

TIGERS AIMING TOWARD A BRIGHTER FUTURE

By Bill Glazier

Review Editor

Everybody has noticed, from the man guiding South Pasadena High's athletic department, to opposing coaches to diehard supporters, all witnessing the transformation of young quarterback Conor Bednarski this season.

From his first start in September against San Gabriel to tonight's Rio Hondo League finale against visiting Blair, many agree, despite an off night last week against La Canada, that Bednarski has a bright future in a Tigers' uniform.

Those watching his development over the season say the Tigers' 16-year-old sophomore signal caller could be one of those players who will be talked about for years to come after his high school playing days are over.

"I think he's come a long way since the first game of the year," said Ralph Punaro, South Pasadena High's athletic director. "He has a good demeanor to be a quarterback. He's struggled at times, but doesn't get rattled. He's done a great job and we're really looking forward to his junior and senior year."

Bednarski is coming off a rough outing in which he threw for only 77 yards, completing 13 of 28 passes while throwing five interceptions in South Pasadena's 20-0 loss to La Canada last week, but Punaro says that's all part of learning the position.

"A lot of it is mental at the varsity level," explained the Tigers' athletic director. "That is what he's finding out right now, that there's just not one option on plays. There are two and three and he's just learning the process of which options open up. He's made some mistakes, but now he knows and is learning from it."

Tigers' assistant coach Rob Hertel, who has NFL coaching experience playing for both Cincinnati and Philadelphia, has seen his share of young signal callers play for South Pasadena High over the years.

He's coached some good ones, including Jonathan Troast, who threw for 1,700 yards a year ago before moving on to play for Pasadena City College this season, and before that Michael Flynn, a three-year starter with a never-say-die attitude, who played with fierce determination.

Bednarski, anxious to see the Tigers start winning, fits in the same mold of those talented quarterbacks coming through the South Pasadena High system in recent years. He looks the part, standing tall in the pocket at 6-1, 180-pounds and, according to Hertel, is developing into a player who "has a huge upside," he said. "Over the past nine weeks, he seems much more confident, calm and guys are looking to him for leadership. He's beginning to assert himself as a vital part of this team."

Those with the job of stopping Bednarski also have taken notice. "He's going to be a good one," said Temple City Coach Randy Backus, after his team throttled the Tigers 42-14. "He's got a great arm and has really improved this season. It's amazing how far he's come from that first game against San Gabriel up to now."

Bednarski calls the season opener against the Matadors "interesting," saying, "There was so much emotion on my part, just wanting to go out there and prove that I can play at the next level."

He showed decent numbers for his first varsity contest, connecting on 13 of 25 for 137 yards, but felt relieved to have the game behind him when it was over. Bednarski also grew from the experience, noting, "that these guys were only a year or two older than me, so I felt if I made my reads and executed the offense I could give us a shot to win."

San Gabriel had little difficulty, beating a Tigers' team 54-14 that includes 10 sophomores and 20 juniors and just a sprinkling of seniors. Four sophomores, including Bednarski, are in the starting line-up. Joining the South Pas quarterback are Kevin Figueroa at defensive tackle and guard, defensive tackle Alex Larrimore and Michael Lind at defensive end and center.

"I expect that over the next two seasons we will have the players we need to compete for a league title," said Bednarski, who, like others, likes the Tigers' chances. "Over this season, our players have learned so much, and with most of the starters returning I have no doubt that we will be able to compete with anyone. Honestly, I believe that the sky is the limit with our team. If everyone works hard and we play together as a team we can be really good, maybe even good enough to win a league championship."

In his corner is South Pasadena's top receiver and cornerback Steven Colliau, a senior who also plays varsity soccer and baseball and one year was a member of the Tigers' golf team.

Colliau, who has proven to be Bednarski's favorite target, catching 67 passes for 679 yards this season, believes Bednarski can someday play division one football. "I definitely think he can play at a Pac-10 school, Big 12 school, something like that," said Colliau, who pulled in six passes for 44 yards in last week's loss to La Canada, putting the Tigers at 2-7 overall, 0-4 in league. "He has things you can't teach - arm strength and pocket presence."

With Bednarski guiding the offense and with a current roster that includes 10 sophomores and 20 juniors, Colliau only sees good fortunes coming South Pasadena's way in future seasons.

"I think the sophomores this year have made some huge strides," said Colliau, playing his final game in a Tigers' uniform tonight. "South Pasadena is going to be a team that the Rio Hondo is going to fear in a couple of years. Connor especially has made huge strides."

Like Colliau, South Pasadena coach Ed Smith likes the idea of having Bednarski around for the next couple of years. "We see the potential in his ability," said Smith, winding up his 14th season at the helm. "We're just hoping that he learns from this year and works hard to get better."

Bednarski, who has thrown for 1,260 yards, five touchdowns and 13 interceptions, has taken his licks, feeling the heat of defenses this season, but, despite the punishment, wouldn't want to be anywhere else come Friday night in the fall.

"Definitely," he said, when asked if he was having fun. "Although this season has had its low points, all of the guys have stayed optimistic and are working hard. They realize the talent that we have and how good we can be. We realize it's a learning experience for many of us who have never played varsity football before. If everyone works hard and we play together as a team we can be really good, maybe even good enough to win a league championship."



South Pasadena High coaches like the future of sophomore quarterback Conor Bednarski