

# Southwestern's Sopak wins Connolly Cup

## Despite diabetes, becomes first Trojan to win Cup

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James P. McCoy / Buffalo News  
Zack Sopak of Southwestern holds up the Connolly Cup.

When he was about 9 years old, Zack Sopak loved playing football so much that he set up a field in his backyard. He painted yard lines, sidelines, end zones and even a design at midfield, and he strung Christmas lights around the yard to light it all up.

Sopak loved playing football so much that he wouldn't let anything get in his way. Not a broken arm, and not diabetes.

He's done it all so well that on Saturday afternoon, the Southwestern senior quarterback's name was announced as the latest addition to an exclusive club of outstanding Western New York football players: Sopak was awarded the 38th Connolly Cup.

"A lot of people don't understand what Zack's gone through and the struggle that he's had [with his health]," said Southwestern coach Jay Sirianni said after Sopak accepted the trophy at Ilio DiPaolo's Restaurant in Blasdell. "He just perseveres. That's the word for Zack Sopak: he perseveres."

Sopak is the first player from Southwestern to receive the Cup, awarded annually by the Riverside Athletic Club. He was the championship game MVP last week — as well as last year — in helping lead Southwestern to two straight Class C state titles and a winning streak that stands at 29.

The 5-foot-11, 180-pound quarterback was an equal threat with his arm and his feet, and clutch third-down plays were his specialty. He completed 102 of 169 passes for 1,831 yards, 21 touchdowns and six interceptions on the year while he ran for 807 yards and four touchdowns on 132 carries.

And he did it all with Type 1 diabetes. His body does not produce enough insulin to properly control blood sugar levels, so Sopak wears an insulin pump daily — except when playing full-contact football — and checks his sugar levels 12 times a day.

"It's a big obstacle that he's managed to overcome," said Sopak's mother, Paula Morris. "He said it would never stop him from playing football — because he loves football."

Sirianni's first time seeing Sopak play was as an eighth-grader. Sopak broke his arm on the first series and missed the rest of that season.

"We knew that there was something special there," Sirianni said, "and look at what it culminated in."

The other finalists were: Lockport senior running back David Fluellen, Lancaster senior quarterback Justin Juda, Grand Island senior running back Andy LaLonde, Williamsville South junior quarterback Joe Licata, Sweet Home senior quarterback Pat McMahon, Cassadaga Valley senior running back B.J. Monacelli, St. Joe's senior quarterback Matt Rosenhahn, Iroquois senior running back Calvin Sluberski and Maple Grove senior quarterback Chris Secky.

When Sopak woke up Saturday morning, his first thoughts weren't of the Connolly Cup, but of the SAT, which he took again in an effort to increase his score. The honor student said the Ivy League's Pennsylvania is among the schools he has been talking to. Others are Albany, Wagner, Washington & Jefferson, Robert Morris and St. John Fisher.

"After I was finished [with the SAT], I was just thinking on the ride up — to be honest I didn't really think I had a chance," Sopak said. "Licata's numbers were crazy and McMahon is a great player. I just came up for the experience, and ended up walking away with the trophy."