

60th Thanksgiving Day Classic



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HAPPY THANKSGIVING! GOOD LUCK WARRIORS!

Warriors key in on undefeated Melrose for 60th annual Turkey tilt



THE 2019 WAKEFIELD Memorial High School football team. In the first row from left to right is Bryce Dunlap, Bryan Fabbri, David Amyouny, Anthony DeVito, Chris Miller, Liam Cosgrove, Zack Sartori, Nathan Delgado, Javin Willis and Christian Delgado. In the second row from left is Tucker Stikeman, Jason Noble, Nick Santilli, Jack Huckins, Tommy Grover, Kevin O'Neil, Nathan Alberti, Josh Catino, Jaden Blake, Leo Yardumian and Nick Roberto. In the third row is Aidan Sweeney, Dominic Sanchez, Joe Alden, Adam Rosenberger, Bryan Lynch, Mykease Driggers, Jack Berinato, Sean Lynch, Nick Paci, Louis Sandanato and Joe Bernabeo. In the fourth row is James Buckley, Dan Hurley, Jamie Poole, Chris Amyouny, Dom DeVito, Jake Sowyrda, Matt Beede, Dan Rosenberg, Wesley Pierre and Phillip D'Alleva. In the fifth row is Max Cusack, Luke Ickes, Sharieff Andrews, Eli Gosselin-Smoske, Kaiden Johnson, Nathan Ickes, TaaJ Andrews, Ian Dixon, Jovanni Teixeira and Liam Stromski. (David Watts, Jr. Photo)

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By DAN PAWLOWSKI
MELROSE — Know your key. It's what Wakefield head coach John Rafferty tells his team every day. "Coach always talks about knowing your key," said Wakefield captain Liam Cosgrove. "Especially defensively, everyone has something they're looking at and we want to work as a collective unit to make a stop, as opposed to relying on one guy. We all know what we have to do and try to focus in on doing one thing well."
 What the Warriors (6-4) are trying to do is finish off their first winning season since 2013 by beating

10-0 Super Bowl-bound Melrose. A win would not only snap Wakefield's seven-year drought against their rivals on Thanksgiving – it would create a three-way tie for first place in the Freedom Division with Stoneham the third team in. Knowing your key applies to both sides of the ball. Part of the reason for Wakefield's vast improvement from last year's 3-7 record heading into Thanksgiving is an offense averaging 23.4 points per game compared to last year's 17.7. Cosgrove, and fellow captains Anthony DeVito and Chris Miller,

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THE CAPTAINS of the 2019 Wakefield High football team are from left to right, Chris Miller, Anthony DeVito and Liam Cosgrove. (David Watts, Jr. File Photo)



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along with players like senior Jake Sowyrda and freshmen Ian Dixon and Phil D'Alleva have paved the way for sophomore sensation

Aidan Sweeney and his team-high 21 rushing touchdowns (10 in his last two games) along with Tucker Stikeman (7 TD's).

But Wakefield's ground-and-pound offense wouldn't be so successful if not for an incredible improvement from the defense.

Last year, the Warriors surrendered an average of 28.6 points per game, including their 34-13 loss on Thanksgiving Eve. This year, the defense is allowing just 15.2.

In addition to the three captains in the trenches, the defensive line has been dominant with senior three-year starter Taaj Andrews and sophomore Sharieff Andrews forming a nearly immovable family tree from their tackle positions. Wakefield has been solid at all three levels, up to linebacker where juniors Stikeman and Danny Hurley can cover all sorts of ground, and in the secondary led by senior Wesley Pierre who reads the field from safety and directs a group of youngsters including Sweeney and Leo Yardumian.

Stopping a Melrose team that has outscored their opponents by an astounding 410-98 this season, is a tall task for any team. Playmakers abound in Melrose led by Chris Cusolito and his 25 touchdowns. The Red Raiders are stacked this year, with a running game that also includes Billy Pesce, Jack Hickey and QB Brendan Fennell who is coming off a

great passing game during the Red Raiders' 41-7 victory over previously undefeated Revere in the Div. 4 North finals.

"I can honestly say that these guys are solid in every single department, offensively, defensively and special teams," said Rafferty of Melrose. "They're the best looking high school team I've seen in a long time."

Before anyone asks, no, there won't be any Duxbury-sized controversies in Melrose this year. (The Dragons sat their starters in 2016 and lost 53-0 to rival Marshfield on Thanksgiving to "prepare" for the Super Bowl). The question was posed to Rafferty in 2005 with his undefeated North Andover team. He didn't consider it first because it was unfair to the student athletes. His former coaching mate Tim Morris certainly feels the same in Melrose. Another reason is good teams get better each game. That week-by-week progress has led to a big jump for the Warriors in 2019.

Another reason for Wakefield's big improvement this year? Team chemistry.

Wakefield can change their mantra from a possessive to a

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contraction and it's still relevant: You're key.

It's something the seniors have made clear to the underclassmen from day one: If we're going to win, it has to be together.

"The biggest difference this year was coming together as a team," said DeVito. "We incorporate the younger guys with everything."

Even Wakefield's weekly dinners at Prince Pizza – what was once a cliquy tradition – is now open to all. "We have the freshmen come with now. [In years past], that was never a thing," said DeVito. "We try to treat them like upperclassmen on and off the field."

"There's no differential between the age groups," agreed Rafferty. "That's a good thing."

The Warriors credit much of their program-wide cohesiveness to an experiment that's worked out very well.

Wakefield's lack of numbers was especially glaring during the 3rd quarter in last year's Turkey Day classic in which Melrose ran away with the game, controlling over eight minutes of possession and setting up two unanswered touchdowns.

This year, mirroring a three percent decline that's even steeper in Massachusetts (league foe Winchester couldn't even field a freshman team), the Warriors took a different approach to their decreasing numbers by employing a technique that used to be unseen in varsity circles. From the start of training camp, all players, freshmen included, practiced together.

"That was the experiment. I was doing it out of necessity with the hopes that it would be functional and good for all," said Rafferty. "I'm really happy with the way it worked out."

The coach admitted he has thought about bringing up freshmen to practice earlier in the season throughout his long coaching career. It never made sense until now.

The result was four full grades working together to push each other from day one.

So, following the lead of a group of seniors who always encouraged the underclassmen to bring their best every day, Wakefield went to work.

Starting in offseason workouts, the Warriors were determined to improve.

"We have a lot of guys who play multiple sports," said Cosgrove. "Chris (Miller) was coming from basketball, I was coming from track and field and Anthony (DeVito) throughout baseball season was coming after practice to lift. We were dedicated and I think some of our teammates took notice."

"Coming together as a group and finding our niche was really good for us. We didn't really have that last year. We didn't know how to win or close games and we just found that out throughout this season with our hard work and found out what a winning team looks like."

Rafferty, who might have the singularly most unique perspective to the Wakefield-Melrose rivalry, knows what it's going to take to win on Thursday, 10:15 a.m. at Fred Green Memorial Field.

He knew it as a fan growing up in town and watching Bill Tighe's team collect Wakefield's first Thanksgiving win in 1961 and he most certainly knew it while earning the Shawmut Award for most outstanding player during Wakefield's 20-0 Turkey Day win during the Warriors' undefeated season his senior year in 1970. He knew it as a Wakefield assistant during

the '91 win and during a frustrating run as an assistant in Melrose from '92-2000 when the Warriors couldn't lose on Thursdays (or on coin flips).

"Just going through the years, I hate to say it but I remember Thanksgiving Day week in high school and the significance of it. It was huge," said Rafferty, who admitted the fanfare might be a little different nowadays, but the spirit of the rivalry is still strong. "As an assistant in Wakefield, then Melrose, then back here – it's the

GAME Page 8

Go Warriors! Happy Thanksgiving!



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Melrose-Wakefield Through the years

1901	Melrose 12, Wakefield 0	1970	Wakefield 20, Melrose 0
1903	Melrose 5, Wakefield 0	1971	Melrose 32, Wakefield 20
1904	Melrose 50, Wakefield 0	1972	Melrose 28, Wakefield 14
1918	Wakefield 12, Melrose 7	1973	Wakefield 18, Melrose 0
1919	Wakefield 6, Melrose 0	1974	Melrose 50, Wakefield 26
1920	Melrose 20, Wakefield 6	1975	Wakefield 24, Melrose 16
1921	Wakefield 26, Melrose 6	1976	Melrose 24, Wakefield 14
1922	Melrose 26, Wakefield 0	1977	Melrose 30, Wakefield 6
1923	Melrose 12, Wakefield 0	1978	Melrose 24, Wakefield 6
1924	Melrose 27, Wakefield 0	1979	Wakefield 14, Melrose 0
1925	Melrose 33, Wakefield 0	1980	Melrose 14, Wakefield 0
1926	Melrose 14, Wakefield 0	1981	Melrose 12, Wakefield 7
1927	Melrose 57, Wakefield 0	1982	Melrose 31, Wakefield 20
1928	Melrose 40, Wakefield 12	1983	Melrose 16, Wakefield 7
1929	Melrose 37, Wakefield 0	1984	Melrose 14, Wakefield 7
1930	Melrose 33, Wakefield 0	1985	Wakefield 14, Melrose 0
1931	Melrose 0, Wakefield 0	1986	Wakefield 32, Melrose 0
1932	Melrose 13, Wakefield 13	1987	Wakefield 15, Melrose 14
1933	Melrose 6, Wakefield 0	1988	Melrose 26, Wakefield 10
1934	Melrose 40, Wakefield 0	1989	Wakefield 10, Melrose 6
1935	Melrose 13, Wakefield 0	1990	Wakefield 0, Melrose 0
1936	Melrose 6, Wakefield 0	1991	Wakefield 14, Melrose 13
1937	Melrose 13, Wakefield 0	1992	Melrose 20, Wakefield 6
1938	Melrose 7, Wakefield 0	1993	Wakefield 17, Melrose 14
1939	Melrose 7, Wakefield 0	1994	Wakefield 14, Melrose 0
1940	Melrose 6, Wakefield 0	1995	Wakefield 28, Melrose 27
1941	Melrose 7, Wakefield 0	1996	Wakefield 3, Melrose 0
1942	Melrose 19, Wakefield 0	1997	Wakefield 12, Melrose 0
1943	Melrose 13, Wakefield 6	1998	Wakefield 20, Melrose 17
1944	Melrose 6, Wakefield 0	1999	Wakefield 14, Melrose 14
1945	Wakefield 7, Melrose 6	2000	Wakefield 34, Melrose 13
1946	Melrose 13, Wakefield 0	2001	Wakefield 35, Melrose 14
1947	Wakefield 6, Melrose 0	2002	Wakefield 12, Melrose 7
1948	Melrose 7, Wakefield 6	2003	Wakefield 20, Melrose 14
1949	Wakefield 8, Melrose 0	2004	Wakefield 7, Melrose 3
1950	Melrose 7, Wakefield 7	2005	Wakefield 27, Melrose 7
1951	Wakefield 27, Melrose 13	2006	Wakefield 21, Melrose 0
1952	Wakefield 19, Melrose 0	2007	Melrose 15, Wakefield 14
1953	Wakefield 34, Melrose 0	2008	Wakefield 34, Melrose 27
1954	Melrose 12, Wakefield 0	2009	Wakefield 14, Melrose 13
1955	Wakefield 39, Melrose 13	2010	Wakefield 15, Melrose 7
1956	Melrose 21, Wakefield 18	2011	Wakefield 3, Melrose 0
1957	Wakefield 25, Melrose 13	2012	Melrose 28, Wakefield 15
1958	Melrose 14, Wakefield 14	2013	Wakefield 17, Melrose 14 (1)
1959	Melrose 20, Wakefield 6	2013	Melrose 13, Wakefield 7 (2)
1960	Melrose 12, Wakefield 8	2014	Melrose 17, Wakefield 15 (1)
1961	Wakefield 22, Melrose 12	2014	Melrose 24, Wakefield 0 (2)
1962	Melrose 0, Wakefield 0	2014	Melrose 15, Wakefield 14 (3)
1963	Melrose 34, Wakefield 6	2015	Melrose 21, Wakefield 0 (1)
1964	Wakefield 27, Melrose 18	2015	Melrose 27, Wakefield 8 (2)
1965	Wakefield 14, Melrose 6	2016	Melrose 28, Wakefield 8
1966	Melrose 22, Wakefield 12	2017	Melrose 35, Wakefield 12
1967	Melrose 8, Wakefield 6	2018	Melrose 34, Wakefield 13
1968	Melrose 50, Wakefield 13		
1969	Melrose 20, Wakefield 6		

Melrose leads series, 60-41-7



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AIDAN SWEENEY's historic season included two five-touchdown performances in Wakefield's final two games against Dracut and North Reading. The single-game rushing touchdown record is six, set by Tate Cummings 100 years ago in 1919. The sophomore had 21 rushing TD's this season. Pictured blocking for Sweeney in the season-opener against Greater Lawrence is Danny Hurley (44), Anthony DeVito (55), Tucker Stikeman (34) and Liam Cosgrove (75).

(Keith Curtis Photo)

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THE WARRIORS celebrate a win over Wilmington in their regular season finale. The 35-14 victory officially punched Wakefield's ticket to the Div. 4 North Tournament. Wakefield finished with a winning record for the first time since 2013. (Sharon Nikosey Photo)

same deal. There will always be a lot of emotion, the crowds are always great, and for the seniors it starts to sink in that this is it. There's still that level of excitement and emotion about it."

As for the keys to victory?
 "Just lining up correctly and knowing what's coming at you," said Miller. "They don't expect anything out of us; they're already checking us off and looking at the

Super Bowl so we want to take advantage of that."

"We're going to play our game," said Rafferty. "Technically we need to be sound and we gotta line 'em up right – that's really important."

"We're going to do what we do. The kids are going to be ready to go and these kids here can play some good football. They've demonstrated that."

"The only thing we could do this year was make ourselves better and I think we proved we did that," said Miller.

That they most certainly did. The Warriors are light years ahead of where many predicted they would be in Rafferty's second year of a rebuild.

Together, Wakefield wants to key in on making history.

"The brotherhood we have," said DeVito

when asked what makes this team special. "Most of us have been playing together since our freshman year, some of us even longer, and it's all built up to now. We're fired up. The goal is to give them the toughest game they've played, maybe rough them up a little before the Super Bowl and make some history in Wakefield."

GO WARRIORS

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