

CB Jackson ‘giddy’ to begin

Veteran expected to provide complement to Porter Jr. in secondary

BY CHRIS ADAMSKI

Donte Jackson hadn’t experienced this kind of anticipation for almost a decade, dating to when he was embarking on his college career as one of the nation’s highest-rated five-star recruits.

“I almost feel, like, giddy,” Jackson said last week after his first full-squad organized activities session with the Pittsburgh Steelers. “I feel giddy like how I was going into LSU, just knowing the standard was already set (at that program). You know what you had to come in there to do (because) it’s been like this for years. And that’s kind of how I felt coming here.”

“I’m excited, giddy like a little kid, because the here standard is set: You come in here, you’ve got to swim with sharks, man. And I like to think I am a shark.”

Jackson, a seven-year veteran cornerback, doesn’t need to be the alpha predator on this defense. Acquired in



Steelers cornerback Donte Jackson (26) warms up during the team’s OTAs workout last Tuesday.

March in exchange for receiver Diontae Johnson in a rare player-for-player NFL trade, Jackson only needs to be a reliable, complementary piece on a unit that features a few hall-of-fame-caliber players as well as an established No. 1 at his position in second-year cornerback Joey Porter Jr.

Jackson, 28, has 80 career NFL games, 76 starts and 4,284 defensive snaps — all with Carolina — since he entered the league as a second-round pick in 2018.

STEELERS • B4

Steelers ‘open to adding’ receiver



TIM BENZ

What I heard from the Pittsburgh Steelers on Tuesday regarding their wide receiver position was encouraging.

Well, unless you’re one of the fans who is buying into the preemptive excuse-making as to why everything will be perfectly fine if the wide receiver depth chart stays just the way it is.

As if there’s really a depth chart beyond George Pickens anyway. Or is it just a random collection of barely recognizable names?

Most who root for (or cover) the Steelers agree that the roster is too thin at that position. Right now, it’s

Pickens, third-round rookie Roman Wilson, and a bunch of fringe veterans, none of whom had more than 20 catches a year ago.

There is, however, a portion of fans, bloggers and media advancing the notion that concerns shouldn’t exist.

Of course, they don’t really believe this. They are just laying the foundation to fend off criticism of the franchise should it fail to add a legitimate, starting-caliber wide receiver before Week 1 against the Atlanta Falcons.

Those arguments usually go a little something like this:

- Wilson is going to be a rookie standout and more than just the slot receiver some analysts say he is.
- Tight end Pat Freiermuth can become essentially

BENZ • B4

INSIDE
» Aussie Johnston steps in as Steelers’ new punter **B4**



Warriors looking to take final step

P-T baseball team has progressed in each of Cortazzo’s 2 seasons

BY PAUL SCHOFIELD

When Lou Cortazzo inherited the Penn-Trafford baseball team in 2023, he walked into a program that was ready to become dominant.

All the Warriors have done is learn how to win big games.

In Cortazzo’s first season, the Warriors reached the WPIAL Class 5A semifinals and won their first PIAA playoff game.

This season, the Warriors have taken it a step further by advancing to the 5A championship game for the second time since 2019.

“That was our goal, to take it to the next level,” Cortazzo said. “We’ve reached the championship game, and we

INSIDE

» Capsule previews for today’s playoff games **B3**

want to progress through the PIAA playoffs and, hopefully, bring home a crown.”

But first, the Warriors (18-3) have their eyes on the championship game against Bethel Park at 7 p.m. Tuesday at Wild Things Park in Washington.

The Black Hawks (15-6-1) defeated Penn-Trafford, 8-5, in the 2023 semifinals. Bethel Park, however, lost to Shaler 10-1, in the title game. Both teams opened the PIAA playoffs with wins but lost close games in the quarterfinals.

Penn-Trafford defeated Bethel Park in the Fall League playoffs, 5-2 in the quarterfinals, and went on to win the title.

Cortazzo said that win means nothing now.

PENN-TRAFFORD • B3



CHRISTOPHER HORNER | TRIBLIVE

Penn-Trafford’s Ethan Septak rounds the bases after hitting a home run against Fox Chapel during their WPIAL Class 5A quarterfinal.

“I joke around with them that I get to fly under the radar. No one even notices I’m here.” — Mitch Keller, Pirates All-Star pitcher



PHOTOS: CHRISTOPHER HORNER | TRIBLIVE

Paul Skenes (above) and Jared Jones have combined for 89 strikeouts and only 14 walks in 75 innings.

PAIR of ACES

Rookie right-handers Jones, Skenes shine in spotlight, drawing attention to Pirates

BY KEVIN GORMAN

They look like baseball’s odd couple when standing side-by-side at their lockers in the Pittsburgh Pirates clubhouse: Jared Jones has flowing hair, a trimmed beard and appears a shade below his listed 6-foot-1, and Paul Skenes has a cropped cut, distinctive mustache and looks every bit of 6-6, 260 pounds.

Don’t let their contrasting appearances fool you. Oscar Madison and Felix Unger they are not. “We’re basically the same person, if I’m being perfectly honest,” Jones said. “We have a job to do, and we’re just doing it to the best of our capabilities, making sure our bodies are feeling good every single day and getting ready to get after it.”

Jones and Skenes are the talk of the baseball world, a pair of 22-year-old rookie right-handed pitchers who have thrown triple-digit fastballs, recorded double-digit strikeouts and turned their starts into must-watch moments for a team Hall of Fame pitcher Dennis Eckersley



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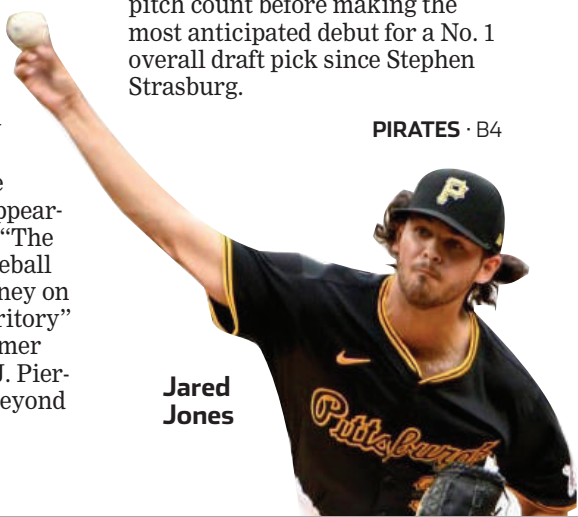
once dubbed a “hodgepodge of nothingness” only two years ago.

Their early success this season has drawn major media attention to Jones and Skenes, even though they have pitched in only a combined 13 career games heading into their scheduled back-to-back starts Tuesday and Wednesday at the Detroit Tigers.

Jones and Skenes have made individual guest appearances on MLB Network, “The Pat McAfee Show,” “Baseball Tonight” with Buster Olney on ESPN and the “Foul Territory” podcast that features former major-league catcher A.J. Pierzynski, creating a buzz beyond Pittsburgh.

“Ya think?” Pirates manager Derek Shelton said, with a laugh. “I think it’s really good for our franchise. ... I do think that that notoriety for our club is important.”

Where Jones shined in spring training to earn a spot in the Opening Day starting rotation and had 10 strikeouts in his major-league debut March 30 at Miami, Skenes started the season at Triple-A Indianapolis to methodically build up his pitch count before making the most anticipated debut for a No. 1 overall draft pick since Stephen Strasburg.



PIRATES • B4

Jared Jones

Burrell baseball team hits reset

After WPIAL playoff loss, Bucs head into PIAA tournament

BY MICHAEL LOVE

Burrell baseball players were given the day off last Wednesday, one day after a tough 2-1 loss to Avonworth in the WPIAL Class 3A semifinals at North Allegheny.

The brief respite from the rigors of the postseason gave them a chance to recharge and refocus. The immediate focus for the Bucs, who hit the field for practice Thursday, Friday and Sunday, is Tuesday’s third-place consolation game against No. 4 South Allegheny at Washington & Jefferson’s

INSIDE

» Norwin senior softball players hope to pull off one more WPIAL stunner **B3**

Ross Memorial Park.

“We got back together (Thursday) and talked about the (Avonworth) game a little bit and then realized what we have in front of us,” senior center fielder A.J. McLafferty said. “We’re definitely not done yet. We feel we have a lot of baseball left.”

Burrell coach Jay Miller said his players responded well and got back to work to get ready for a South Allegheny team that pitched a pair of shutouts in the first two WPIAL rounds before being

BURRELL • B3



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WPIAL PREVIEW CAPSULES

BASEBALL

No. 7 Penn-Trafford (18-3) vs. No. 4 Bethel Park (15-6)
7 p.m. at Wild Things Park, Washington
On the air: Trib HSSN
Players to watch: Brandon Roher, Penn-Trafford; Ethan Stanhoff, Bethel Park
Extra bases: Bethel Park defeated Penn-Trafford, 8-5, in the 2023 semifinals. In the semifinals, Stanhoff went 2 for 3 with a double, Michael Bruckner went 3 for 4 with a double and three RBIs and Ryan Walsh also doubled and drove in a pair. ... Noah LeJeune is batting .293 with four doubles, four home runs and 19 RBIs. ... Ryan Petras is hitting .469 with 30 hits — which includes five doubles — 23 runs scored and 18 stolen bases. ... Santino Diulus is 6-1 with a 1.31 ERA. ... Both teams are section champions. ... Three Warriors have 12 or more RBIs. Ethan Septak leads with 23, and Jason Sabol has 21. Septak has four home runs and Ian Temple three. Chuck Fontana leads with 28 hits. The Warriors played in the 2019 final. ... Both teams will play in the PIAA postseason. The winner plays the District 3 fifth-place team, and the loser faces the District 3 champion. The state tournament begins June 3 at sites and times to be determined.

SOFTBALL

Class 5A
Third-place game
Penn-Trafford (14-6) vs. Latrobe (11-11)
3 p.m. at Gateway
Winner: Takes third place in the WPIAL for the PIAA playoffs. The loser is fourth.
Players to watch: Bella Rubbe, Penn-Trafford; Macie McHugh, Latrobe
Extra bases: Penn-Trafford is looking for a repeat of 2019 when it lost in the WPIAL semifinals and rallied to win the PIAA championship. The fourth-seeded Lady Warriors had a 6-1 lead in the semifinals but lost 8-6 on a walk-off, two-run homer by Emma Paul in the bottom of the eighth inning. Rubbe blasted a pair of two-run homers in the loss. ... Latrobe, the No. 11 seed, dropped a 4-2 decision to No. 10 Thomas Jefferson in the semifinals despite a home run and two RBIs from Kayla Williams. The Wildcats hadn't been to the semis since 2018, which was also the last time they made the state playoffs. ... The state tournament opens Monday. The winner of this game plays the champion of District 6, 8 or 9. The loser travels to play the WPIAL champion, Armstrong or Thomas Jefferson.
Class 3A
Third-place game
Ligonier Valley (15-6) vs. Avonworth (14-4)
5 p.m. at Gateway
Winner: Earns third place in the WPIAL for PIAA tournament seeding. The loser is fourth.
Players to watch: Cheyenne Piper, Ligonier Valley; Alivia Lantz, Avonworth
Extra bases: The top two seeds in the WPIAL bracket didn't expect to meet in this game. Ligonier Valley will look to ace Piper to power them through another postseason test, but the Rams will need more offensive production. After Piper tossed three consecutive no-hitters — two in the playoffs, including a perfect game — she allowed four hits, including two home runs to Kaitlyn Polk, in a 3-0 loss to South Park in the semifinals. The Rams last made the PIAA playoffs in 2021 and were the state runners-up in 2A. ... Avonworth, the favorite to three-peat as WPIAL champion, was upset by No. 4 Mohawk, 5-3. Lantz, the Antelopes' go-to ace for several seasons, has as many strikeouts as hits allowed (10). Rylee Gray had two hits, including a homer, in the loss. The Antelopes had won 12 straight. They won WPIAL and PIAA championships in 2022. ... The state playoffs start Monday. The winner of this game visits the champion of District 6. The loser travels to play the District 10 champion, Fairview.
— Bill Beckner Jr., Paul Schofield

Norwin hopes for 1 more stunner

Seniors lead Knights into WPIAL softball title game

by BILL BECKNER JR.

Norwin has only three seniors, but they weren't ready to turn in their softball uniforms before they donned their caps and gowns.

The girls graduated Friday, but their allegiance to the Lady Knights program will carry on for at least another week or so.

And a diploma could be accompanied by ... a championship?

The reality of the situation is beginning to set in for the girls.

Bailey Snowberger, Josey Michalski and Brookelyn Kotch helped fifth-seeded Norwin pull a monumental upset in the WPIAL Class 6A semifinals as the Lady Knights sent Hempfield, the state's No. 1 team, packing with a 5-2 semifinal win last Wednesday at Gateway.

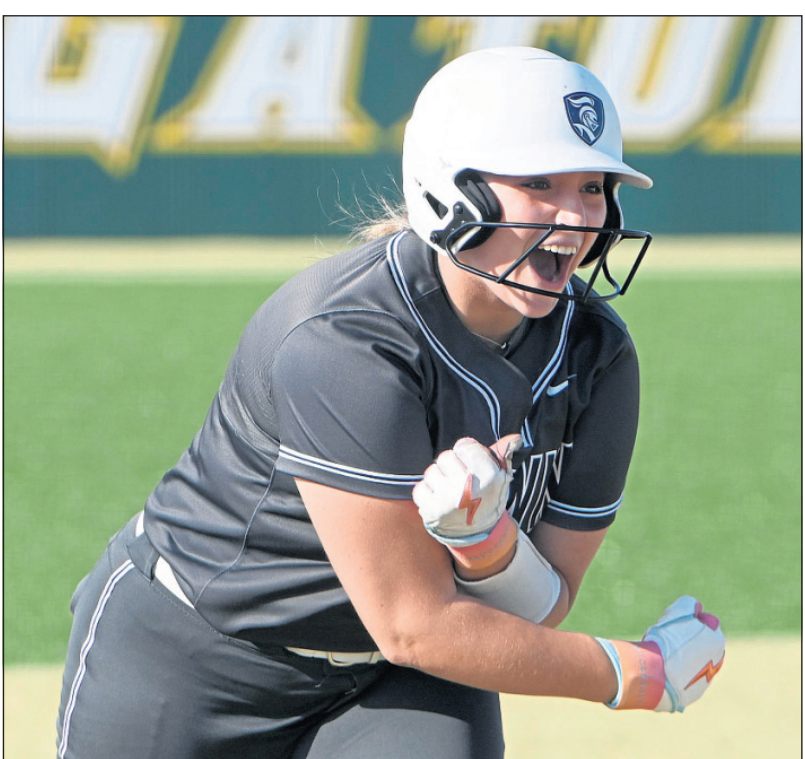
Just when everyone wrote it off, Norwin sprung up and delivered a knockout punch that propelled it to its first WPIAL championship game.

If you saw this coming, share your crystal ball with the rest of us.

Norwin did not fear defending champion Hempfield and pitcher Riley Miller, rather embracing a chance to shock 6A with a nothing-to-lose mentality.

"We lost to Hempfield the last two years," said Michalski, who hit a two-run homer in the win. "We got together and said, 'Let's go out with a bang. If we lose, we lose. But let's go out and play our best and see what happens.'"

Norwin (10-10) will get another huge challenge Wednesday when it faces No. 2 Seneca Valley (20-1) and star pitcher Lexie Hames in the championship at 4:30 p.m. at Cal



CHRISTOPHER HORNER | TRIBLIVE

Norwin's Josey Michalski rounds the bases after hitting a 2-run homer against Hempfield during the first inning of their WPIAL Class 6A semifinal. The Knights face Seneca Valley in the final Wednesday.

(Pa.)'s Lilley Field.

Even Hames admitted she was surprised it will be Norwin, not Hempfield, in the finals.

"A little bit," she said. "But, honestly, every team in 6A is hard. Every team is extremely competitive and is going to be a tough game."

The Lady Knights, who finished 7-9 in section play, were swept by Pine-Richland and Hempfield but beat both of them in the playoffs.

Now, they have an opportunity for redemption against Seneca Valley.

"I think we can win," said Kotch,

who limited star-studded Hempfield to six hits and got the Spartans to pop up 13 times. "If we have the same mindset, we can."

Kotch is a Penn State New Kensington commit but held her own against a number of Division I commits.

"It doesn't matter if you're D-III or D-I," she said. "That doesn't define who you are. Anyone can beat anyone."

Snowberger, a D-I Holy Cross commit, concurred from a classification standpoint.

Pitching key in Warriors' run to final

PENN-TRAFFORD · FROM B1

"Both teams had multiple-sport athletes who missed that game," Cortazzo said. "Winning the title was nice because it gave us confidence, and we got to see our future pitchers. We worked hard in the fall."

Those pitchers included Brandon Roher, Zach Feldman, Hunter Brown and Dom DeLio. Roher was the winning pitcher against Fox Chapel in the WPIAL quarterfinals, and Feldman started and got the win in the semifinals against Franklin Regional.

"The fall league helped us because we got to work in younger players that ended up helping us," Roher said. "It gave us confidence because we could trust them in key situations. Bethel Park is a good team."

Cortazzo said he doesn't know a lot about Bethel Park yet. He said the Black Hawks have a strong pitching staff.

Roher said the spring trip to Myrtle Beach brought the team together.

"We jelled as a team," he said. "We're a family, brothers backing brothers. We have more of a family atmosphere."

Cortazzo said many of the players have been playing together since they were 7 and 8 years old.

Ethan Septak homered against Fox Chapel and had a two-run single against Franklin Regional.

Jason Sabol hit a three-run homer, and Braydon Stone had a two-run triple and finished with three RBIs against Franklin Regional.

Bethel Park rolled over section rival Trinity, 11-1, in the quarterfinals and edged No. 1 West Allegheny, 7-6, in the semifinals. The Black Hawks rallied from a 3-0 deficit against West Allegheny.

Mike Bruckner and Ryan Walsh hit back-to-back two-run doubles to give the Black Hawks a 4-3 lead, and Joe Revis singled home Walsh in the third inning. Bruckner made it 6-3 on a single in the fourth inning, and Noah LeJeune had the winning sacrifice fly in the seventh inning.

Dylan Paul held West Allegheny scoreless over the final two innings to earn the save.

Paul Schofield is a TribLive staff writer. He can be reached at pschofield@triblive.com.

Bucs playing for PIAA seeding

BURRELL · FROM B1

limited in a 2-0 loss to top seed Riverside in the other WPIAL semifinal game at North Allegheny.

"We talked at the start of practice Thursday about how much we've grown since the start of the season, what we've done well and not so well and what we can do better," Miller said. "For as much as we've accomplished, I feel this team can do more and will do more. The guys understand what they need to clean up as they move on."

Miller said his team's 1-0 win over Neshannock in the quarterfinals and the immediate return to the field the next night against Avonworth was draining.

"It was intense," Miller said. "I love those intense games. I think these guys do, too, now that they are seeing it and experiencing it. The guys expended so much energy and gave it everything they had in those two games. You can tell that everyone has bought into it. It has brought this team closer together."

Junior Stevie Hasson is a likely candidate to get the start against South Allegheny. He was solid against Neshannock as he threw seven shutout innings and allowed just two hits as the Bucs edged the No. 11 Lancers, 1-0.

Hasson is 6-3 on the season with a 2.59 ERA over 54 innings.

South Allegheny, the No. 4 seed, beat No. 13 McGuffey, 7-0, and No. 12 Shenango, 2-0, to reach the WPIAL semifinals.

Senior Jaxson Champ and junior Ryan Cortes collected South Allegheny's only two hits against Riverside. They both reached with no outs in the fourth and were on second and third with one out. But South Allegheny was unable to get either runner home.

South Allegheny, the Section 2 champion, split with Avonworth in section play.

Senior Trenton Popovich mirrored Hasson's success as he fashioned back-to-back complete games in getting his team to the semifinals. He surrendered a combined five hits over 14 innings in the two wins.



CHAZ PALLA | TRIBLIVE

Burrell's David Kleckner celebrates with Dylan McKallip after McKallip scored against Avonworth during their WPIAL Class 3A semifinal May 21.

Miller said his team is well aware of what the Gladiators can do. The teams met for a doubleheader in the fall with South Allegheny getting the better of Burrell in those matchups.

"They took it to us in the fall," Miller said. "We lost one game 15-0, made a lot of mistakes and gave them a lot of free bases with walks and things like that. We bounced back and lost the second game 3-1. It was a team that we felt we could compete with then, and we're better now. I am sure they are a better team, too. "It's some motivation for the guys to try and get one back. It should be a really good game Tuesday."

Beyond Tuesday's game against South Allegheny, Burrell will be playing June baseball as the first round of the PIAA tournament is Monday at a site to be determined.

The Bucs, in the state playoffs for the first time since 2010 when they made it to the quarterfinals, will be traveling for their first-round game.

"It's great to know we get to keep playing," said junior Isaac Lacinski, who gave up four hits and struck out six in seven-plus innings in the loss to Avonworth.

"It's 6A," she said. "With the schedule we play, you can't take any nights off. It prepares us for this." Snowberger said she and her teammates made pinky promises to fulfill their roles in the semifinal.

They didn't let her down, with a collective thumbs up.

• Freshman Diem Wardzinski caught all seven balls hit her way.

• Junior Rachel Minter went 3 for 4.

• Kotch didn't walk anybody and delivered an RBI double.

"Everyone is buying in," Snowberger said. "Softball is a game of failure. It's about the next pitch, the next hit."

Coach Brian Mesich said the team readjusted to Miller's pitching, paying more attention to detail while "shouldering up to the ball" and being more aggressive.

"It was more attacking than backing (off)," Mesich said. "We wanted to make them make plays rather than stand there and strike out. They have been our kryptonite."

Michalski said she knew Norwin had potential to make some noise in the playoffs.

"If we all pick each other up," she said.

"That is important. If I strike out, they pick me up."

Mesich said Kotch's hard work earned her the starting nod in the circle in the postseason.

He said the defense made "game-changing plays" against Pine-Richland in the quarterfinals, and the momentum carried over.

"It's reps, attention to detail," Mesich said. "Keep getting better, and it will come. We need to put the ball in play and get contact."

Bill Beckner is a TribLive staff writer. He can be reached at bbeckner@triblive.com.

HIGH SCHOOLS

BASEBALL

WPIAL playoffs

CLASS 6A

Championship

Wednesday's schedule

Mt. Lebanon (18-4) vs. North Allegheny (16-5) at Wild Things Park, 7 p.m.

CLASS 5A

Championship

Today's schedule

Penn-Trafford (18-3) vs. Bethel Park (15-6-1) at Wild Things Park, 7 p.m.

Third place

Wednesday's schedule

Franklin Regional (14-8) vs. West Allegheny (16-4) at Washington & Jefferson, 6:30 p.m.

CLASS 4A

Championship

Wednesday's schedule

Indiana (13-9) vs. North Catholic (16-4) at Wild Things Park, 4 p.m.

Third place

Today's schedule

Montour (15-6) vs. Thomas Jefferson (19-3) at Washington & Jefferson, 6 p.m.

CLASS 3A

Championship

Today's schedule

Riverside (16-1) vs. Avonworth (15-8) at Wild Things Park, 4 p.m.

Third place

Today's schedule

South Allegheny (17-5) vs. Burrell (11-8) at Washington & Jefferson, 1 p.m.

CLASS 2A

Championship

Wednesday's schedule

Serra Catholic (17-1) vs. Seton LaSalle (16-3) at Wild Things Park, 1 p.m.

Third place

Today's schedule

Burgettstown (13-4-1) vs. Our Lady of the Sacred Heart (17-5) at Washington & Jefferson, 3:30 p.m.

CLASS A

Championship

Today's schedule

Bishop Canevin (14-4) vs. Eden Christian (16-4) at Wild Things Park, 1 p.m.

Third place

Wednesday's schedule

Carmichaels (13-5) vs. Avella (11-6) at Washington & Jefferson, 4 p.m.

SOFTBALL

WPIAL playoffs

CLASS 6A

Championship

Wednesday's schedule

Norwin (10-10) vs. Seneca Valley (20-1) at Lilley Field, 4:30 p.m.

CLASS 5A

Championship

Thursday's schedule

Armstrong (17-3) vs. Thomas Jefferson (12-7) at Lilley Field, 2:15 p.m.

Third place

Today's schedule

Penn-Trafford (14-6) vs. Latrobe (11-11) at Gateway, 3 p.m.

CLASS 4A

Championship

Thursday's schedule

Elizabeth Forward (19-1) vs. Hampton (17-3) at Lilley Field, 4:30 p.m.

Third place

Today's schedule

Chartiers Valley (16-4) vs. Blackhawk (9-8) at North Allegheny, 3 p.m.

CLASS 3A

Championship

Wednesday's schedule

Mohawk (17-5) vs. South Park (19-1) at Lilley Field, noon

Third place

Today's schedule

Avonworth (14-4) vs. Ligonier Valley (14-6) at Gateway, 3 p.m.

CLASS 2A

Championship

Thursday's schedule

Neshannock (20-0) vs. Bentworth (16-2) at Lilley Field, noon

Third place

Today's schedule

Our Lady of the Sacred Heart (14-5) vs. Laurel (17-5) at North Allegheny, 5 p.m.

CLASS A

Championship

Wednesday's schedule

Union (20-1) vs. Chartiers-Houston (17-2) at Lilley Field, 4:30 p.m.

Third place

Today's schedule

West Greene (13-7) vs. Carmichaels (15-3) at Jefferson-Morgan, 3:30 p.m.

All schedules are subject to change. To report scores or schedule changes, email ptrsports@triblive.com. Visit TribHSSN.triblive.com/scores for results, stats, standings and box scores from around Western Pennsylvania.



CHRISTOPHER HORNER | TRIBLIVE

PAUL SKENES (LEFT) AND JARED JONES

Pirates' aces are used to intense spotlight

PIRATES · FROM B1

Both have been described as electric. Jones (3-4, 3.05 ERA) is averaging 10.4 strikeouts per nine innings and has seven quality starts in 10 outings, despite giving up as many home runs (10) as walks. Skenes topped 100 mph on his four-seam fastball 17 times in his debut, then fanned the first seven batters he faced on his way to 11 strikeouts in six no-hit innings in his second career start, against the Chicago Cubs on May 17 at Wrigley Field.

The emergence of Jones and Skenes has turned a Pirates starting rotation that was a major offseason concern into the team's greatest strength, with 27 quality starts through the first 54 games, while overshadowing a magnificent May by All-Star right-hander Mitch Keller.

"It doesn't take the load off or anything but definitely the spotlight," said Keller, who is 4-0 with a 1.30 ERA in four starts this month, including a complete game against the Los Angeles Angels on May 16. "I joke around with them that I get to fly under the radar. No one even notices I'm here, so it's funny."

The notoriety is nothing new for Jones and Skenes, both former two-way players who have taken turns in the spotlight before they reached the majors. Jones was the Los Angeles Times Player of the Year at La Mirada High School in 2019, a year before the Pirates selected him in the second round.

Skenes won the John Olerud Award as the nation's top two-way player as a sophomore at Air Force before transferring to LSU and leading the Tigers to the College World Series championship and being selected with the No. 1 overall pick in the MLB Draft last July.

"There are definitely some things to adjust to, but all of the attention isn't super crazy. It's just more people in the stands, I think," said Skenes, who turns 22 on Wednesday. "It's not too different because I was doing it in Indy, too. Really, the big spike in all of that was after the draft. It wasn't so much when I debuted. It's not super new."

Despite their differing appearances, teammates say Jones is spot-on about his similarities to Skenes. Both arrive to the ballpark early, are rigid in their routines between starts and share the same mentality toward attacking hitters. They have learned to block out the distractions and concentrate on playing a game of catch — at intense velocity and movement that is complemented by a variety of secondary pitches.

"These two guys know what they need to do, especially in the game, in big situations," said Pirates lefty Martin Perez, who, like Skenes, broke into the majors at age 21. "They get here early, do all their routines. They like to talk. They ask a lot of questions. My job is not to just go out there and pitch. My job is helping them get to the process and make sure the process is not too hard for them."

"At that age, a lot of things are going on around you. But these guys have a really good personality. They know what they want and what they have to do."

Jones and Skenes simply consider it their normal. Both are adjusting to life in the majors but shrug at the suggestion their lives have changed because of the increased publicity and scrutiny. To them, it's the same game, just on a bigger stage. "We're going out there

and playing baseball," Jones said. "All of that stuff is just outside noise. It's all really cool stuff, talking to those people. But it's just noise. When I'm on the mound, I don't really hear anything. It's just me and the catcher behind there. I'm just doing my job."

Five years ago, Skenes was catching Jones.

Growing up 30 minutes apart in Southern California, they played for rival travel teams as teenagers. But at 17, they were teammates for a Prep Baseball Report event heading into the summer circuit, with Skenes catching Jones for an inning as he recorded three strikeouts.

Where Jones signed with the Pirates out of high school for \$2.2 million in 2020, Skenes blossomed while attending Air Force and LSU and signed for a draft-record \$9.2 million bonus last summer.

"It's surreal," Jones said. "I'm super happy for him and all that he's accomplished. The growth spurt essentially is what hit him. It's been incredible to watch. I've watched him go through college, watched him at LSU last year. By growth spurt, I just mean playing baseball. He was never a big-name dude in high school, but he obviously stood out."

"He was a really good player in high school. Once he got to college, he just took off. It's so cool to see that type of stuff. I'm really happy for him."

Shelton smiled at the sight of Jones and Skenes standing with Keller in the dugout during games, building a bond that could benefit the Pirates for the next five years. All three were drafted and developed through the same system, providing what Shelton calls an "organizational win," and are forming the nucleus of a starting rotation that quickly has become one of baseball's best through the first two months.

"I don't think we've had many starters from previous years stay, so we've had a new rotation it feels like every year. It's definitely nice to have those guys," Keller said. "I learn from those guys, too. We're sharing experiences. They've got questions and stuff. Most of the time we're in the dugout, we're just talking about the game going on, probably not as deep as everybody's reading into it."

"Some of them might get there, deeper questions or answers, sharing experiences or stories. Mainly, trying to get a good relationship and be really good teammates first and foremost and good friends, too. I think that carries a lot of momentum and gives us the trust in each other."

It hasn't taken long for Jones and Skenes to earn the trust of the Pirates, starting with the top of the organization. General manager Ben Cherington credited the rookies for how they have handled their transition to the major leagues by acting like they belong, on and off the field.

"I think they've handled it very well," Cherington said. "We're seeing two young pitchers that are certainly competing in games and giving us a chance to win but handling themselves between starts and have quickly become comfortable in a good way."

"I think they would both tell you, and we feel like, as much as that's exciting, we want the story to be about the team more than we want it to be about individuals. But they're both doing their part, for sure. We're lucky to have them both."

Kevin Gorman is a TribLive staff writer. He can be reached at kgorman@triblive.com.

Jackson addition was long time coming

STEELERS · FROM B1

"Just knowing that I was coming here to be part of something that was always already up and running and that was already dominant and that I could come in and just be come out rolling, that's exciting," Jackson said.

Jackson tied for the fastest time in the 40-yard dash at the 2018 NFL Combine, and he had 14 interceptions over his first 63 games.

But, just eight months after signing a three-year, \$35 million contract extension in March 2022, Jackson suffered a torn Achilles tendon that ended his fifth NFL season.

In his only action that followed — last season — Jackson did not have an interception and was credited with just five passes defended over 16 games for the 2-15 Panthers.

"I play corner, so the spotlight is always on that position, no matter if you're a big name or you are just a solid guy who's been out there making plays," Jackson said. "And I like to think I was always a solid guy who was

out there making plays. It's just not in front of the right eyes.

"So this is an opportunity to go out there and show what I have been doing my whole career, and that's making plays. Flying around. Being an impact player. That's my mindset right now, just to come in and fly around and be a difference-maker."

Jackson is in the early stages of a partnership with Porter, who, as a rookie last season, played more on the left side of the defense. Jackson has tended to play more on the right throughout his career.

"I don't care where I play, left or right," Porter said. "Whoever I'm guarding, I don't care where I go. 'D-Jack' feels the same way. We are just taking turns right now."

Jackson called the paring with Porter "a match made in heaven."

"I love that he might as well be a football he loves the game so much," Jackson said. "Me and him talk all the time, just bouncing ideas off each other. He asks a lot of questions, he's a

great learner and he writes a lot down, so the sky is the limit for Joey. I can't wait to just to get going with him."

The Steelers — specifically, coach Mike Tomlin — have been waiting a long time to get after it with Jackson, a player the Steelers were linked to repeatedly during the lead-up to the 2018 draft. In 2022, the Steelers were one of two finalists during his brief foray into free agency.

The Steelers ended up signing Levi Wallace and re-upping with Ahkello Witherspoon.

"So it kind of had a familiarity with how much they really wanted me to come be a part of this," Jackson said. "As a seven-year guy, you look for those things that get you excited to come play football, and that was totally one of them. That had me going to watch all the old (Steelers) games from back in the day. Just excited to be part of an organization like this."

Chris Adamski is a TribLive staff writer. He can be reached at cadamski@triblive.com.

Steelers need 3rd receiver

BENZ · FROM B1

the second wide receiver.

• Calvin Austin III is going to emerge. Some of their veteran acquisitions are underrated, and they can use Justin Fields as Taysom Hill.

• New offensive coordinator Arthur Smith's offense doesn't use a lot of three-wide receiver sets anyway.

• Chill 'aht! It's only May, n'at! As far as that last point goes, OK. Agreed. But unless a really big fish surprisingly enters the trade pond — or is released — the pickings have gotten awfully slim for impact pass catchers now that the draft and free agency have come and gone.

As for those first three arguments? They sound like more hope than a plan.

Meanwhile, I believe that other notion that Smith's offense doesn't need receiver depth because he doesn't run a lot of three-wide receiver sets is shortsighted.

That analysis is flawed because, even if Smith doesn't run out of 11 personnel (one back, one tight end, three receivers) very often, the Steelers don't even have a clear-cut No. 2 receiver, let alone a third. Not to mention what kind of a predicament the offense would be in if Pickens gets hurt.

Furthermore, that line of thinking is now being refuted by the receivers themselves. On the first day of minicamp Tuesday, Wilson balked at the suggestion that Smith dilutes receiver snaps.

"No doubt, this offense definitely uses the receivers a lot," Wilson said. "If you want to say as far as (minimizing 11 personnel) throwing the ball? The receivers are used a lot in the run game. ... I've got no idea what he is going to do. But I'm going to be ready for it."

Scotty Miller, who came to Pittsburgh this offseason after playing for Smith last year in Atlanta, gets the sense that his former head coach might be willing to expand the menu for the receivers in Pittsburgh.

"In Atlanta, we had a lot of tight ends: Jonnu Smith, Kyle Pitts," Miller said. "I think they wanted to get them on the field, which limits how many receivers we can have out there."



AP

Receiver Scotty Miller, now with the Steelers, has experience playing for new offensive coordinator Arthur Smith.

Conversely, in Pittsburgh, during the 2023 season, after Freiermuth, backup Connor Heyward averaged the most receiving yards per game among tight ends at just 9.8, totaling only 167 for the year.

Pickens expects Smith to evolve as the NFL evolves.

"You probably didn't see it in Tennessee. You probably didn't see it in Atlanta. But the game is changing so much overall," Pickens said. "You've got new rules on defense, the hip-drop tackle. As the game is changing, different plays are coming about, too, for offensive coordinators. I could see him doing a lot more college-themed things, which is space and getting open. That's going to work."

It certainly sounds like coach Mike Tomlin is leaving the door open for the Steelers to acquire somebody else at the position.

"We're always open to adding, not only to that group, but any group,"

Tomlin said Tuesday when I asked him if the team might still consider acquiring a receiver. "That is our mentality. But I would imagine that that's the mentality of those that we compete against as well. We continually try to get better in all areas."

That's 100% the right answer. They should consider it. Strongly. Even if it means overpaying a little bit in terms of draft picks for next year.

And, as we all know, those who are making a case as to why the Steelers don't need to get another receiver in May will lavish them with praise in August if they figure out a way to make a trade happen. That's just the way it works.

Just like how an NFL offense in 2024 works much better if you can field three capable wide receivers at a time.

Tim Benz is a TribLive staff writer. He can be reached at tbenz@triblive.com or via Twitter @TimBenzPGH.

New punter can solidify position

Veteran Johnston was top 10 in many stats last season

BY CHRIS ADAMSKI

Scott Township native Christian Kuntz is just getting to know the new colleague he will be working closest with on a daily basis over the ensuing months and maybe years.

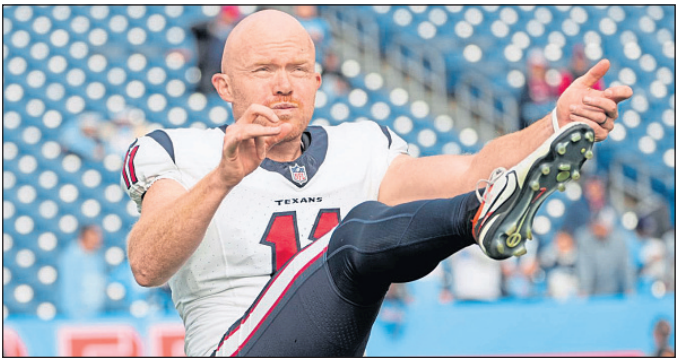
And while Kuntz so far has enjoyed his interactions with Australian Cameron Johnston, there's one way in particular the Pittsburgh Steelers' new punter can get on the good side of the player he depends on most to set him up for success.

"I know (former Steelers Aussie punter Brad Wing) brought this desert, some Australian breakfast cookie," Kuntz, the Steelers' long snapper, said after an organized team activities session this past week. "And, wow, they were unbelievable. I am gonna ask Cam to bring me back one when he goes home next time."

Whether Johnston produces any culinary delights from Down Under, he figures to be able to endear himself to Kuntz, other Steelers teammates and fans simply by providing consistent, strong punts.

Consistency largely lacked from Johnston's predecessor, Pressley Harvin III.

The Steelers cut Harvin soon after the season ended, clearly with a target in free agency in mind in the 32-year-old Johnston. A seven-year NFL veteran, Johnston last season ranked sixth in the NFL in net punting average (43.7 yards) in large part because his rates



AP

Cameron Johnston signed with the Steelers in March.

for punts landing inside the 20 (45.5%) and that went for touchbacks (4.5%) ranked among the top 10.

"He's a pro," said Kuntz, whose tenure as Steelers long snapper began when Harvin joined the team. "Cam's been around for a while, and he's done it in multiple different stadiums and teams. He hits great heights (with hang time), and he's an Aussie guy so those end-over-ends are good. And he's a good dude too, so it's good to have that."

Part of the burgeoning community of Aussie punters in the NFL, Johnston is familiar with Wing and is close friends with Jordan Berry. The latter was the Steelers' punter from 2015-20, with Wing their primary punter in 2015 and an injury fill-in for Harvin for two games last season.

Johnston and Berry worked together at Prokick Australia, a punting academy of sorts that produces punters for American football college programs and, in turn, the NFL.

"I've known Berry really, really well for a while now, so I messaged him

before signing here and asked him about the Steelers," Johnston said, "and he said everything was great. He said everything was really, really good here, and I agree. I've loved it since the first day I got here. Great group of guys, and I am super excited."

Johnston won a national championship and was named all-Big Ten while at Ohio State, and he's settled in the Columbus, Ohio, area where his wife is from. In the NFL, he's twice been on teams that have advanced to the divisional round of the playoffs (the 2018 season with Philadelphia and last year with Houston).

He agreed to terms with the Steelers during the first day of the "legal tampering period" for free agency in March.

"When this opportunity arose, we jumped on it right away," Johnston said. "I am just looking forward to getting out there to try to help win some games."

Chris Adamski is a TribLive staff writer. He can be reached at cadamski@triblive.com.

