

# On Thanksgiving, it all comes down to matchups

By Chad Garner, cgarner@sentinelandenterprise.com  
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FITCHBURG -- Football is a game of matchups.

If you have an advantage on the field over an opponent, the smart money is on that coach who will try to expose that weakness.

Both Fitchburg and Leominster are trying to prepare as much as possible so they don't get exposed on offense, defense or special teams on Thanksgiving at historic Crocker Field.

All eyes in this matchup will be on Fitchburg High senior tailback Sal Figueroa. The beast running back -- running out of the I-formation offense -- can run over defenders and also run away from them for a quick six points. He's a complete package of a back for the Red Raiders, and is the main guy to stop for the Leominster defense.

"It's been tough for us to stop good running backs all year," Leominster coach Dave Palazzi said. "We have to get a push up front. He's going to get his runs, but we have to tackle downfield. If he gets to that second level and gets loose, we could have some problems. We have to try to corral him and keep him between the numbers. Just swarm the ball."

Figueroa has rushed for 1,652 yards and 17 touchdowns on the year.

Fitchburg coach Tom DiGeronimo points to Leominster's defensive line as a potential problem.

"I think what stands out is that their front is very good," the FHS coach said. "They are very physical and their backers are active. They are athletic in the back end. What people don't realize is they play an unbelievable schedule and they are playing their best football right now. We've got to be able to match that."

Leominster's rushing attack isn't to be taken lightly, either.

Junior Adam Couch has rushed for over 1,000 yards and scored 10 touchdowns for the Blue Devils. Couch and the LHS offense have heated up in the last three games -- all Blue Devil wins.

"We have to contain (Couch) and eliminate any big plays," DiGeronimo said. "We have to make them earn whatever they earn. You can't have breakdowns. We have to tackle and run to the football."

But DiGeronimo also cautioned that Leominster isn't a one-man show. The Devils can attack with several different playmakers, including junior quarterback Pat Gallagher.

"They do a lot of different things on offense," DiGeronimo said. "Their backs are very good and their quarterback is a two-year starter. He's a very good player. They have some kids on the outside who can catch the ball. They are a good team."

Palazzi is also aware of the exploits of Fitchburg quarterback Andrew Brooks.

"They have a good quarterback with another year of experience in Brooks," Palazzi said. "He can throw the ball."

Fitchburg can also bring the heat with trigger man and defensive coordinator Charlie Raff dialing up different pressure packages.

"They can do a lot of things to really put some pressure on you defensively," Palazzi said. "We have to be ready. They have a pretty good defense back there, similar to what we do. It's a pretty evenly-matched game I think. We have to go out there and play our game."

Everyone is fired up to play and watch this Leominster versus Fitchburg matchup on Thanksgiving morning.

"It's going to be exciting for our kids," DiGeronimo said. "It's all about them. It's their day to shine and hopefully good things happen. There will be a lot of excitement. I want them to go out and play their best game."

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