

# Off The Cuff *and on the QT*

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## Two and two equals two!

LANGHORNE: What exactly does that mean? Easy, two games with two teams in each and after they're over, they'll be just two teams left (see what I'm saying: 2 games with 2 teams will result in just 2 ... oh, forget it).

And before I get going on my report for you readers, you can see I'm back in Langhorne after my little jaunt to the West coast. Boy oh boy, I would have bet my last nickel on the Trojans to win that game. As it is, with the Westwood boys nipping the South-Central crew I believe it's safe to say that the games are still determined on the field.

Okay, back to the point. We've got ourselves a wing-ding of a weekend coming up with the 'Canes and Falcons meeting at a little past high noon at War Memorial in Doylestown. Plus on the western side of the state the Panthers and Little Lions will do likewise at Mansion Park in Altoona. Figure a couple of hours later that day and we'll know who our champs are (East and West). What say we dig in a bit and see if we can't figure out how these games might turn out – and we'll start out West.

### **The Western Championship**

The Upper St. Clair Panthers versus the State College Little Lions – as I said in one of my earlier “look-sees”, it's an all Big Cat final for the “West-enders”. Expect plenty of growls, claws and teeth in that affair.

First off, how about Jim Render and his Panthers. With 28 years as the head man at USC (actually Render has been a head coach for 37 years in total with 313 victories stashed in the vault) and a WPIAL championship for each finger on his hand (that's five if you hadn't noticed – including the thumb), Coach Render and his guys are the real deal (and who can forget his 1989 club that some rank in the top ten of all time PA teams). Focusing in on 2006, though, this year's team is looking like it's one of those “best teams” as well. Featuring all the hallmarks of a Render coached club – discipline, execution, mistake-free ball and a miserly defense (plus a 14-0 record) it's sure tough to look the other way when these guys run on the field.

But what makes this ought-six Panther club tick? You have to start with the fleet feet and quick moves of Dane Conwell who is USC's all-purpose man in the backfield. It's Conwell who can be counted on week after week to deliver the mail. And right up there with him is their QB, Pat McShane, and his favorite targets, Neil Apfelbaum and Taylor Everett. Dependable and steady but not flashy in the least, the Panthers do what they have to and have averaged a respectable, but hardly spectacular, 31 points a game. Just in case you're wondering about their size, let me provide you with some "stats" on their all-senior interior linemen (left tackle to right): Jason Sakoian (6'-5", 255); Josh Radziukinas (5'-11", 220); Zach Jones (6'-1", 225); Jeremy Block (5'-10", 235); and Dan Mulholland (6'-0", 255). (Senior Davis Shane is their tight end and comes in at 6'4", 205.) That's a very respectable 240 a man and did I mention – they're fast!

So what about the defense, you ask? Tough, fast, stingy, cheap, mean – am I making a point here? Giving up just over 9 a game these uglies are a LARGE part of that 14-0 record. Yet they're as nondescript as their plain, jet-black helmets. No frills, nothing fancy, just straightforward as it gets. Their motto: Line up, hit you, repeat. Line up, hit you, repeat. Perhaps you might like to hear their names. Here's a few: David Shine, Josh Radziukinas and Dan Mulholland along the front with Dane Conwell at linebacker and Pat McShane at corner and Grant Serdy as a free safety (at least there were a few "new" names among the no-names).

So not being a two platoon team, the Panthers put their best guys out there - on both sides of the ball - and so far it's working just fine (and the WPIAL is no walk in the park).

What about the Little Lions, Paula, don't we get to hear about them? Sure you do boys and girls, just pull your chairs in a little closer and I'll give you the dope. Course, I should start with a "Tip o' The Hat" to head honcho Al Wolski for snagging his 100<sup>th</sup> career win with State College's victory over Governor Mifflin this past weekend. There isn't a fella that deserves it more – way to go coach!

Now the team. Well, of the four clubs still standing (which is a tremendous feat in and of itself) State College probably is given the lowest "rating" by the people who think about such things. Record-wise, and at 12-2, they've been stung a few times (Bishop McDevitt tripped them 24-16 and Harrisburg turned them back too, 32-27). Plus a few games have been nail-biters (Altoona made it close but went down 23-17 and Central Dauphin had them on the ropes but gave it up, 29-26). Offensively they do know how to score (they're lighting up the scoreboard at almost 35 a game) but defensively they're the "weakest" of the group allowing almost 14 each week. Let me sum it up this way - when you think of the Lions you think "wild and wooly" – exciting all the way, from start to finish.

Personnel wise, the team revolves around senior quarterback Brooke Hart. He's like their Dan Persa or Andy Fogel – the man who makes it all happen. When Hart is happening the Lions are too. And he's got a nice target in Nate Stupar who has speed, hands and is tough. All in all, the Little Lions have a nimble, fast offense that can score quickly. They're tough to hold down and are the better of the two sides of the ball that State College puts on the field.

Speaking of being “defensive”, when they're on the field they do “do their job” but they have been pushed around a bit during the season. Even so, State College has made the Final Four so they can't be all that bad (even if D3/D6 is often viewed as the runt of the group).

## **The Eastern Championship**

Pennsbury and Liberty, Pennsbury and Liberty, Pennsbury and Liberty. Or said another way – Liberty and Pennsbury. It's a dream come true. It's like I'm a kid again. The Falcons and Hurricanes. The Big 6/7/8. Easton, Neshaminy, Dieruff, Wescoe, Opp, Ramsey, Forchetti, Kane, Petercuskie, Hartenstine, Donchez, Edwards, Emanuel, Colbert, Baugher ... wow, that was a real mind trip.

Alright, alright let's get back to reality and take a gander at Liberty first. And any look in that direction has to start with Dan Persa. Not much more to say about this young man, is there? A four year starter and Mr. Everything to the Liberty fans and their team. He's the man. Smoking the 40 in 4.5 he's able to run them in when the mood strikes (he's picked up 916 yards on the ground) while he can claim a completion percentage of almost 70% too (and he likes to throw with 180 attempts so far this year for over 1,700 yards). All in all he's scored 12 times with his own two feet and has 16 through the air. So when you think Liberty and you think offense, points and scoring, you can almost stop right there and just yell out – it's Dan time. As Persa goes, so goes Liberty.

I probably should mention one other “thing”, and not as an after thought – his name is Ahkeem Smith and he's Persa's upback in the pro-style spread offense they employ. Mr. Smith not only goes to Washington but he also goes up and down the field piling up 1,300 yards and scoring 25 TDs in the process. So let's just say the two of them require watching (and a couple of extra players on the field – at all times).

Okay then – how about their defense? Adequate. Above average, not great. Course when your offense is putting up almost 40 a game how good do you have to be (that's right – 40). So even at 12.5 “points allowed”, it's really not an issue (and their 13-1 record makes that point).

So all in all, Liberty is a pretty good team (and every bit as big as you might think). And although their season long list of opponents probably wasn't as tough

as Pennsbury's, they went to the dance last year so they've got a wealth of experience on their side. On the other side of the coin, though, BECA did figure them out as they handed the 'Canes their lone setback of the year, 21-20. Plus their first tussle with Easton (regular season) ended as a win (17-7) but it wasn't a runaway victory. So before the crown is placed on their head, keep in mind that they're not invincible.

Next up in our review: Pennsbury. The orange and black. The B.U.M.s – Big Ugly Monsters. What a “surprise” they've been this year (actually, not to me). I kind of think of them as the movie (“Back to The Future”) – that's what this team is (try thinking Dr. Frankenstein – Galen Snyder – as he's glued together pieces of the 1972 and 1974 Falcons with some new sinew and muscle all covered in a healthy dose of that good old Pennsbury work ethic which should be read as “smash-mouth”). I'll tell you what - these guys are one of the more single-minded groups Lower Bucks County has seen in a few seasons (they kind of remind me of the 2001 'Skins – determined).

Okay, looking behind the curtain the first thing you'll find is their “Ground and Pound” philosophy. And they wear it well as they're a bunch of brutes on offense; they thrive on Stone Age football. Don't believe me? Check their stats: 3,636 rushing yards and 682 passing with 44 TDs on the ground and just 3 up top. Their fullback is Josh Parkes who tips them at 250 pounds. Then there's their halfback, Jackson Fagan, who has 2,125 yards and 26 six-pointers (he's so goooooood). Meanwhile quarterback Victor Iturbides sets the tone for the team. Quiet and unassuming. He's like the guy who gets up everyday, kisses the wife and two kids on the cheek and heads off to work and gets back home at six – every day. Yea, that Pennsbury offense is as dependable as a 1964 VW bug – and as predictable (course, it hasn't mattered yet as nobody has quite figured out how to stop them).

The offensive line? Well, if you had them over for dinner you could blow your food budget in one night (yes – they're big, as in BIG). So all in all, when Pennsbury's offense steps on the field and unleashes “Ground and Pound” there is just not much you can do. They will score – just not a lot (28 points a game) but they will score (and they'll leave a few bruises along the way).

Over on the defense the first place you look is right in the middle and what do you see? C.J. Marck. In fact, you see him everywhere – along with the rest of the Falcon “stonewallers” – and that's what they are – a stonewall. They don't give up squat and their “play” during the playoff run has been getting better every week. This is an evolving and improving bunch of kids. Kind of like a fine wine – the longer they're around the better they get. Case in point – during the regular season they gave up a little over 100 points in 10 games while in the post-season they've been clipped for a paltry 32 in 4 games (with at least half that after the first team was on the bench). See what I'm saying?

Hey – whether it’s Marck, Dennis Lynch, Greg Bickel, Fred Bordley, Mike Mastronardi or any of the rest of the Pennsbury defenders standing at the podium, they’re not very different from Upper St. Clair when it comes to the speech they deliver: Line up, hit you, repeat. Line up, hit you, repeat. Line up, hit you, repeat (just a little louder).

Anyway, between you and me - I’m tired of all this stuff. Who cares about all the superlatives (except the moms making the scrapbooks)? Let’s cut to the chase. What we have here is the best offense of the four still standing (Liberty) going up against the best defense of the four still standing (Pennsbury). I’m serious as the day is long – Pennsbury has the best defense and Liberty has the best offense in Pennsylvania. Flip-flopping the view through the telescope, Pennsbury has a good, solid offense and Liberty has a good, solid defense (although I should add that Jackson Fagan is, without a doubt, the best running back that’s still running).

Said another way it’s like this: Persa and company – best offense. Marck and company – best defense. Persa – best quarterback. Fagan – best running back. And oh yea – Marck – best linebacker. Let’s face it; we’ve got a lot of “bests” meeting up in Doylestown. Really, we do.

## **Paula’s Picks**

I’ll start with the Western Championship. I think you know where I’m going. Yea – you’re right. Upper St. Clair. Too much offense against not enough defense. Too much discipline and tradition against too much “new to the dance” but not all there yet. I don’t think the Panthers are going to find the going easy but they will come out on top (but State College will be back so keep an eye for these guys).

As to the East. Ohhhhh my. As a dear friend of mine knows so well, this is a tough one. Getting specific, I see this as a game going to the first team to reach 21 but that won’t be easy for either of them (if either of them even gets to 21). This could be a 17-14 final. Or maybe a 15-14 game. I don’t expect a lot of points will be scored in this battle of behemoths (I might call an over-under of 31 and feel pretty good about it).

So who will it be? Hmm. How about the team that makes a big play or gets a big break. I see 48 minutes of two teams – and I think the two best teams in the state – going at it eye-ball-to-eye-ball. It really is going to be a one or two play game that will make the difference because on paper I can’t see either of these two clubs dominating the other. And I don’t know who’s going to make that play - or get that break. I just can’t tell you. Am I leaning one way or the other? Tell you what; if you held a gun to my head I would say this: Offenses win games and defenses win championships.

Talk to you after the games.