

## Nottingham football offense lines up for success

By Rich Fisher

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**OCT. 22:** The Nottingham High football team has the top passer and top receiver in the Colonial Valley Conference with Mark Newlin and Robert Wiggs. It has Andre Simmons, a running back who averages 4.5 yards per carry.

The Northstars have scored 30 or more points in four of the last five games and 40 points in three of the last five.

Obviously, they have skill players.

But skill without protection is like a sharp looking suit with no one wearing it. It just kind of lays there. Football success always starts in the trenches, where amazingly, Nottingham has three sophomores starting on the offensive line and doing a more-than-respectable job.

The anchor has been 6-0, 200-pound Matthew Hedden, who started at center every game as a freshman last year. Senior Miguel Colon (6-2, 220) is at left guard but is mainly a defensive player, while senior left tackle Rafal Klos (6-3, 200) is just returning from an early-season injury. To the right of Hedden are classmates Tyree Patterson (5-8, 210) and Zachary Baker (6-3, 240) at guard and tackle. It's not an experienced unit, but second-year volunteer offensive line coach Mike Taylor is turning it into a formidable one. An O-lineman at Steinert and Trenton State (now College of New Jersey), Taylor joined the Northstars last season. His brother Don is the team's quarterbacks coach/offensive coordinator.

"They're young, so I spend all my practice time just working basic drills and teaching the fundamentals," Taylor said. "To scheme stuff is easy. We worry about that a couple days before the game, make sure we know what we're gonna see and we have the scheme stuff down.

"But every practice, it's just the fundamentals of pass blocking, run blocking. To play the offensive line you need the whole array of all the footwork of five different run steps, you need to know how to pass block and how to pass set. So it's constantly working on fundamentals."

They are fundamentals no one sees from the stands. If the footwork is right, if the lineman hits the defender exactly where he should, no one really knows but the coaches and players. Everyone else is busy watching the ball.

But rest assured, if this line had not matured beyond its years so quickly, Nottingham (3-3) would not be carrying a three-game winning streak into Saturday's game at West Windsor-Plainsboro South. But the good news for the 'Stars is the upside the young linemen still have.

"I'm happy we're getting it done," Taylor said. "But it's an off-season workout thing we need to get them to do to get them to come in next year and be a dominant offensive line. The problems we have right now are just being out-physicaled. They're trying to do the techniques, they're sophomores and they don't have that senior strength yet. So we need the off-season work to get where we need to be.

"But they're a fundamentally sound line, and every week we're working the fundamentals and breaking film to see what they're weak at. They're getting better every week and if we're putting up these kinds of points we should be winning some games."

Ironically, Hedden has gone from the new kid on the line to its most experienced player in just one year.

The sophomore played football throughout his childhood growing up in Phillipsburg. He was a tight end until being moved to center in eighth grade. He stayed there when he arrived in Hamilton Township as a freshman, and showed that he learned a lot in just one year snapping the ball.

"I just came in last year and tried to work hard and get better and just try to do what the team needed me to do," Hedden said. "I did what coach Taylor taught me and tried to work my hardest."

Hedden said he finally felt like he belonged after Nottingham defeated Hamilton and the line helped Kendrick Williams rush to like, 8 million records that day.

After losing all his linemates, Hedden has welcomed the challenge of being a leader.

"It's kind of neat," he said. "I like helping Tyree Patterson and Zach Baker, they kind of look for me to see who they block. I just try to help them out."

Taylor, who rotates as many linemen as possible so no one is completely new to the experience the following season, feels 2008 was a tremendous help to Hedden.

"It's nice that he played last year," the coach said. "He went through a lot. He went through all the growing pains.

"It's nice that he comes back and when you coach him he understands the game. When you explain things to him he has that understanding from having played last year."

And he has been able to transfer that feeling to the first-year starters.

"He gives that to the other sophomores," Taylor said. "He's turned into the leader, he's the one on the line talking. I saw it even more today (Saturday against Trenton).

"In the second half at West (Oct. 10) it happened a lot because they were blitzing a lot, so there was a lot more communication in that game than the previous games. I commented after the game that we really came a long way because of the communication of the O-line. I saw it again today so we should have that for the rest of the year. Next year all these kids are back so we should be a really dominant offense next year."

They're a pretty dominant offense this year, much to the surprise of one their leaders.

"I kind of thought we would struggle a little bit," Hedden said. "I can't believe we're doing so well." Believe it Matt, because you're part of the reason.