

Steelers' Smith takes Connolly Cup

Standout named best of the best in very good year

By Keith McShea
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From time to time during the season, Capone Smith would visit the Web site of the Connolly Cup to review the players who had been nominated for the award given to the most outstanding football player in Western New York.

"I was looking at history of the Connolly Cup, and I would look at a finalist and 'Google' their name and see what they did in high school," said the Lackawanna senior. "And the numbers that the kids have this year are just crazy [as opposed to] the people in the past."

Many football followers agree that this year's class of 10 nominees is one of the very best in the history of the award, and when future players check those Connolly Cup archives to see who won it in such a great year, they'll see Smith's name.

Smith, an exceptional multitasking threat who helped the Steelers to the Section VI Class B title, was awarded the 37th Connolly Cup by the Riverside Athletic Club Saturday afternoon at Ilio DiPaolo's Restaurant in Blasdell.

"I'm just honored and so happy — words can't even describe how I feel," said Smith. "I received the high school award at the Little League banquet in Lackawanna [Friday night]. . . . Everyone who has something to do with my football playing was there — especially those who were teaching me the basics and the fundamentals and making the game easy. I just want to play football. Whatever it takes to win."

The 5-foot-10, 180-pounder stood out in whatever position he played for the Steelers (10-1): quarterback, running back, wide receiver, defensive back, punter, kick returner. And when asked about one of his top plays of the season, both Smith and Lackawanna coach Bruce Lakso cited a momentum-changing, thunderous hit he delivered on kickoff coverage in a crucial late regular-season game at East Aurora.

Smith rushed for 2,036 yards and 19 touchdowns on 163 carries, threw for 273 yards and three touchdowns on 22- for-39 passing and caught six passes for 94 yards and two touchdowns — including a 32- yard TD catch in Lackawanna's 28-10 Section VI championship win over Fredonia.

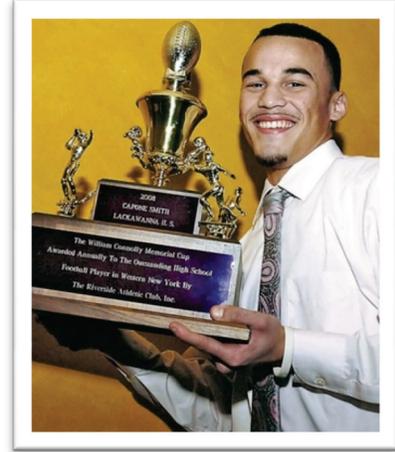
"He just did everything for us, with a smile on his face," said Lakso. "Sportsmanship, athlete, warrior — he's the total package."

This year's field was so loaded that the Connolly Cup committee extended its thorough selection process an extra week. "This is the best year I've ever been a part of, by far," said committee Chairman Dennis Sarow, who has been involved with the committee for 15 years. "I don't think it's close. And there are 10 players out there that could have made [the final 10]. It was tough."

The field included five players who won state championships, including three quarterbacks who were named the MVP of their championship game. The top 10 also included last year's winner, Jeff Tundo of Orchard Park (no player has ever won the award twice).

Tundo (2,002 rushing yards) was joined by senior backfield mate Kyle Hoppy (1,290 passing yards, 920 rushing yards), the quarterback and Class AA game MVP. Senior quarterback Casey Kacz (1,647 yards, 22 touchdowns), the MVP of the Class A state final, and junior running back/linebacker Deshanaro Morris (1,503 rushing yards, 63 unassisted tackles) represented Sweet Home. Maple Grove junior quarterback Chris Secky (1,810 yards passing, 23 touchdowns) led the Red Dragons to the Class D title.

The other finalists were Canisius senior quarterback Sean Brady (2,038 passing yards), Grand Island senior wide receiver Alex Neutz (1,182 receiving yards, 20 touchdowns), Iroquois senior running back Brandon Murie (1,660 rushing yards, 26 touchdowns), and senior Luke Tasker of Monsignor Martin Association League AA champion St. Francis, a standout at receiver, quarterback, running back, defensive back and all facets of special teams.



Dennis C. Enser/Buffalo News
Lackawanna's Capone Smith is the 37th player to hoist the Connolly Cup, awarded by the Riverside Athletic Club.