

2023 Thanksgiving Day Football

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**Supplement to the Wakefield Daily Item
Wednesday, November 22, 2023**

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&

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Warriors going for 3rd straight in 63rd Thanksgiving Classic



THE 2023 WAKEFIELD High football team is ready to host the 63rd Thanksgiving Day game against Melrose at 10:15 a.m.

(Courtesy Photo)

By DAN PAWLOWSKI
WAKEFIELD — As the Wakefield High football team gets ready to host Melrose for the 63rd

Thanksgiving Day game, there's a familiar feel of finality. As it is with most Massachusetts teams playing their rivals on Thanks-

giving - the big game represents a final chance to represent your school and your community, on the biggest of stages.

In many ways, that's what makes this tradition so beloved. It's your last chance. Make it one to remember.

That more traditional take on the big game matters when dissecting Wakefield vs. Melrose, mostly because in three of the last five Thanksgiving Day games, a Super Bowl loomed for one.

Wakefield's Super Bowl victory last year proceeded yet another instant classic on Thanksgiving, a game in which the Warriors came back from a 12-24th quarter deficit to win their second straight Turkey Day Classic, 15-12.

This year, the two rivals will meet with identical 7-3 records, certainly indications of successful teams despite the fact that both were left out of the Div. 4 state tournament, an omission most glaring for Melrose who finished the regular season at 6-2. Still, the visitors will have

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a chance to win the Middlesex League Freedom Division title on Thursday morning, extra motivation for both sides as they close out their seasons.

More important to the Warriors is their chance to extend the winning streak on Thanksgiving to three games.

"We're just playing for ourselves, for that three-peat to keep the Thanksgiving trophy," said senior captain OL/DL Joe LaMonica. "We're going for the positives that we get out of it. For our entire families, it's just a better mood on Thanksgiving when you win."

"Nothing can be closer to the truth," agreed Wakefield head coach John Rafferty, leading his 5th Thanksgiving game as the head coach at his alma mater after playing in it and then later coaching as an assistant for Melrose. "When you're in this game, and I've been in it for far too many years, it is still the most important game throughout the course of the season. So yes, you have your good Thanksgiving's and sometimes not so good."

That can certainly qualify as a theme for the 2023 Warriors who have dealt with plenty of adversity in the form of injuries this season, most notably to senior captain WR/DB Steven Woish, the team's lone returning All-Star from last year's perfect season. Woish (16 catches, 311 yards, 4 TDs) and freshman QB Westin McNeilly (469 passing yards, 6 TDs) had the Warrior offense buzzing to start the year 3-0 with wins over Greater Lawrence, Lexington and Northeast Metro Tech. Injuries to both were a significant reason why the Warriors went 2-3 in their next five, including losses to strong

Burlington (21-0), Woburn (36-3) and Stoneham (22-6) teams.

Although McNeilly will need to wait until next year to experience his first Thanksgiving game, Woish is back and the Warriors have been finding their groove again, picking up two shutouts in a row in the consolation round, 21-0 over Medford on Nov. 2 and 36-0 over Lynn Classical the following week.

"A bunch of inexperienced players have had to step up," said senior captain OL/LB/K Mark Letchford. "We played a few tough games when we weren't healthy but now we're starting to get everyone back."

The revamped playbook for Wakefield is run-heavy, leaning on LaMonica, Letchford and a talented offensive line for new tight-end-turned-quarterback, junior Matt Beaver.

Running well behind that power has been sophomore RB Myles Sanchez who has racked up a team-high 1,011 rushing yards and 13 TD's. The new thunder to the starting RB's lightning has belonged to freshman Jaden Fullerton who earned 358 rushing yards and 3 TD's in the final six games, steadily climbing the depth chart from a special teams standout to a key part of the offense and the defense as a linebacker.

Standing out even more has been the defense as a unit. Their second straight shutout now means the Warriors have allowed under 10 points per game on the season. Their front seven of LaMonica, Letchford, Beaver, Fullerton, juniors Jackson Fitzpatrick and Zach Courtright a big reason for that, in addition to Sanchez senior Declan O'Callahan and juniors John Fitzgerald

and Ian Christie in the backfield.

Together, the Warriors will look to disrupt a Melrose offense that has averaged 28.4 points per game this season, led by dual-threat QB Connor Brophy, not far removed from a nearly 300-yard, 4TD performance against Wilmington on Oct. 27.

"The quarterback is a throwing threat but more importantly a running threat, he's off the charts as far as that goes, so he adds a special dynamic to the offense," said Rafferty of Brophy. "They're just a good, solid high school football team. They do everything well. They're extremely well-coached and as a result, they execute well."

Meanwhile, Wakefield's recent success is a credit to the seniors who have refused to let a playoff absence define them.

"The team chemistry aspect has helped us out a lot because we're all friends not only on the field but off it too," said LaMonica. "If you can't find a reason in yourself why you want to win then do it for someone else."

It's a feature of this team that Rafferty saw before the season was even close to starting.

"One thing I've noticed about this group and this is going back to last winter with offseason workouts, they're a tight-knight group," said the coach. "They just have great attitudes. They truly understand that any suc-

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One more time



THE SENIORS are ready to lead the Warriors onto Landrigan Field one more time for the 63rd Thanksgiving Day game. Pictured from left to right with their families are seniors Logan Bayers, Anthony Briasco, Michael Ford, Bryce Vaughan, Declan O'Callahan, Joe LaMonica, Steven Woish, Mark Letchford, Brady Murphy and Graham Swanson. (File Photo)

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Building upon the success of last year's endeavor, where we had the privilege of providing free hoodies and towels, this year, we are delighted to continue this cherished tradition by offering cozy beanies. We couldn't be more thankful for the opportunity to share our appreciation with you, our cherished community. We look forward to seeing you at Wakefield High School at 10:15 a.m. for a day of warmth, unity, and celebration.

Beanies are available for the first 1500 Melrose fans and 1500 Wakefield fans respectively. Actual beanies not pictured



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cess is a collective effort and they're special that way and as a result, they're great to coach."

That mentality has carried over from last year's 13-0 Super Bowl season. Many of these Warriors played key roles on that team, experience that can only help in the biggest game of this season.

"Last year, we played a lot of huge games so there won't be as much pressure on us because we've been in those situations," said Letchford.

"On Thanksgiving, there's al-

ways a great turnout, no matter the situation so we're ready. I mean, it doesn't get crazier than walking into Gillette Stadium so I don't think the hype factor should really get to us," said LaMonica.

Says Rafferty, "They made it to the mountaintop so they've experienced that and everything about it. It doesn't get any more excitable or a bigger atmosphere than that. For us this year, it's Thanksgiving. They know what it's like to play in big games."

"Even last year, when we

thought we could go there and win easily - just knowing it's a grind every year helps," agreed Woish.

Warrior football alum like Rafferty can understand the mindset of the seniors as they look forward to their last high school football game on their home field.

No matter your motivation, it's reason enough to leave it all out there.

"In football, you work all week for one game," said LaMonica. "Other sports, you lose, 'Oh well, we'll get 'em on Thursday.' In football, you work so much, watch so much film, practice so much all for one game so it's our last opportunity for all of that work to pay off."

For others, the chance to deny their rivals the league trophy is at the top of the motivating food chain.

"It's always nice playing spoiler to your rivals when you get a chance to take the league title from them so it gives me an extra pump to go out there and bring it," said Woish, a sentiment no doubt understood by those lucky enough to play on Thanksgiving. "We definitely don't want our rivals to win the league if we can say something about it."

And finally, for others, well hey, it's Thanksgiving after all. Let's not forget what's really important.

"Just looking forward to leaving it all out there, going home and eating some good food," says Letchford.

In the end, Wakefield has continued their "one-game at a time" mantra in order to prepare for the 113th meeting between the two.

"I know I'm a bit of a broken record when I say we just focus on the next game but we have," said Rafferty. "We're focused on Thanksgiving, that's everything to us right now. It's always a big deal for the kids, particularly the seniors and it would be the cover of the book for this group. They want to go out on a high note and be remembered for that."

Kickoff is set for 10:15 a.m.

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Melrose-Wakefield Through the years

1901	Melrose 12, Wakefield 0	1972	Melrose 28, Wakefield 14
1903	Melrose 5, Wakefield 0	1973	Wakefield 18, Melrose 0
1904	Melrose 50, Wakefield 0	1974	Melrose 50, Wakefield 26
1918	Wakefield 12, Melrose 7	1975	Wakefield 24, Melrose 16
1919	Wakefield 6, Melrose 0	1976	Melrose 24, Wakefield 14
1920	Melrose 20, Wakefield 6	1977	Melrose 30, Wakefield 6
1921	Wakefield 26, Melrose 6	1978	Melrose 24, Wakefield 6
1922	Melrose 26, Wakefield 0	1979	Wakefield 14, Melrose 0
1923	Melrose 12, Wakefield 0	1980	Melrose 14, Wakefield 0
1924	Melrose 27, Wakefield 0	1981	Melrose 12, Wakefield 7
1925	Melrose 33, Wakefield 0	1982	Melrose 31, Wakefield 20
1926	Melrose 14, Wakefield 0	1983	Melrose 16, Wakefield 7
1927	Melrose 57, Wakefield 0	1984	Melrose 14, Wakefield 7
1928	Melrose 40, Wakefield 12	1985	Wakefield 14, Melrose 0
1929	Melrose 37, Wakefield 0	1986	Wakefield 32, Melrose 0
1930	Melrose 33, Wakefield 0	1987	Wakefield 15, Melrose 14
1931	Melrose 0, Wakefield 0	1988	Melrose 26, Wakefield 10
1932	Melrose 13, Wakefield 13	1989	Wakefield 10, Melrose 6
1933	Melrose 6, Wakefield 0	1990	Wakefield 0, Melrose 0
1934	Melrose 40, Wakefield 0	1991	Wakefield 14, Melrose 13
1935	Melrose 13, Wakefield 0	1992	Melrose 20, Wakefield 6
1936	Melrose 6, Wakefield 0	1993	Wakefield 17, Melrose 14
1937	Melrose 13, Wakefield 0	1994	Wakefield 14, Melrose 0
1938	Melrose 7, Wakefield 0	1995	Wakefield 28, Melrose 27
1939	Melrose 7, Wakefield 0	1996	Wakefield 3, Melrose 0
1940	Melrose 6, Wakefield 0	1997	Wakefield 12, Melrose 0
1941	Melrose 7, Wakefield 0	1998	Wakefield 20, Melrose 17
1942	Melrose 19, Wakefield 0	1999	Wakefield 14, Melrose 14
1943	Melrose 13, Wakefield 6	2000	Wakefield 34, Melrose 13
1944	Melrose 6, Wakefield 0	2001	Wakefield 35, Melrose 14
1945	Wakefield 7, Melrose 6	2002	Wakefield 12, Melrose 7
1946	Melrose 13, Wakefield 0	2003	Wakefield 20, Melrose 14
1947	Wakefield 6, Melrose 0	2004	Wakefield 7, Melrose 3
1948	Melrose 7, Wakefield 6	2005	Wakefield 27, Melrose 7
1949	Wakefield 8, Melrose 0	2006	Wakefield 21, Melrose 0
1950	Melrose 7, Wakefield 7	2007	Melrose 15, Wakefield 14
1951	Wakefield 27, Melrose 13	2008	Wakefield 34, Melrose 27
1952	Wakefield 19, Melrose 0	2009	Wakefield 14, Melrose 13
1953	Wakefield 34, Melrose 0	2010	Wakefield 15, Melrose 7
1954	Melrose 12, Wakefield 0	2011	Wakefield 3, Melrose 0
1955	Wakefield 39, Melrose 13	2012	Melrose 28, Wakefield 15
1956	Melrose 21, Wakefield 18	2013	Wakefield 17, Melrose 14 (1)
1957	Wakefield 25, Melrose 13	2013	Melrose 13, Wakefield 7 (2)
1958	Melrose 14, Wakefield 14	2014	Melrose 17, Wakefield 15 (1)
1959	Melrose 20, Wakefield 6	2014	Melrose 24, Wakefield 0 (2)
1960	Melrose 12, Wakefield 8	2014	Melrose 15, Wakefield 14 (3)
1961	Wakefield 22, Melrose 12	2015	Melrose 21, Wakefield 0 (1)
1962	Melrose 0, Wakefield 0	2015	Melrose 27, Wakefield 8 (2)
1963	Melrose 34, Wakefield 6	2016	Melrose 28, Wakefield 8
1964	Wakefield 27, Melrose 18	2017	Melrose 35, Wakefield 12
1965	Wakefield 14, Melrose 6	2018	Melrose 34, Wakefield 13
1966	Melrose 22, Wakefield 12	2019	Melrose 35, Wakefield 7
1967	Melrose 8, Wakefield 6	2021	Melrose 35, Wakefield 0 (1)
1968	Melrose 50, Wakefield 13	2021	Melrose 13, Wakefield 21 (2)
1969	Melrose 20, Wakefield 6	2022	Wakefield 15, Melrose 12
1970	Wakefield 20, Melrose 0		
1971	Melrose 32, Wakefield 20		

Melrose leads series, 62-43-7



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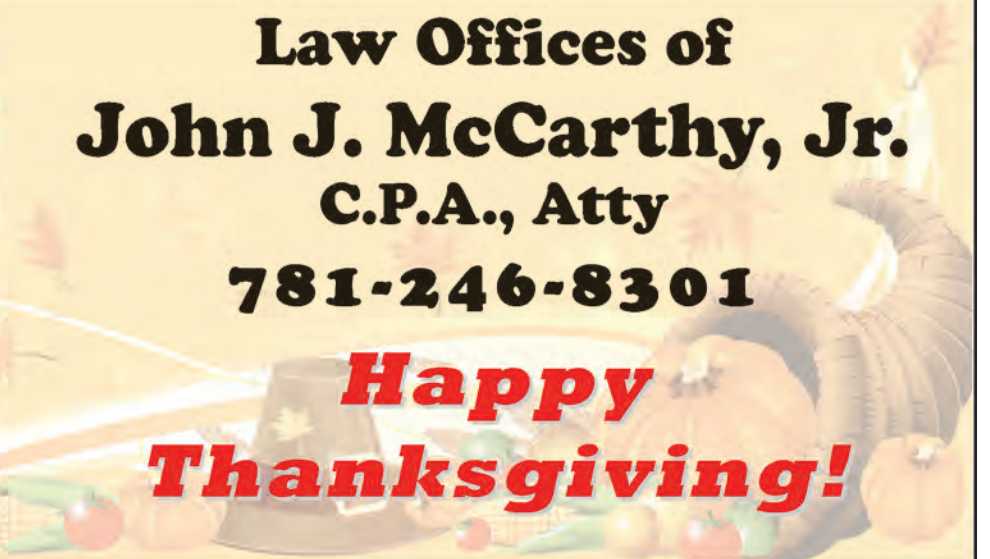


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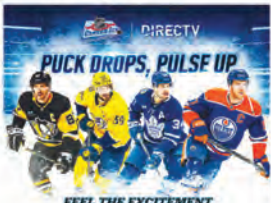
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THE WARRIORS (7-3) are looking for their third consecutive victory on Thanksgiving Day over rival Melrose (7-3) this year. The game will kickoff 10:15 a.m. at Landrigan Field.
 (Brian Cusack File Photo)

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