

3rd-ranked Lacey rallies to edge No. 9 Southern Regional, 21-19

By MICHAEL McGARRY, Staff Writer | Posted: Sunday, October 14, 2012 12:30 am

STAFFORD TOWNSHIP - The Lacey Township High School football team floundered for all but 42 seconds of the first half Saturday afternoon.

That scant amount of success in the first two quarters was enough to propel the Lions to victory.

Quarterback Tom Kelly threw two touchdown passes and ran for another score as Lacey rallied from a 12-point deficit to beat Southern Regional 21-19 in a Shore Conference A South game. The victory gave Lacey (6-0) sole possession of first place in the division.

Lacey players arrived at Southern especially inspired. Many of them had watched Toms River North beat Brick Memorial 30-25 Friday night. The Lions knew because of North's win they could have the division lead to themselves with a victory over Southern.

"This was a huge game for us," said Lacey running back and defensive back Kyle Spatz. "We practiced longer than normal for this. Then we heard that North won and we were like, 'Let's go.' We wanted to take over first place."

Fans filled the home and visiting bleachers at Southern Regional for Saturday's much-anticipated matchup. Although the two schools are located just 12 miles apart on the Garden State Parkway, Lacey and Southern had not played in nearly 30 years because they've been in different divisions.

This season they are both in A South because of geography and enrollment. Both teams are also in the midst of good seasons. Lacey is No. 3 in The Press Elite 11, while Southern (3-2) is No. 9.

Southern dominated nearly all of the first half.

"The first half was lackadaisical," Kelly said.

Lacey trailed 12-0 when it took over at its own 21-yard line with 42 seconds left in the second quarter.

Just four plays later, the Lions had a touchdown and the momentum. Christian Tutela began the drive with a 14-yard run and Spatz followed with a 24-yard gain.

After an incomplection, Kelly found wide receiver Bill Belford (five catches for 82 yards) open over the middle. It was a broken play.

"Belford was wide open so I threw it to him," Kelly said.

Belford zig-zagged through the Rams' defense for a 41-yard touchdown to cut the Southern lead to 12-7 with eight seconds left in the first half.

"After that touchdown, you would think we were up 21-0," Kelly said. "We went into halftime like we were winning the game and we came out the same way."

Lacey controlled the ball in the second half behind Kelly's passing.

The junior completed 22-of-28 passes for 245 yards. He completed 8-of-9 in the fourth quarter.

Kelly especially had success throwing over the middle to slot receivers Brandon Boos (4 catches for 49 yards) and R.J. Kurtz (five catches for 63 yards).

"We don't always have to get the ball to Spatz, Tutela and Belford," Kelly said. "We have guys in the middle who are just as good as they shined today."

Lacey took the lead for good when Kelly finished a 10-play, 74-yard drive with a 1-yard sneak to give the Lions a 14-12 advantage with 3:37 left in the third quarter.

Lacey added another touchdown after Spatz intercepted a pass at midfield. He returned it for a touchdown but a blocking penalty gave the Lions the ball at the Southern 21-yard line.

Three plays later, Kelly threw a 13-yard touchdown pass to Spatz to give the Lions a 21-12 lead with 2:13 left in the game.

Southern didn't fade away. The Rams rallied and scored with 55 seconds left on a pass from Dan Higgins to Abe Gonzalez.

But the drama and hopes of a Southern comeback quickly faded as Lacey recovered an onside kick and got the first down it needed to run out the clock.

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Lacey Township 0 7 7 7-21

Southern Regional 6 6 0 7-19

FIRST QUARTER

SR-Gonzalez 5 run (kick failed)

SECOND QUARTER

SR-Hem 36 pass from Higgins (kick failed)

LT-Belford 41 pass from Kelly (Dolly kick)

THIRD QUARTER

LT-Kelly 1 run (Dolly kick)

FOURTH QUARTER

LTSR

INDIVIDUAL LEADERS

Rushing- Spatz 17-44 LT. Gonzalez 14-63 SR.

Passing- Kelly 22-28-0-245 LT. Higgins 15-31-1-206 SR.

Receiving- Belford 5-82 LT. Gesicki 7-79 SR.

Records- Lacey Township 6-0; Southern Regional 3-2