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High School Football Spotlight: Zaier Harrison hopes to lead Cornell's resurrection

By Chris Bradford cbradford@timesonline.com 13 hrs ago



Cornell quarterback Zaier Harrison (7) throws a pass during Cornell's game against Rochester at Cornell High School.

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CORAOPOLIS – While most players trudge back to the locker room, weight room or perhaps the trainer's room following Cornell football practices, Zaier Harrison's regimen is a little different.

Most days, Harrison can be found staying late to go through the warm-up line of Cornell's youth team, shaking hands and encouraging the youngsters that share the practice space with one of the WPIAL's smallest school districts.

That, Raiders coach Ed Dawson says, speaks volumes about the character and leadership of his starting quarterback who, keep in mind, is only a sophomore.

"Honestly, he's an even better kid than he is an athlete," Dawson said. "He's just very helpful, very considerate of others. A really good kid."

Oh, and on the football field? He's pretty good there, too.

The 5-foot-10, 160-pound Harrison is a dynamic playmaker with his strong right arm and his legs. Though Harrison is an underclassmen, Dawson hasn't been shy about throwing the ball. Harrison has completed 79 of 160 passes for 786 yards with six touchdowns while rushing for 150 yards on 26 carries (5.8 per carry).

Barring something unforeseen, Harrison should become Cornell's first 1,000-yard passer during Dawson's tenure.

Harrison is far from a finished product, but his raw athleticism intrigues. Dawson reports that he's seen dramatic improvement following a productive off-season spent in the gym and classroom, but Harrison isn't satisfied just yet.

"Decision making (could be better), because sometime it's late and it could be quicker still," Harrison said.

Next on Harrison's and the Raiders' to-do list is to win a game. Cornell is 0-5 heading into Friday night's Big Seven Conference game at Shenango.

Since the program was restored last season following a five-year hiatus, the Raiders are a combined 0-14. With 17-20 players on the roster this season (down from 40 in 2016), most players are playing on both sides of the ball, and fatigue and the inevitable mistakes are unavoidable. Harrison doubles as the Raiders starting free safety and ranks among the top three on the team in tackles.

"We've got to play all four quarters instead of only playing two," Harrison said.

Last week, the Raiders came their closest to date to landing in the win column, falling 22-20 to Union.

Against the Scotties, the second-place team in the Big Seven, Harrison threw for 177 yards (13 of 21) and one TD while rushing 14 times for 80 yards and two TDs.

Dawson called it Harrison's most complete performance to date. Harrison is one of a handful of underclassmen that Dawson believes can carry Cornell back into prominence in Class 1A in the years to come.

"He's a very smooth kid, he does a lot of things that looks effortless," he said. "It's fun to watch him, especially realizing the kid is only in 10th grade. The sky is the limit for him.

"He's a winner by trade and eventually the wins will come."