

Game of the Week: Future of the Battle of the Bay at a crossroads



Seaside's Josiah Escort uses his right hand to fend off a tackle by Pacific Grove's Ryder Gamecho on Friday night at Seaside. Escort is expected to be a key player in Seaside's game against Monterey on Saturday. (Donald Fukui — Herald correspondent)



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PUBLISHED: September 4, 2025 at 9:35 AM PDT

MONTEREY – From a historical standpoint, the date of the game still gets circled each year – for the last 59 – by players and those who have participated in the matchup.

Coined the Battle of the Bay, the emotion and adrenaline that is poured into the annual football game between Monterey and Seaside high schools sees alumni dust off their old block jackets with a sense of pride.

Yet, the declining number of players in the Spartans' football program over the years has taken its toll. Sustaining the program is a concern going into Saturday's 60th meeting at Monterey Peninsula College.

"We're trying to keep our football program above water," Seaside coach Al Avila said. "Right now, I don't know if we should be playing this game. It's not good for the morale or potentially the health of our kids."

Avila, who has been part of the rivalry as a player or coach for six decades, went from being in the Gabilan Division, the most competitive division in the Pacific Coast Athletic League, four years ago to the Santa Lucia Division, the least competitive, this fall after a 1-9 season.



Monterey's Bronson Gulley had 15 completions in the team's opener against Christopher. (John Devine -- Monterey Herald)

The Toreadores, who hold a 31-27-1 overall lead in the series, are in the Gabilan Division, with more freshmen out for football (40) than Seaside has in its entire program (38).

"Absolutely, it's an unfair playing field," Avila said. "It has been for years. But it's up to us as coaches and teachers of this school to turn this around and convince kids, parents, that Seaside is a good place to send your kids."

The Spartans, who hope to suit up 22 kids for Saturday's 2 p.m. game at Monterey Peninsula College, have dropped four straight to their rivals to the west – the last two by a combined score of 91-20.

"I'm not crying," said Avila, who played in the game in 1973. "It's reality. It's not just football. Look at all our sports programs. Look at our numbers. It's tough."

The rivalry, however, still means something. There is a different vibe throughout the week on both campuses, one that grows with anticipation as the game gets closer.

"The game still means so much to both communities," said Monterey Principal Tom Newton, who played and coached in the game and has been an administrator on both sides. "I have no doubt Seaside will get back on an upward trajectory."

Avila would love nothing more. For now, what's more important is sustaining the program for the future, campaigning on campus, convincing kids to give it a shot.

Yet, it's challenging when you have 22 healthy players, several of whom are coming up from a junior varsity program that's won one game in two years.

"It's not sustainable at this rate," Avila said. "We're begging kids to come out. We're just trying to put these kids in a position to compete. Our foundation isn't about winning or losing."

The Spartans showed enough flashes on film in a 14-7 loss last week to Pacific Grove to not be taken lightly by the Toreadores, who rallied for a 22-21 win at Christopher.



Monterey's Ethan Bonilla. (John Devine -- Monterey Herald)

Before the past two meetings, the previous three games between Seaside and the Toreadores were decided by three, two and two points, with field goals for both sides in 2019 and 2021 deciding the outcome.

“The last two games have been outliers,” Monterey coach Alex Besaw said. “Emotions come into play. During my first year, we had to beat them just to make the playoffs.”

Besaw was speaking about a Monterey 29-27 win, in which the Spartans missed a two-point conversion that would have sent the game into overtime.

Ironically, it was a two-point conversion by the Toreadores with 21 seconds left that enabled them to escape Christopher with a one-point win.

“We found out a lot about who we were in different moments,” Besaw said. “It was great to see a group with no experience playing together, find a way to win a game like that.”

In breaking down film, the Toreadores struggled with their execution. Mistakes grounded their attack, while defensive breakdowns were abundant earlier in the game.

“You don’t want to crush the spirits of a win like that,” Besaw said. “But the reality is we didn’t execute very well. We have to be realistic with ourselves. We addressed it.”

Besaw, who has only been a part of this rivalry for three years, also addressed the need to keep emotions in check and not get caught in the buzz on social media.

“A lot of these kids live a few blocks from each other,” Besaw said. “It’s not just a rivalry with a rich tradition. It’s bragging rights. We talked about being mature emotionally.”

The Toreadores put a balanced product out on the field last week, with Ethan Bonilla rushing for 127 yards and Kai Vaughn catching seven of Bronson Gulley’s 15 completions.

“Monterey has a lot of team speed and good size,” Avila said. “In watching film, I thought their defense looked well-coached. In the past, it looked like streetball.”

The 6-foot-6 Gulley orchestrated the Toreadores on a game-winning drive in the final 1 minute and 21 seconds with a touchdown pass to Dekota Ordonio and a two-point conversion to Vaughn.

“We always finish our walk-throughs by going for two,” Besaw said. “So for these guys, it was nothing new. The kids weren’t shocked that we were going for two.”



Seaside's Nathaniel Bell. (John Devine -- Monterey Herald)

What Besaw would like a week before opening Gabilan Division play is a better start. Last week the Toreadores were staring at a 14-0 first quarter deficit.

Yet, unlike Week 1 when Besaw had five sophomores starting on defense – two of whom were brought up that week, there is a varsity game under their belt.

“Sometimes it’s good to be green,” Besaw said. “You don’t know any better when you fall behind. We didn’t finish or tackle very well. We got punched in the mouth. I’d like to make the simple things simple.”

That youthful defense got a lift last week from linebacker Connor Rose, who recovered a fumble, and defensive end Tailib Ackerman, who also started at left tackle.

The Spartans are trying to fill both those spots after losing Walter Perez in the season opener for at least the rest of the preseason.

Perez was a big part of the offensive line in springing Josiah Escort, who accounted for Seaside’s only touchdown last week.

“They are creative in getting Josiah the ball,” Besaw stated. “We understand where their athletes are. We have to bottle them up as best as possible.”

Defensive end Jeremiah Laui was flying all over the field for the Spartans last week, while Nathaniel Bell helped contain the inside run.

“After the first quarter, we shut down Pacific Grove the rest of the game,” Avila said. “We were more physical.”

Seaside spent the week fine-tuning its offensive schemes, no matter how simple they may be, looking for what Avila described as very few weaknesses in the Monterey defense.

“One guy missing an assignment keeps the play from developing,” Avila said. “Are these young kids ready? No. But

they battle. As long as you're playing with heart and effort, you can't get down with that."