and cornerback Payton Cook (Louisville recruit) return for coach Tim Tyrrell. He also has a new quarterback in senior Nick Kinsey, an Eastern Michigan recruit who moved in from Minnesota.

Also considered: Ashland, Columbus St. Francis DeSales, Whitehouse Anthony Wayne, Xenia

2025 Advance Local Media LLC. Visit cleveland.com. Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC.