

## **2007 District 12 Preview**

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During the last few years, there has been one constant in Philadelphia high school football. That constant is that it should be no surprise who the top teams will be in each league. In the Philadelphia Catholic League (PCL) Red division, the top teams will be St. Joe Prep, Roman Catholic and LaSalle, and possibly a rebounding Cardinal O'hara. In the PCL Blue division, West Catholic and Archbishop Wood should contend for their division and league title. In the Philadelphia Public League (PPL), the top teams in AAAA will once again be Frankford, Washington and Northeast. Frankford and Washington have combined to win 16 of the last 21 PPL championships, with each team winning 8 apiece. Bok, the only PPL team to win the AAA division, will most likely repeat as AAA champ again this year.

### **Philadelphia Catholic League**

#### **Red Divison (big schools)**

If one thing has been certain for the past seven years, it's that St Joseph Prep will win the Red Division regular season title. But, winning the Red Division title doesn't necessarily guarantee a PCL title. As a matter of fact, during the past 7 seasons, Prep has won 48 consecutive regular season games, but have won only 4 PCL titles.

In 2007, defending PCL Red champ, LaSalle, who surprised everyone with a semi-final OT win against Roman, and then an even bigger surprise victory over Prep in the final, will return this year looking much different than last season. LaSalle lost a good deal of players to graduation after last season, but with the numbers they get, look for them to stay in the hunt in the PCL Red division in 2007.

Roman Catholic, since their championship run in 1999, always seems to be the team who might have a chance to knock Prep from the top of the division. But, they have consistently fallen short, usually finishing second or third in the division and then coming up short in the playoffs. But, with a couple of D1 prospects and many from their 2006 team returning, once again Roman will be the odds on favorite to give Prep a run for the division title in 2007.

After the top three teams, the final year of the current league alignment will see the fourth through sixth spots fought out among Judge, North, Ryan and O'Hara, with Bonner once again bringing up the rear in the Red division. The Falcons of Northeast Catholic, the perennial doormat of the PCL Red division, saw a resurgence in 2006, mainly due to the outstanding performance of their all-everything player, Daryl Robinson. With Robinson playing at Temple in 2007, the Falcons want to prove that they were more than a one player team. Look for the Falcons to finish in the middle of the pack in 2007 as they continue their resurgence. Father Judge, once a perennial powerhouse in the PCL has fallen on mediocre times since Whitey Sullivan retired from coaching 8 years ago. The Crusaders, with the top enrollment in the PCL, and loads of talent each year, is still trying to find its way back to prominence in the league. Ryan, a team that was much better than their 2006 record, returns a good number of players and should improve their record this season. Look for the Raiders to break into the playoffs this season. O'hara, a usual PCL power, tries to rebound from a tough 2006 season, which saw them win only 2 league games against 5 losses. Bonner hired Jim Burner as the new coach in 2006, and then they added a new turf practice field in 2007. Then, unexpectedly, Burner was fired by the Bonner administration on the second day of camp this year, which means the Friars will start the season for the third straight year with a new coach. It's hard to imagine how Bonner will climb out of the basement of the Red Division this year. Let's hope they get things straightened out soon, if for no other reason, then for the kids on that team.

### **Blue Division (small schools)**

Like the PCL Red Division, the PCL crowned a new champion in 2006. West Catholic, the Blue Division's runner-up in 2003, 2004 and 2005, finally broke through and beat Archbishop Wood, the Blue Division three-peat champs. This division is, in my humble opinion, wide open in 2007, with up to three or four teams contending for the title.

The top two teams, by virtue of their performance the past four seasons have to be West Catholic and Archbishop Wood. Wood (2001, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006) or West (2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006) have made it to the championship game each of the past 6 years and both teams have met in the Blue Division Championship each of the past four years, with Wood winning the first three and West finally besting Wood in the 2006 game. Both teams are usually loaded with talented players, with West usually having higher profile players like Curtis Brinkley (Syracuse), John Maddox (West Virginia), Derrell Hand (Notre Dame), Marques Slocum (Michigan), but it has been Wood in 2003, 2004 and 2005 who prevailed in the championship. Only in 2006, without a Division 1 prospect on the team, were they able to finally break through the championship door for the first time in 41 years.

Archbishop Wood's coach, Joe Powell, left the team at the conclusion of the 2006 season to coach at Upper Merion. This left the team in turmoil, as the administration hired a coach, but due to booster backlash, he resigned after only a few days. The search for a new coach seemed to go on forever, with the school finally offering the position to one of Powell's assistants, who promptly turned it down. The job was then offered to, and accepted by long time St Joe Prep assistant, Steve Devlin. Look for Devlin to try to bring some of the Prep magic to Wood and keep them near the top as a contender in the Blue Division.

After West and Wood, you have to look at Neumann-Goretti to make a run at the division title. Even with a new coach, the Saints should make a run for the title, mainly due to the many returning players from their 2006 semi-final team. The Saints two marquee players would be linemates Chris Palmer and Kadeem Custis, both of whom should entertain some Division 1 offers before all is said and done. Steve Smith, citing frustration with the school administration, resigned in early July. The administration was able to bring in a half-dozen or so applicants on short notice, but eventually did the right thing by turning over the reigns of the team to assistant Bill Sytsma. Sytsma served as Offensive Line coach for the saints the past two seasons and should be able to keep the team focused on the task at hand. Look for the Saints to finish in the top three of the division.

The next three teams in the division will be a toss up between Conwell-Egan, Archbishop Carroll and Bishop McDevitt. All three teams have had their share of glory the past ten years, but all three have also seen some hard times in recent years. These three teams should round out the 6 team playoff roster, but the order of finish is anybody's guess. I see it as Carroll, McDevitt and Egan.

The basement should be occupied by perennial basement dwellers Cardinal Dougherty and Kennedy-Kenrick. Neither of these two teams has won a league game against any other team except for each other. This year should be pretty much the same.

## Philadelphia Public League

### AAAA

**Note:** The Public League AAAA teams play in three divisions (Red, White and Blue). The teams are selected for each division by how they performed the previous season. The Red division is generally the best teams in the league, the Blue division are the not so good teams and the White division consists of the “so-so” teams. Each season, the last place team from the Red and the White division move down a division, and the top teams in the White and Blue move up. In my humble opinion, it’s not the best way to align the league. But, then again, they rarely ask my opinion.

In the Public League AAAA Divisions, you can pretty much flip a coin each year. Heads is Frankford and tails is Washington. Or, heads is Washington and tails is Frankford. It really doesn’t matter, as one of these two teams will most likely win the PPL championship, just like they have done in most years for the past 25 years. As a matter of fact, over the past 25 seasons, these two teams have won 17 league titles (Frankford 9, Washington 8), and all of the past 7 championships (Fkd 4, Wash 3). There have only been 4 championships in the past 25 that didn’t feature one of these two teams (1982, 1993, 1998, and 1999). Nothing much changes in the public league, so expect these two teams to be in the thick of it at the end of the season.

The best team in the Public League over the past 25 years, who hasn’t won a championship in about 25 years, is Northeast. Northeast is the league’s hard-luck team, going 1-4 in championship games in the past 25 years (they won in 1983), and even losing out on a playoff spot one year, due to an arcane playoff tie-breaker, in a year when they were clearly one of the best teams in the league. The biggest obstacle has been the fact that Northeast is generally in the same division with Washington and Frankford. But, if any team can knock Frankford and Washington off the PPL hill, it’ll be Northeast. Central sometimes makes a little noise, but as usual, they will come up short in the end. Although some may disagree with me, the rest of the AAAA division of the PPL isn’t really worth mentioning; at least not this year.

### AAA

The AAA division of the PPL is easy. Bok will beat up on the under manned Charter schools and win the division. They’ll compete in the PPL AAAA playoffs, where they will lose in the first round and then go on to the AAA state playoffs and get whooped by whatever team they are unfortunate enough to play. There’s really not much more to say about this division.