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2016 Turkey Bowl Essentials: A Breakdown of New Canaan vs. Darien

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Thursday morning will mark the third straight year New Canaan and Darien collide in the Turkey Bowl as the top two teams in the state.

As was the case last year, this will be the only time the No.1 Wave and No. 2 Rams face one another as Darien will defend its state Class LL title while the Rams are looking to win their fourth straight Class L crown.

And if the previous two Thanksgiving match-ups—both won by Darien by a score of 28-21—are any indication, this year's game will be another classic chapter in a historic rivalry that dates back to 1928.

Even with the absence of an official FCIAC Championship game this season, stakes will be high on Thursday as the game will count toward CIAC rankings, impacting the probability of a state semifinal home game.

But first things first. Let's take a deeper look at the collision course about to play itself out in front of a ([very](#)) sold-out crowd of 4,700 fans at Dunning Field on Nov. 24.

New Canaan's Offense vs. Darien's Defense

- New Canaan's offense has improved every week, so much so that it's almost hard to remember when it was under scrutiny after a somewhat lackluster 20-6 season-opening win over Trinity Catholic. The Rams' balanced attack racked up a total of 3,620 yards (1,895 passing, 1,725 rushing) in 2016, averaging more than 400 yards and almost 40 points per game. It's no secret that the biggest challenge for Darien will be to try and neutralize New Canaan's star running back Ryan O'Connell. Easier said than done. The senior co-captain is one of the top players in the state, equally adept at running and receiving and able to turn broken plays into touchdowns in the blink of an eye. O'Connell—who should be 100% percent after missing nearly all of the previous two games with an ankle injury—gained 502 yards on 83 carries in 2016, scoring 8 rushing touchdowns. He also caught 19 passes for 424 yards and 5 TD's. New Canaan showed significant offensive depth as senior running back Graham Braden (77-604, 7 TD's rushing) has been a consistent threat out of the backfield behind a solid offensive line led by senior co-captain Teddy Hood and Fordham-bound, 6'7", 265-lb. tackle Will Conley. Sophomore receiver Quintin O'Connell (29 receptions for 515 yards and 6 TD's) emerged as a playmaker and a favorite target for poised freshman quarterback Drew Pyne (99-155, 1,658 yards, 21 TD's, 7 INT's passing; 55-319, TD rushing), who has improved each game while filling the considerable shoes of graduated star QB Michael Collins. Look for more "Drew-Q" hookups on Thursday if Darien is able to stop New Canaan's running attack by stacking the box, as well as contributions from wideouts Justin Greco (15-203, TD) and Jack Rechtermann (15-221, TD).

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Despite losing star lineman Mark Evanchick to graduation, Darien's defense didn't skip a beat in 2016, allowing an average of just 14 points per game. Expect Darien to shadow O'Connell all day with star linebacker, senior co-captain Finlay Collins (62 tackles, 5 sacks) and make someone else—notably Pyne—beat them. Senior defensive linemen Cord Fox (58 tackles, 9 sacks) and co-captain Quinn Fay (44 tackles, 5 sacks) lead a Darien defensive unit that had 33 sacks on the season, and have the ability to seal the edges and contain the elusive New Canaan QB. Not allowing Pyne to escape the pocket will be a key for Darien as that's where he's at his best—be it throwing on the run or tucking the ball away and scrambling. Darien's secondary is solid, led by Tim Herget (4 INT, 37 tackles) and Nick Green (2 INT, 57 tackles), who will be ready and able to take advantage of any mistakes Pyne and the Rams might make under pressure.

Darien's Offense vs. New Canaan's Defense

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Like New Canaan, Darien's offense was seemingly decimated by graduation, only to see new names emerge as bona-fide stars. Foremost has been the play of senior QB Brian Peters (134-206, 2,359 yards, 26 TD's, 6 INT's passing), who took over under center following the graduation of all-time Wave great Timmy Graham. Peters lacks the mobility of Pyne but given the protection afforded him by a massive offensive line—anchored by their senior co-captain, Michigan-bound, 6'6", 299-lb. tackle Andrew Steuber—he is content to sit back in the pocket and wait for his receivers to get open. Leading that corps of receivers is Herget, a legitimate deep-threat who caught 21 passes for 510 yards and 6 TD's. Rounding out a talented quartet of receivers are Spencer Jarecke (25-322, 3 TD's), Nick Green (20-376, 5 TD's) and Max Grant (18-436, 6 TD's), each of whom is capable of taking advantage of any potential lapses in New Canaan's secondary. Darien also boasts an effective ground game with feature back Mitch Pryor leading the way with 659 yards rushing on 73 carries—good for an average of more than nine yards per carry—and 13 rushing touchdowns. Finlay Collins provides Darien with a dual-threat option, rushing 70 times for 484 yards and 6 touchdowns while hauling in 18 receptions for 341 yards and 2 TD's. Both backs have exceptional speed and an ability to turn the corner on pitches or run up Steuber's back for yardage up the middle.

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New Canaan's defense has been its most consistent weapon in 2016, capable of completely shutting down opposing offenses and providing positive field position for the offense. That being said, the Rams D will have its hand full against Darien's multi-faceted attack, which averaged more than 43 points per game this season. For New Canaan to shut down the Wave, it will have to get consistent backfield penetration from its front-three of Jack Kircher (31 tackles, 5 sacks), Dylan Miles (34 tackles, 3 sacks) and Seamus O'Hora (28 tackles, 5 sacks). The Rams will also look to linebackers Grant Morse (62 tackles, 2 fumble recoveries), senior co-captain James Freyre (59 tackles, 2 sacks, 2 INT's) and sophomore Garrett Braden (5 sacks, 39 tackles, 10 tackles for a loss) to blitz the line of scrimmage to contain Darien's running game and disrupt their deadly short passing attack. The strength of New Canaan's defense is arguably its secondary, led by Ryan O'Connell (19 tackles, 6 INT's), Jackson Appelt (25 tackles, 5 INT's) and senior co-captain Tommy Root (20 tackles, 5 INT's). It's an opportunistic group that came away with a remarkable 21 interceptions on the year and held opposing offenses to an average of less than 10 points scored per game, most of which came late in the game against the New Canaan second unit.

Special Teams

Appelt and the O'Connell brothers are as dangerous as anyone on kickoff returns and juniors Griffin Arnone and Sean Knight are equally adept on punts for the Rams. Darien has a strong, experienced kicker in Riley Stewart (47-52 PAT's) and a weapon in punter Dillon Jones, who booted a 75-yarder earlier this season. New Canaan kicker Grant Morse has been consistent since taking over the job, making 36 of 39 extra points but has not converted a field goal all season. Herget and Collins are solid return men for the Wave. Might be best for both teams to try and kick the ball out of the end zone on kickoffs.

EDGE: Darien

Key Matchup: Andrew Steuber vs. Jack Kircher

Kircher has quietly been one of New Canaan's most important players, as the 6'3", 263-lb. DT has shown a consistent penchant for sacks and QB hurries. Most teams ran away from Kircher this season, but don't expect Darien to shy away from taking the ball to the left side behind Steuber, possibly the top O-lineman in the state.

If Kircher can get pressure on Peters, he could force some errant passes into the awaiting arms of New Canaan's dangerous secondary. Keep an eye on this battle within the war.

Prediction

Darien has had the Rams' number for the past four seasons. In fact, the last time New Canaan lost to someone other than the Wave was on Dec. 12, 2012 when they fell to Windsor 27-21 in the Class L Semifinals.

This will be another classic coaching chess match between New Canaan's Lou Marinelli and Darien's Rob Trifone, unquestionably the two best coaches of the two best programs in the state.

On paper, there's not much to point to a clear favorite. Except one. New Canaan has a +14 turnover differential, while Darien has a +3. I'll predict a back-and-forth battle with the Rams defense coming up with a huge turnover in a key spot to make Thanksgiving great again in the 06840.

New Canaan – 28, Darien – 24

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