

Highland's resolve has already been tested up front

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GRANGER TWP., Ohio — Josh Messina spent two days in the hospital.

Highland's big senior tackle suffered from dehydration to the point that it kept him out of the Hornets' season opener and start of the following week in preparation for Hudson.

"It made me realize how much I love this team," said Messina, who returned Wednesday and contributed on both sides of the ball Friday night in the Hornets' [32-0 victory](#). "I'm going to fight for this team."

Messina is the only returning starter on the offensive line from last season for Highland (2-0), which entered this week [ranked 12th in the cleveland.com Top 25 for Northeast Ohio](#) and is coming off consecutive runs to the OHSAA Division II regional finals.

That could have hindered Highland's ability to run the ball in its season opener, especially when coach Mike Gibbons and his staff turned to a replacement who never played left tackle before this season. Yet, starting defensive end Dan Miller did just that in a blowout of Erie McDowell on the road in Pennsylvania. With Messina back at tackle Friday, Miller teed off with his teammates on Hudson quarterback Hayden Lipinski for six sacks. The run game complemented that performance, and Highland put together a performance that made Gibbons a proud coach.

"If you have a good season, they're always going to talk about the kids who graduated," Gibbons said. "I love those kids more than anything, but you feel for the kids who have to hear about it all offseason. I'm just proud of those kids for coming out and showing what they could do."

Messina and Miller had to hear about losing All-Ohio defensive linemen Carson Noonan (now at Miami of Ohio) and Ryan Zywiec. So did junior linebacker Evan Foust, whose second-quarter tackle on Reno Ferri forced a fumble. Miller recovered it, leading to the Hornets' first score.

Senior running back Casey Myser celebrated the Hornets' first two scores. He now has five on the season after scoring 46 of them as a junior behind Messina and the rest that graduated.

"He was the lone returning starter from last year's group, so it's not only his ability to block but his leadership and the way he can make the calls up front," Gibbons said. "For some of these kids, it's new. They played JV last year."

When he needed a replacement in Week 1 for Messina at left tackle, they turned to Miller, who is 45 pounds lighter. The closest thing he had as experience at offensive tackle is blocking at tight end or picking up on anything he saw from an opposing scout team lineman trying to block him in practice.

“It was definitely a change for me,” Miller said. “I’ve never played the line, but they’ve always put me in any spot they need me because they trust me. In practice, I told myself I could do it.”

Miller, whose main sport is baseball and is a Suburban League all-star pitcher, grew up playing quarterback and slot receiver during his youth football days. He remained a quarterback and linebacker through middle school, moving to defensive end in eighth grade.

So why play him at tackle?

For Gibbons and his staff, Miller’s mentality had as much to do with it as anything.

“He’s the pitcher of the year in our conference,” Gibbons said. “He’s a great baseball player like Casey, but it’s a lot of multisport kids love football and know how to compete.”

Miller’s mindset is simple.

“When I’m on the mound, I tell myself I’m the best guy out there,” he said. “That’s the same mentality you have to have on the football field. You’ve got to know you’re better than the guy you’re lining up against because if you think different, he’s going to destroy you.”

Highland’s players maintained that approach to their weight training and film study. Gibbons said it is “player led,” starting with those alums who the current playmakers must hear about in the offseason.

Before too long — and Week 2 is about that time — they become the standouts who will leave those question marks next winter and spring about *how Highland can replace them*.

Whether it’s Myser or the interchangeable parts up front, Highland could have up to 14 weeks to postpone that talk and build it up. Senior linebacker Jameson Gordon, whose third-quarter interception made for one of four takeaways by the Hornets, has become one of those players to be remembered.

Even he looks up to Messina’s example.

“He works his (butt) off every day,” Gordon said, “and he worked himself into failure last week. Him being back, he’s one of the best leaders on the team. He gets us pumped up before the games, and he definitely leads our O-line.”