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By **ROBERTO GONZALEZ**
Courant Staff Writer

Hartford Public's Greg Bartlett didn't take part in his team's wild postgame slip-and-slide celebration in the mud. He couldn't. Bartlett was busy accepting the MVP trophy for his efforts in the 68th meeting of Hartford Public and Weaver Thursday.

The junior running back had just rushed for 176 yards and one touchdown on 25 carries, breaking a school single-season rushing record to lead Hartford Public to a 20-0 victory over Weaver in a downpour at Dillon Stadium.

Hartford Public (8-2) leads the series, 37-28-3.

The victory also was significant because it kept Hartford Public's playoff hopes alive. If Bridgeport Central defeats Warren Harding Sat-

urday, the Owls will make their first appearance in the Class LL championship game.

Bartlett has rushed for 1,537 yards this season. Marvin Riley set the record as a senior last season with 1,367 yards.

After the game, all the 6-foot, 190-pound Bartlett wanted to do was thank the offensive line, the defense and his friends.

"If Marvin had this line," Bartlett said, "he would have rushed this far. But I also have to credit the coaches."

Bartlett joined the team as a freshman, but had to await his turn as two other excellent running backs, Aaron Fisher and Riley, came before him.

"I waited and watched," Bartlett said. "I learned a lot from them. I'm still learning."

Regardless of what happens Saturday, it's been one of Hartford Public's best seasons in a long time.

"We have good kids," fifth-year Hartford Public coach Jack LaPlante said. "They're good athletes but also good students. They come from good homes and get a lot of support from their parents."

And alumni. LaPlante was most pleased with the support not just of the older alumni, but recent graduates. Most notably former players of the past couple years, such as Riley, Eric Shorter and Harvey Kendall, who were on hand Thursday.

They played a big role at halftime. Hartford Public dominated most of the first half, but scored only six points on a KiJuan Ware 36-yard pass to Keith Kendall with 9 minutes, 13 seconds left in the first quarter.

LaPlante said Riley, Shorter and Kendall talked to the players at halftime, instilling in them the importance of the game.

"They banged on their helmets," LaPlante said. "They told the team to get off its butt and do a better job for all the people who had come to see them play today."

Weaver (0-9-1) came out with much intensity and put together its best drive of the game, marching to the 6-yard line. But on third-and-goal, Hartford Public's Logan Stringer intercepted a Steve James pass and returned it 57 yards.

"That was a big play," LaPlante said. "That turned it around for us."

Hartford Public scored its last two touchdowns on a 22-yard pass from Ware to Ira Lynch early in the fourth quarter and an 11-yard run by Bartlett with 3:18 left.