

## Football - Homecoming Kings: Lacey 21, Southern 19

Written by Scott Stump - Managing Editor



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**MANAHAWKIN** - With a pivotal Class A South game hanging in the balance late in the fourth quarter on Saturday, Lacey showed just how much its offense has evolved in a year and how much confidence the Lions have in their playmakers to seal a win over Southern.

The Lions have a solid kicker in senior Liam Dolly and had already been stopped once on downs at the Southern 10-yard line earlier in the quarter, but on fourth-and-2 from Southern's 13-yard line, they decided to go for the jugular up by two points. Junior quarterback Tom Kelly found senior tailback Kyle Spatz in the flat, and he juke a defender and sped for a 13-yard touchdown and a nine-point lead with 2:13 left in the game. Lacey (6-0, 4-0), ranked No. 4 in the All Shore Media Top 10, held on from there for a 21-19 win over the No. 9 Rams (3-2, 2-2) in a game they trailed 12-0 early on to take sole possession of first place in Class A South and spoil Southern's homecoming.



"I knew we were going to go for it there because in the spread we have so many options to go to," Kelly said. "I knew I was going to give the ball to Spatz. You give him the ball in open space, one-on-one, I'll take that all day. That kid had him two yards behind the first down, and he broke the tackle."

"(Southern) kept blitzing the linebackers so we kept throwing it in the flat because they didn't have any outside guys on me," Spatz said. "I felt so good when I made that (move on the touchdown). I

Lacey junior quarterback Tom Kelly was 22-for-28 for two touchdowns passing and also ran for a score in a pivotal 21-19 win over Southern in Class A South.

can't even explain it."

Kelly was brilliant in the victory, finishing 22-for-28 for 241 yards and two touchdowns passing, and also running for a one-yard score. After taking his lumps as a sophomore starter last year, he is now 59-for-79 passing (75 percent) for 1,010 yards and 13 touchdowns in six games this season for an offense averaging 42.3 points per game.

"The difference this year is 100 percent (offensive coordinator Cory) Davies and the playmakers around me. We're a year more experienced. We ran power-I all last year, and it was difficult to drop back and we usually only had two receivers, but coach Davies really opens everything up for me. It's a lot easier for me to understand, and now we're just dominating."

"(Kelly) has come a long way," Spatz said. "He's putting up numbers this year, and he's starting to mature enough to read the defense, be smart and make plays."

After Spatz's catch for his 15th touchdown of the year made it 21-12, Southern made things interesting at the end by going on a seven-play, 65-yard scoring drive in which senior running back Abe Gonzalez caught three passes for 51

yards, including a 9-yard touchdown catch that cut it to 21-19 with 55 seconds left in the game. Even after Lacey recovered the ensuing onside kick, Southern still had three timeouts, but Spatz rendered that a moot point when he ran for a six-yard gain on third-and-2 to seal the win. Spatz entered the game as the Shore Conference's second-leading rusher at 705 yards, and even though the Rams bottled him up in the ground game with 49 yards on 19 carries, he found other ways to affect the game with the huge touchdown catch and an interception that set up that final scoring drive.

Southern had all the momentum early in the game, as the Rams got on the board first with an impressive 11-play, 97-yard drive after being pinned at their own 3-yard line by a 44-yard punt by Lacey junior Christian Tutela. Gonzalez rumbled in from five yards out for a touchdown, but the extra point was no good for a 6-0 lead with 22 seconds left in the first quarter. The key play was a leaping, 42-yard catch over the middle by 6-foot-6 junior wideout Mike Gesicki with Southern stuck on its own 4-yard line.

The Southern defense, which recorded 10 hits for a loss or no gain in the loss, continued to frustrate Lacey's offense to get the ball back. The Rams then went on a nine-play, 68-yard drive that ended when senior quarterback Dan Higgins hit wideout Nick Hem for a 36-yard touchdown pass. However, the extra point was again off the mark, which proved crucial given the final margin, and the Rams led 12-0 with 6:50 in the second quarter.

Southern's defense forced an incomplection by Kelly on fourth-and-3 from the Rams' 43-yard line on Lacey's next possession, but the Lions made the best of one final series before the half. They got the ball at their own 21 with only 47 seconds left in the second quarter, but Tutela ran for 14 yards, Spatz broke off a 24-yard run and then the Lions showed how dangerous they can be at any given time. Kelly found senior wideout Bill Belford streaking across the field and he took a short pass and exploded through a seam for a 41-yard touchdown that cut the lead to 12-7 with eight seconds left in the half for a big momentum shift.

"It was actually not supposed to go to (Belford)," Kelly said. "It was supposed to go around on a wheel route. Belford does what he does when he gets the ball in space. At halftime you would've thought we were up 28-0 because of that play. We were excited, and it showed in the second drive at the beginning of the second half."

After the teams traded three-and-outs to start the third quarter, Lacey took the lead for good. The Lions went on an 11-play, 74-yard drive that chewed up 5:06 and was engineered brilliantly by Kelly, who was 5-for-5 passing for 58 yards and also ran for 13 yards during the march. The crucial play was a 26-yard strike to senior wideout Brandon Boos on third-and-16 that helped set up a 1-yard touchdown on a keeper by Kelly for a 14-12 lead with 3:37 left in the third quarter.

"After they saw Belford score, we knew that the middle would be open," Kelly said. "That's why you saw the slot guys start to make plays. They were keying on Belford and Tutela the whole game, so when we started throwing it to Boos and (RJ) Kurtz, they didn't know who to cover at that point."

The Lions had a chance to build the lead when they marched 70 yards in nine plays to Southern's 3-yard line early in the fourth quarter, but the Rams' defense dug in. Senior defensive lineman Ryan Boyle, who had two tackles for a loss in the game, combined with defensive back Oliver Bissey to nail Spatz for an eight-yard loss on second down and then junior defensive lineman Bailey Bellissimo, who had three tackles for a loss or no gain, stopped Kelly for no gain on third-and-goal. The Lions decided to go for it on fourth down, but Bissey broke up a pass to kill the threat.

That gave Southern a golden opportunity down by two points with the ball at its own 10-yard line with 5:28 left in the game. Facing fourth-and-six from their own 42-yard line six plays later, the Rams decided to go for it. Spatz snuffed out the play, picking off Higgins and returning it for a touchdown, although the score was called back due to a block in the back on the return.

"I saw Gesicki from the corner of my eye coming in for the post, and I saw the quarterback watching him the entire time, so I jumped the route," Spatz said. "I read it the whole entire time."

That set up Lacey's final scoring drive and Spatz's touchdown catch to wrap up a huge win. The Lions have now cleared the hurdles of Toms River North and Southern to take over first place thanks to Brick Memorial's loss to Toms River North on Friday night. Their main obstacle remaining to their second division title in three years looks to be a road game at Brick Memorial on Nov. 2. The win over Southern also was important for the power-point haul that will come from beating a Group V school as the Lions seek home-field advantage in South Jersey Group IV in search of their second state sectional title in three seasons.

"It feels good to be in the driver's seat to take over first place," Spatz said.

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#### **Box score**

**Lacey 21, Southern 19**

.	L	S
First downs	17	15

Rushes-yards	20-58	22-94
Passing	22-28-0	15-31-1
Passing yards	241	210
Fumbles-lost	1-0	1-0
Penalties	6-55	2-15
Lacey (6-0, 4-0)	0	7 7 7 - 21
Southern (3-2, 2-2)	6	6 0 7 - 19

**Scoring summary:**

S: Gonzalez 5-yard run (kick failed).

S: Hem 36-yard pass from Higgins (kick failed).

L: Belford 41-yard pass from Kelly (Dolly kick).

L: Kelly 1-yard (Dolly kick).

L: Spatz 13-yard pass from Kelly (Dolly kick).

S: Gonzalez 9-yard pass from Higgins (Yaiser kick).

**Individual statistics**

Rushing - S: Gonzalez 14-64, Higgins 5-20, Yaiser 3-10. L: Spatz 19-49, Belford 1-9.

Passing - S: Higgins 15-31-1 210. L: Kelly 22-28-0 241.

Receiving - S: Gesicki 7-82, Hem 4-63, Gonzalez 3-51, Colecchia 1-14. L: Boos 4-49, Spatz 5-38, Belford 5-71, Tutela 2-18, Jensen 1-3, Kurtz 5-62.

Interceptions - L: Spatz 1-39.