

PLAYOFF FOOTBALL: HIGHLAND VS. NORTH RIDGEVILLE



NICK GAMMETT / GAZETTE

Josh Messina is the only returning starter on the Highland offensive line.

Hammer time

Messina brings relentless physicality to O-line

Albert Grindle
The Gazette

When Highland left tackle Josh Messina heard the words "solo left" in quarterback Grady Gibb's play call, he knew the time to send a message had arrived.

The Hornets were comfortably ahead of Tallmadge 42-0 late in the first half of a Week 6 Suburban League American Conference game, and the first-team offense was embarking on its final drive before taking a seat. Messina was annoyed by what he perceived as a little pre-

NEXT UP

WHO: North Ridgeville (10-1) at Highland (11-0)
WHAT: Division II, Region 6 semifinal
WHEN: 7 p.m. Friday
WHERE: North Gateway Tire Field
TV/RADIO: WEOL.com



Messina

6-foot, 260-pounder buried his man, and what happened next stunned Hornets teammates and even the referees, who incorrectly thought Messina was showing up his opponent.

See MESSINA, B2

MESSINA

From B1

Messina rolled over, popped to his feet and let out a primal scream with a head snap reminiscent of wrestler Ric Flair's famous "Wooo!" He then bobbed his head and pointed toward the Highland sideline that was roaring with approval as Dobkowski scurried for a 27-yard gain that was followed by a 23-yard TD reception from Lucas Gerding.

That Messina, the team's most physical lineman, pancaked someone wasn't a surprise. The celebration certainly was, however, because Messina is so quiet that teammates and coaches alike often tease him that he "talks too much" after saying (maybe) three words. Messina was initially called for unsportsmanlike conduct, but the flag was correctly waved off after the officials realized Messina was celebrating his highlight-reel play with his team.

"There was some trash-talking before the game, and we (forced a punt)," he recalled Wednesday after practice. "I knew it was a screen play, and I told some of my guys, 'I'm going to block this corner.' It was right in front of our sideline, so I was like, 'Just watch.'"

The lone returning starter from one of the greatest O-lines in Medina County history — four of the five were first-team All-Gazette — is now the anchor at left tackle as top-seeded Highland (11-0) prepares to host No. 4 North Ridgeville (10-1) on Friday in a Division II, Region 6 semifinal at North Gateway Tire Field. The role is one Messina takes seriously in his own stoic way after playing between co-Gazette MVP Carson Noonan and All-Ohioan Ryan Zywiec as a junior.

Messina's old-school style takes the classic coaching point "block until the whistle" to heart. He's incredibly punishing, has such tremendously quick feet and hands that he sometimes looks like a robot when working to the second level, boasts impressive vision that allows him to pick up delayed blitzes and stunts with ease and uses a hand punch with such ferociousness that pass rushers going wide have no chance to sniff Gibb.

The only real concern for

Playoff pairings

DIVISION I

Region 1 — No. 4 Toledo Whitmer (9-2) at No. 1 St. Edward (9-2); No. 3 Canton McKinley (9-2) at No. 2 Mentor (11-3)
Region 2 — No. 5 Springfield (8-4) at No. 1 Middlebrook (8-2); No. 6 Huber Heights Wayne (8-4) at No. 2 Troy (9-2)
Region 3 — No. 5 Powell Olentangy Liberty (9-4) at No. 1 Lewis Center Clermont (9-2); No. 6 Upper Arlington (10-2) at No. 2 Piquetting Central (10-1)

DIVISION II

Region 4 — No. 4 Cincinnati Princeton (9-2) at No. 1 Cincinnati Elder (11-3); No. 3 Cincinnati St. Xavier (9-2) at No. 2 Cincinnati Anderson (11-3)
Region 5 — No. 5 Hudson (10-2) at No. 1 Avon Archbishop Hoban (9-1); No. 3 Austintown Fitch (9-1) at No. 2 Walsh Jesuit (9-1)
Region 6 — No. 4 North Ridgeville (10-1) at No. 1 Highland (11-0); No. 3 Avon (10-1) at No. 2 Wadsworth (11-0)

DIVISION III

Region 7 — No. 4 Canal Winchester (10-1) at No. 1 Surrency Big Walnut (10-1); No. 3 Massillon Washington (9-3) at No. 2 Columbus St. Francis Xavier (9-2)
Region 8 — No. 5 Cincinnati La Salle (9-2) at No. 1 Cincinnati Anderson (11-3); No. 7 Harrison (9-3) at No. 3 Tiffinwood Madison (7-3)

DIVISION IV

Region 9 — No. 4 West Branch (10-1) at No. 1 Perry (9-2); No. 3 Mentor Lake Catholic (9-2) at No. 2 Geneva (9-3)
Region 10 — No. 4 Lima (9-3) at No. 1 Shiloh (11-0); No. 6 Sandusky

Perkins (9-3) at No. 2 Galien (10-1)
Region 15 — No. 4 Chillicothe Union (11-0) at No. 1 New Lexington (10-1); No. 3 Plain City Jonathan Alder (10-1) at No. 2 Gradenheuter Indian Valley (10-0)
Region 16 — No. 4 Cincinnati (11-3) at No. 1 Cincinnati Indian Hill (11-0); No. 3 Cincinnati Hill Christian Academy (10-1) at No. 2 Goshawk Valley (10-1)

DIVISION V

Region 17 — No. 4 Marietta Garfield (9-2) at No. 1 Youngstown Cardinal Mooney (9-2); No. 3 Poland Seminary (9-2) at No. 2 Grand (11-0)
Region 18 — No. 5 Findlay Liberty-Benton (10-4) at No. 1 Liberty Center (11-0); No. 2 Genoa Area (10-1) at No. 2 Winchester Tway (10-1)

DIVISION VI

Region 19 — No. 4 Barnesville (9-2) at No. 1 Winesburg (11-0); No. 3 Nelsonville York (11-0) at No. 2 Gahanna Columbus Academy (9-2)

DIVISION VII

Region 20 — No. 5 Redwood North Union (8-4) at No. 5 Carlisle (10-2); No. 11 Cincinnati Mariemont (8-4) at No. 2 Lewisburg Indian Lake (9-2)
Region 21 — No. 5 Smithville (10-2) at No. 1 Kirtland (11-0); No. 7 Sugarcreek Garvey (9-2) at No. 6 Delton (9-3)
Region 22 — No. 3 Carey (8-4) at No. 4 Paulding (11-0); No. 3 Archbold (9-2) at No. 2 Jackson Heights-Lakeview (10-1)

DIVISION VIII

Region 23 — No. 5 North Robinson Central Crawford (11-1) at No. 1 Centerville (10-1); No. 3 West Jefferson (10-1) at No. 2 Beverly (9-3)
Region 24 — No. 5 Oldcastle (8-4) at No. 1 New Madison Tiffinville (11-0); No. 6 Anna (9-3) at No. 2 Springfield Northeastern (10-1)

the Hornets heading into the season was the O-line, yet Messina, Wyatt Sitz, Spencer Marquis, Cody Bendau and Thomas Fearn have paved the way for an offense that averages 46.7 points on 404.4 yards. Highland also has yet to score fewer than 32 points.

"He's a very physical offensive lineman who finishes blocks and plays and does everything the right way," offensive line coach Kenny Fritz said. "I would describe him as interesting. Josh on the surface level, he seems like a very bland individual, but the more you talk to him, there's a lot more about him than meets the eye. He's a great kid, first and foremost, he's a team player and knowing Josh is always going to the right thing makes us feel great that he's anchoring the offensive line for us."

Messina's football journey has been relatively unique, because his first love was lacrosse. His father, Charles, played at Northern Illinois, and Josh took up the sport in the fifth grade. He's now a stout defender for one of the fastest-growing programs in Northeast Ohio under coach Nate Howard, who also was the O-line coach when Messina was a freshman and sophomore. Messina decided to add football to his athletic résumé in eighth grade.

Why?

"Hitting people," he said with a grin before later expanding and calling his level of physicality "high."

"(The game is about) finding something angry that you don't like in life and you taking it out on the field."

Despite boasting a street fighter mentality, Messina has not been assessed a penalty over the last seven games. One of the few flags, a holding, was simply bad luck when his arm became stuck underneath an Avon Lake defender's jersey after he drove his man 9 yards laterally downfield before pancaking him on an outside zone play.

Coming off an efficient 38-7 blowout of Brecksville, the Hornets know there will be no more easy games. North Ridgeville was the surprise of the Southwestern Conference that has been dominated by Avon, winning three one-score games to wrap up sole possession of second place behind the Eagles.

If anything, Messina and Co. wouldn't mind a four-quarter game for once. They've yet to play from start to finish this season.

"We just have to follow our (blocking) rules, especially on offense" Messina said, "and on defense, we're going to throw a bunch of things at them."

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