



## Upper St. Clair and Pine-Richland hope to 'run' away with WPIAL 5A football championship



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Daylight saving time was two Saturdays ago, but the Pine-Richland and Upper St. Clair football teams will have another version of turn-back-the-clock this Saturday.

In this high school football era of spread offenses, four-receiver sets and teams throwing the ball often — especially in the larger classifications — Pine-Richland and Upper St. Clair will square off in a championship game that might have an old school feel to it. In other words, these Rams and Panthers will try to run off with the title.

The two meet for the Class 5A crown noon Saturday at Norwin High School. It will be the first of two championships at Norwin. Central Catholic plays North Allegheny for the 6A title at 6 p.m.

“This is kind of a throwback game,” Upper St. Clair coach Mike Junko said.

Added Pine-Richland coach Jon LeDonne: “The temperature will be low and it will be cold, too, so it will be more of an old school game. It will probably be a pound-it-out game, for sure.”

While Upper St. Clair does throw some, the Panthers don't exactly come at opponents with an all-out aerial attack. Freshman Ethan Hellmann will be the starting QB and he has attempted only 31 passes the past three games.

Both of these teams seem to be at their best when they are running the ball with success and what team has more success on the ground at Norwin will more than likely have the championship trophy on its bus on the way home. But these two go about having success on the ground in different ways.

Upper St. Clair is led by senior running back Jamaal Brown, and the Panthers usually get him the ball in a conventional way — by handing it to him. Brown has rushed for 1,468 yards and averages 7.9 yards a carry. In the first nine games, Brown averaged only 13 attempts. In the past three games, he has carried the ball 24, 20 and 22 times and has run for 176, 198 and 132 yards in those games.

“The team that can establish the line of scrimmage and run the football should have a good day in this game,” Junko said. “We’ve traditionally been a spread offense type of team, but because of weather conditions, we’ve gone with our heavy set at times lately and run the ball. That’s not always in our M.O.

“But we feel like Jamaal is capable of taking what would be a 3-yard gain and turning it into something bigger. Their kid is the same way.”

That “kid” is Pine-Richland quarterback Ryan Palmieri. While USC’s ground attack is conventional with a running back leading the way, Pine-Richland’s is led by its QB. Palmieri was switched from running back to quarterback after the Rams started 1-3. Pine-Richland hasn’t lost since.

Since taking over at QB, Palmieri has rushed for 1,132 yards on 146 attempts in eight games and now has 1,503 yards on 231 carries for the season. In two playoff games, he has rushed for 236 and 160 yards. Palmieri gains yardage on outside runs but also is adept at finding holes inside the tackles.

“We just do what is suited to our personnel,” LeDonne said. “Ryan could probably sling it around and maybe throw for 250 or 300 yards. But the later it gets in November, you’ve got to be able to run the ball.”

Pine-Richland also has a strong runner in Ethan Pillar, who has rushed for 962 yards on 161 attempts. Palmieri has thrown only 70 times all season, but he is efficient, completing 50 of 70 for 558 yards.

Pine-Richland also has an excellent offense live that features Ryan Cory, a 6-foot-4, 280-pound junior who has scholarship offers from Pitt, West

Virginia and Kentucky, among others.

Besides Brown, Upper St. Clair has a big-play receiver in Aidan Besselman, who averages 20.1 yards a catch. Besselman, who also plays defensive back, has some scholarship offers from FBS and FCS colleges.

“I laugh sometimes about offense because in the playoffs, it’s really defense that carries you to a championship,” Junko said. “Any great Upper St. Clair team, they’ve played good defense to get to the championship. We feel good about our defense, but this is one of the most formidable running attacks we’ve seen.”

Junko is in his fourth season as coach and has taken Upper St. Clair to a title game for the first time since 2011, when legendary Jim Render was the coach.

For LeDonne, this is his second time in a title game, but with a different team. Not many coaches in WPIAL history have taken two different teams to championship games, but LeDonne won a WPIAL title with Penn Hills in 2018. This is his first year at Pine-Richland.

“We talked when we were going onto the field [Tuesday] for practice,” LeDonne said. “We needed the lights on for practice. Any time you have the lights on when you’re going to practice and it’s November, you’ve had a pretty good season. We just need to close it out now.”

### **Starting lineups**

#### **UPPER ST. CLAIR**

##### **Offense**

**13** QB Ethan Hellmann – 5-9, 140, Fr.

**7** RB Jamaal Brown – 5-11, 205, Sr.

**4** WR Aidan Besselman – 6-3, 190, Sr.

**5** WR Cody Marn – 6-4, 190, Sr.

**43** WR Ty Lagoni – 6-0, 190, Sr.

**44** TE Cam Phillips – 5-11, 175, Jr.

**75** LT Marcus Fennell – 6-3, 300, Sr.

**58** LG Nate Stohl – 6-3, 240, Soph.

**52** C Zachary Ehasz – 6-3, 240, Sr.

**55** RG Mark Banbury – 6-2, 275, Sr.

**78** RT Marco Carone – 6-4, 250, Jr.

**99** K Bennett Henderson – 5-10, 165, Jr.

### **Defense**

**55** NG Mark Banbury – 6-2, 275, Sr.

**58** DT Nate Stohl – 6-3, 240, Soph.

**78** DT Marco Carone – 6-4, 250, Jr.

**23** ILB Van Hellmann – 6-1, 190, Soph.

**34** ILB Shea Moorhead – 6-2, 220, Sr.

**43** OLB Ty Lagoni, 6-0, 190, Sr.

**33** OLB Aidan Conn – 6-2, 190, Sr.

**4** SS Aidan Besselman – 6-3, 190, Sr.

**41** CB Gordon Croninger – 5-11, 175, Sr.

**10** CB Jacob Hufnagel – 6-1, 180, Sr.

**17** FS Tim Speer – 5-10, 170, Sr.

**42** P Jacobo Echeverria – 5-11, 175, Sr.

### **PINE-RICHLAND**

#### **Offense**

**25** QB Ryan Palmieri – 5-11, 180, Sr.

**44** RB Ethan Pillar – 6-0, 200, Jr.

**10** H Alex Cerminara – 6-1, 195, Jr.

**3** WR Niko Andrews – 6-1, 175 Soph.

**5** WR Vasile Balouris – 5-9, 175, Jr.

**1** WR Andrew Mellis – 5-10, 185, Sr.

**55** OT Brady Carrigan – 6-6. 230, Sr.

**59** OG Jon Smith – 6-1, 270, Jr.

**52** C Isaiah Kerns – 6-1, 270, Sr.

**75** OG Ryan Cory – 6-4, 290, Jr.

**73** OT Jake Beam – 6-4, 275, Sr.

**26** K Grant Argrio – 6-1, 190, Soph.

## **Defense**

**18** DE Joey Perry – 5-11, 205, Sr.

**7** DT John Rottinghause – 6-2, 220, Sr.

**75** DT Ryan Cory – 6-4, 290, Jr.

**34** DE Aiden Hasley – 6-1, 215, Sr.

**10** LB Sam Heckert – 5-10, 170, Soph.

**40** LB Max Heckert – 6-0, 220, Sr.

**4** LB Evan Johnson – 6-1, 175, Jr.

**19** CB Bryce O'Brien – 5-10, 170, Jr.

**1** CB Andrew Mellis- 5-10, 185, Sr.

**25** S Ryan Palmieri – 5-11, 180, Sr.

**28** S Tanner Cunningham – 5-7, 155, Soph.

**18** P Joey Perry – 5-11, 205, Sr.

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