

A Show of Hands

Receiving corps fuels SB's high-octane offense

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A certain insurance company has used a familiar slogan, calling themselves "The Good Hands People." It wouldn't be wrong for the members of Santa Barbara's high-flying passing attack to adopt that phrase as a collective moniker. Or better yet, we could suggest the ever-welcome sign "always open."

While the Santa Barbara football team has lost more games than it has won heading into tonight's Southern Section Northern Division first-round playoff game at Thousand Oaks, it certainly was not because of a lack of effort from the Dons' senior

receiving quintet. Tight end Bryson Lloyd, wide receivers Andrew Mendoza and Roberto Nelson, and running backs Kyle Leonard and Freddy Maldonado have each had a hand in a Dons aerial attack that has averaged well over 30 points per game, and with plenty of fireworks along the way.

"As a coach, I cut my teeth on the I-formation. But football changes, and while I thought we could do really well passing this year, I had no idea they'd perform as well as they have," coach Will Gonzales said.

Those early, modest expectations were easy to

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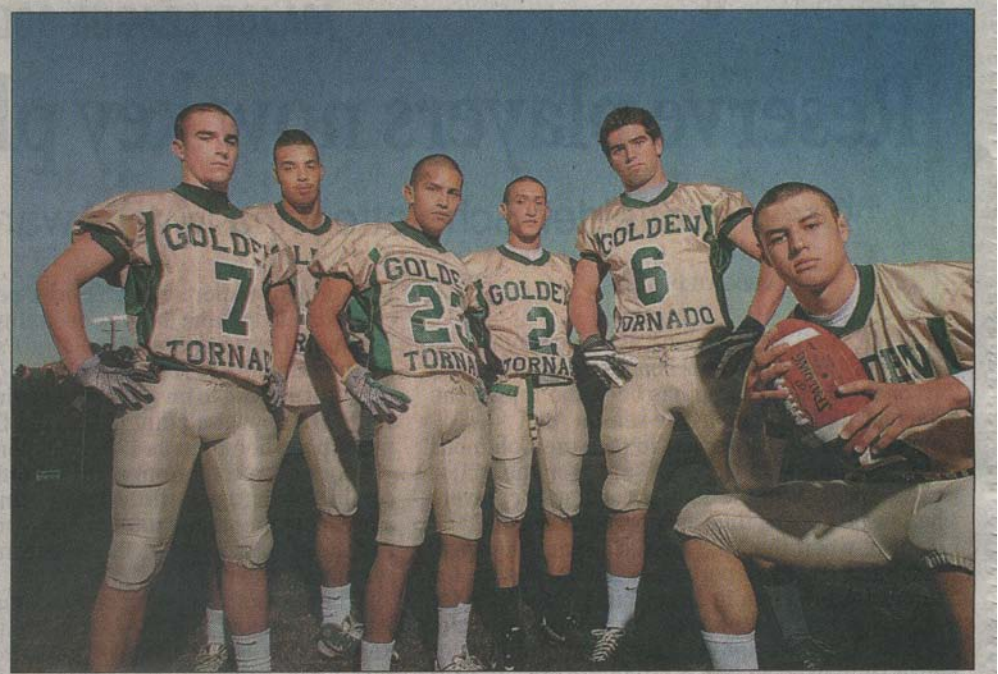
come by after Santa Barbara's 7-4 2007. Both Lloyd and Nelson blossomed as top targets that season, with Lloyd totaling 46 catches for 646 yards and eight touchdowns and Nelson leading the team with 689 receiving yards hile hauling in seven scores on only 27 receptions.

With his top two receivers and quarterback John Uribe set to return for 2008, Gonzales hoped to maximize their potential and installed a wide-open offense.

"Coach G changed the system, and we are able to utilize a lot of weapons," said Lloyd, who has a county-high 84 receptions (second-best in county history) for 930 yards and six touchdowns, despite missing one game and most of two others with an ankle sprain that he has struggled with all season. But even when reluctantly sidelined, the 6-foot-3, 230-pound tight end has continued to make solid contributions by offering his advice and experience to fellow receivers.

"As Bryson goes, we go. He's a vocal leader on

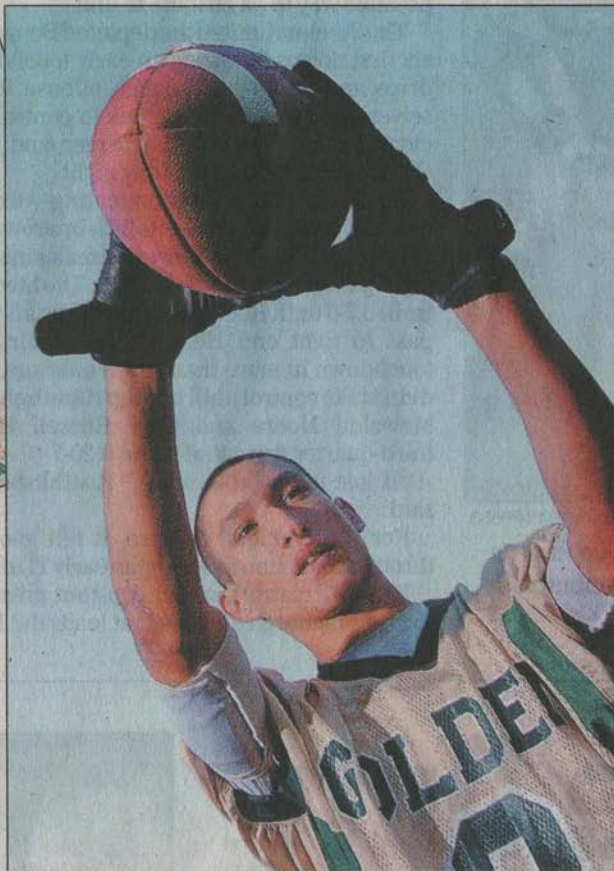
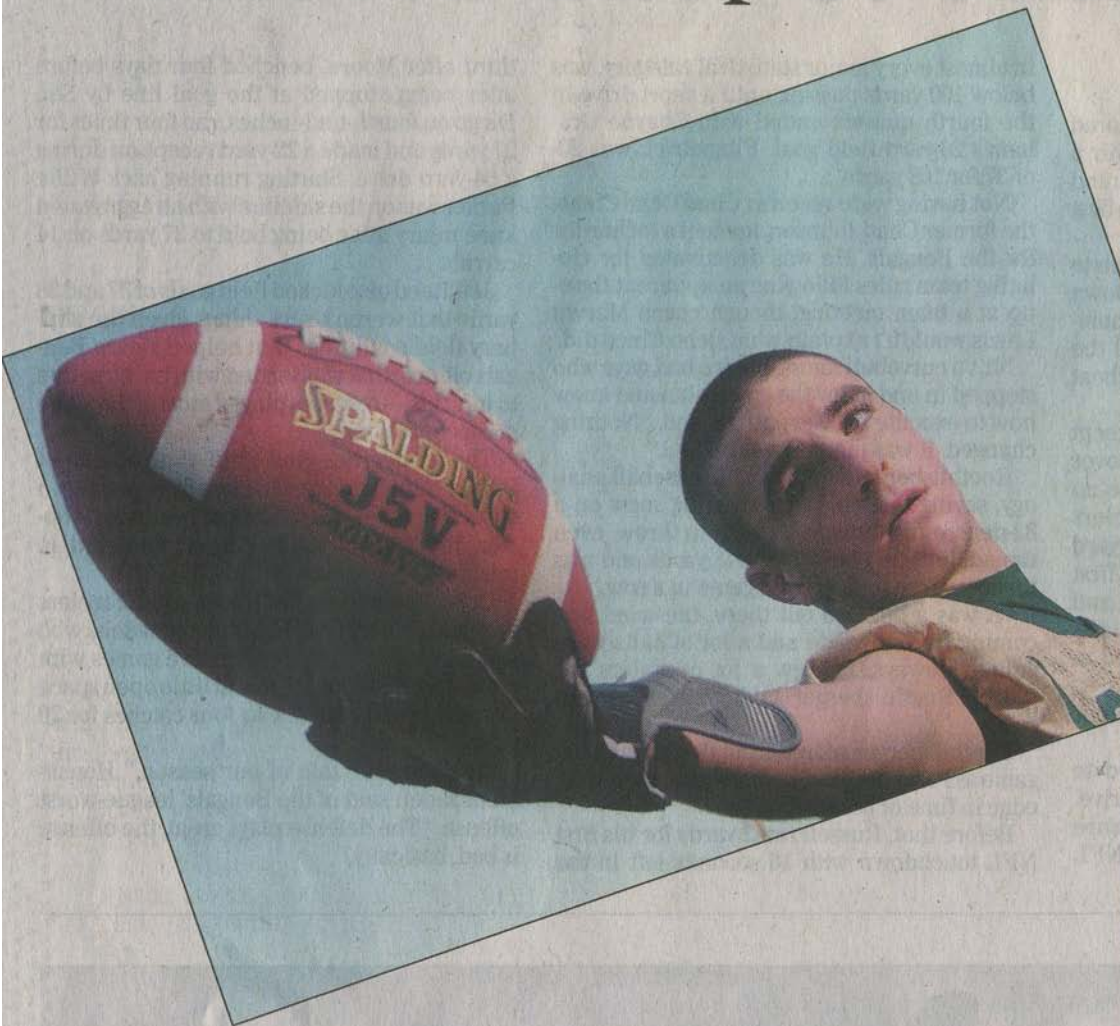
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MIKE ELIASON/NEWS-PRESS PHOTOS

The Santa Barbara High offense, from left, Kyle Leonard, Roberto Nelson, Freddy Maldonado, Andrew Mendoza and Brandon Lloyd and quarterback John Uribe, have teamed to set numerous records this season.

Dons receivers perfect the hands game



OFFENSE

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and off the field. And when he's injured, he reacts well and helps the rest of the guys," Allen said.

With Lloyd (who has had four games of 11 or more receptions) continuing as the Dons' most dependable outlet, Nelson grew even more as a big-play threat. His 18 touchdowns this season are the second-best in county history (Carpinteria's Jerry Hamilton had 22 in 1979), and Nelson is only the sixth county player to surpass 1,000 receiving yards in a single season (66 catches, 1,107 yards). Nelson also had six games of 100 or more yards receiving.

At the beginning of the season, the odds didn't seem good for a player like Andrew Mendoza to get much playing time. But the senior wideout, who was seldom used in 2007 (one catch for 12 yards), blossomed into a legitimate threat with 29 catches for 407 yards and five touchdowns. His two biggest games came against San Luis Obispo (6-for-109 yards, two TDs) and San Marcos (9-for-169, two TDs) when he filled the void when Lloyd was injured.

"It felt good helping my team. We're having fun being a part of this offense," Mendoza said.

The Dons got even more help with a pair of transfers who have both become key receivers from the backfield in Freddy Maldonado and Kyle Leonard.

Maldonado played last year for Carpinteria, and at first wasn't sure what role he would play. As it turned out,

Maldonado has played just about everywhere, whether it's lining up next to Uribe in the backfield or split wide out. This season, he has totaled 24 catches for 449 yards and seven touchdowns. Additionally, he has scored two rushing touchdowns and has been an explosive kick returner with TD runbacks against Buena and San Marcos.

Leonard transferred into Santa Barbara from Florida, where he had played at nationally-renowned Nease High School, where he was a freshman when Heisman Trophy winner Tim Tebow was a senior. The senior running back was encouraged to come to Santa Barbara by Lloyd, who explained that the two had become friends in junior high school when Lloyd's family had moved out to Florida for a year before returning to Santa Barbara.

"It's so amazing to be a part of this," said Leonard, who has rushed for 361 yards while catching 52 passes for 383 yards and four touchdowns. "We have so many weapons that anyone can shine on any night."

And it seems that everyone has, and with Uribe averaging over 45 passing attempts per game, there has been little grumbling about who gets the many balls

that are coming their way.

"It's not even like that. In the games, everyone is getting involved. It's great to have friends and we're having a lot of fun out there," Nelson said.

"We're all close and tight knit out there. And anyone can have a great night," said Uribe, who is approaching the 4,000-yard mark and has thrown 40 touchdowns.

While the Santa Barbara offense has scaled some great heights, a struggling defense has at times overshadowed their effort. Gonzales points out that the Dons' six losses have all come to teams that have qualified for the playoffs.

"A few breaks here and there, and we could easily be 8-2 instead of 4-6," said Gonzales, whose team faces a big challenge tonight in overcoming a 9-1 Thousand Oaks team.

"We're going in with a chip on our shoulder. We know we just have to come back and play as hard as we can," Uribe said.

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Clockwise from top left, Kyle Leonard, Andrew Mendoza, Roberto Nelson and Freddy Maldonado have been on the receiving end of most of Santa Barbara's offense this season.