

Lacey takes over top spot in Shore high school football poll from Matawan

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The Shore Conference's great debate over who should be ranked No. 1 marches on with more fuel added to the fire this week because Lacey ascends to the top spot in the Asbury Park Press Top 10 Poll.

The Lions, who have been No. 2 all season, leapfrogged Matawan, the Shore's only other unbeaten team, after beating No. 3 Middletown South, 27-7, on Saturday.

Lacey, which was in total control of the game against the Eagles and led, 20-0, at halftime, has a more impressive resume than does Matawan, the defending NJSIAA Central Group II champion, as the teams enter the playoffs.

Along with their victory against Middletown South, the unofficial No. 1 seed in Central III, the Lions have wins over playoff teams Wall, Manchester, Barnegat and Neptune. Those teams are a combined 20-12.

Matawan's most impressive victory came in Week 1, when it defeated Freehold, which is the likely No. 3 seed in Central III. The Huskies' other victories over playoff teams came against Rumson-Fair Haven and Barnegat.

The only common opponent for the teams is Barnegat. Lacey beat the Bengals, 28-7, in Week 5, and Matawan defeated them, 49-14, the following week.

It's important to note, however, Lacey played an emotional Barnegat team, which was undefeated at the time, at the school's homecoming. The Bengals also came out of that game banged up, as quarterback Nick SanGiacomo suffered a hip injury, which he played through the next week on the turf at Matawan.

Lacey coach Lou Vircillo and most of Lacey's players downplayed the rankings after Saturday's game. Quarterback Craig Cicardo said the rankings don't matter to the players, but felt Lacey made a statement against Middletown South.

"We don't care what the rankings are or what you guys (various media members) think," Cicardo said. "We definitely showed today we're the best team in the Shore. You guys can do what you want. We have no control over that, but we definitely showed we're the best team in the Shore. And (Saturday) definitely proved it."

When informed Matawan would drop to No. 2 even after beating New Brunswick, 43-0, on Saturday night, Huskies coach Joe Martucci said his team has more important things to worry about at this point in the season than rankings.

"The rankings are for the newspapers and the fans," Martucci told Asbury Park Press staff writer Bob Jordan. "I don't really care about it. I care about being undefeated and going into the playoffs strong."

The only other movement in the rankings this week came at the bottom, where Toms River North dropped a spot to No. 10 after losing to No. 5 Manalapan.

1. LACEY 9-0. Last week: No. 2. Jake Dabal scored on the first two possessions of a 27-7 victory against Middletown South. Dabal capped the Lions' opening drive with a 3-yard TD run and returned a fumble 78 yards for a touchdown on Middletown South's first possession. He finished with 69 yards on 13 carries, Jarrod Molzon had 135 yards of total offense and Cicardo went 7-for-7 for 111 yards and also ran for two TDs. Lacey's

defense forced three turnovers and held the Eagles to 55 yards on the ground. No team has scored more than seven points against the Lions this season. Next game: Tentatively Saturday vs. Timber Creek (5-3) in an NJSIAA South Group III quarterfinal.

2. MATAWAN 8-0. Last week: No. 1. The Huskies, owners of the Shore's longest winning streak at 16 games, beat winless New Brunswick, 43-0. The Zebras had minus-27 total yards of offense, including minus-32 on the ground. Cassius Williams ran for 61 yards and three TDs on five carries, McArthur Underwood had 42 yards of offense and two TDs on five touches and Jared Allison passed for a TD and scored on a 68-yard run. Matawan will unofficially begin its sectional title defense against a team making its second-ever playoff appearance. Next game: Tentatively Saturday vs. Monmouth (4-4) in an NJSIAA Central II quarterfinal.

3. MIDDLETOWN SOUTH 6-2. Last week: No. 3. Trailing, 7-0, the Eagles drove to the Lacey 14-yard line on their first possession, but Tom Murray sacked Howie Brey, forcing a fumble that Dabal returned 78 yards for a touchdown. Middletown South never recovered and lost, 27-7. Brey was knocked out of the game early in the second half with a concussion, Eagles coach Steve Antonucci said. Scott Meeker went 15-for-22 for 127 yards and Taylor Rogers caught 10 passes for 83 yards. Despite the loss, the Eagles remain No. 3 on the strength of their victory against No. 4 Brick Memorial. Next game: Tentatively Friday vs. Steinert (4-4) in an NJSIAA Central III quarterfinal.

4. BRICK MEMORIAL 7-2. Last week: No. 4. The Mustangs drove to the Howell 23-yard line late in the fourth quarter, but on fourth-and-8, Dylan Walsh's lateral was caught by Max Fontaine, sending Brick Memorial home with a 14-7 loss. Anthony Miller carried 13 times for 48 yards and scored on a 6-yard run in the fourth quarter. Quarterback Mike DiGuilmi passed for 124 yards, but threw two interceptions and was sacked five times. Brick Memorial owns a head-to-head victory over No. 5 Manalapan and its only other loss this season came at Middletown South. Next game: Tentatively Friday vs. East Brunswick (5-3) in an NJSIAA Central IV quarterfinal.

5. MANALAPAN 6-2. Last week: No. 5. Josh Firkser's had a number of standout games this season, but Friday night's might have been the best. The senior ran for 256 yards and three TDs on 33 carries and also had an 80-yard catch-and-run for a TD with 27 seconds left in a 28-24 win against then-No. 9 Toms River North. Quarterback Mike Bimonte completed 8-of-13 passes for 203 yards and a TD. Manalapan defeated Middletown South in Week 2, but its Top 10 resume continues to be hurt by a loss to unranked Jackson Memorial (4-4) in the season-opener. Next game: Tentatively Friday vs. No. 8 Howell (5-3) in an NJSIAA Central IV quarterfinal.

6. FREEHOLD 6-2. Last week: No. 6. After playing their third overtime game of the season last week, the Colonials had it easier this week, beating Monsignor Donovan, 41-19. Derrick Bender ran for 77 yards, including a 58-yard TD, on five carries and caught three passes for 66 yards and two TDs. Quarterback Sterry Codrington passed for 95 yards and a TD and also rushed for 120 yards and two TDs. Rameer Wright returned an interception, his fourth of the season, 38 yards for a TD to open the scoring. Freehold will unofficially open the Central III playoffs against a team it has already beaten in a tough game this season. Next game: Tentatively Saturday vs. Neptune (5-3) in an NJSIAA Central III quarterfinal.

7. RED BANK CATHOLIC 7-1. Last week: No. 7. Heavily-recruited tight end Jack Tabb caught a 23-yard TD pass from Ryan Spahr and returned an interception 40 yards for a TD nine seconds later as the Caseys struck twice late in the first half and went on to beat Toms River East, 28-0. Andrew Casten added 152 yards on 22 carries and scored on runs of 33 and 41 yards in the fourth quarter. Red Bank Catholic's defense limited the Raiders to 123 yards of offense, including 46 rushing on 38 attempts. Next up for the Caseys is the treacherous Non-Public IV playoffs. Next game: Tentatively Friday at Bergen Catholic (8-1) in a Non-Public IV quarterfinal.

8. HOWELL 5-3. Last week: No. 8. The Rebels secured a berth in the Central IV playoffs with a 14-7 victory against Brick Memorial. Quarterback Ryan Davies was 11-for-19 for 176 yards with a TD and wide receiver

Mike Clark caught five passes for 81 yards and a TD. Fontaine rushed 16 times for 63 yards and a TD. Howell sacked Brick Memorial quarterback Mike DiGuilmi five times and limited the Mustangs' triple option attack to 73 yards rushing on 39 attempts. According to unofficial calculations, Howell will get another shot at a team it was trounced by three weeks ago. Next game: Tentatively Friday at No. 5 Manalapan (6-2) in an NJSIAA Central IV quarterfinal.

9. MANASQUAN 7-1. Last week: No. 10. Senior running back Tariq Turner delivered another big performance this weekend, rushing for 180 yards and three TDs in a 42-6 victory against Lakewood. The Warriors scored 42 unanswered points after falling behind, 6-0. Quarterback Tyler Saito went 8-for-11 for 150 yards and threw TD passes to Connor Grogan and Bryan Abadrabo. Saito also scored on a 3-yard run. Manasquan, which lost to Matawan in the Central II final last season, enters the playoffs on a six-game winning streak. Next game: Tentatively Saturday vs. Roselle (6-2) in an NJSIAA Central II quarterfinal.

10. TOMS RIVER NORTH 5-3. Last week: No. 9. The Mariners nearly stole a victory against Manalapan in the final seconds, only to have their hearts broken by Firkser. The loss kept the Mariners out of the South IV playoffs by one power point, according to unofficial calculations. Quarterback Demetri Davis, who ran for 146 yards, scored his second TD of the game and converted the 2-point attempt himself to tie the score at 21 with 9:54 left, and Chris Gulla made a 23-yard field goal for a 24-21 lead with 41 seconds left. Firkser, though, scored on Manalapan's next play from scrimmage. Toms River North's losses are to Howell, Brick Memorial and Manalapan, teams with a combined record of 18-7. Next game: Tentatively Friday or Saturday in an NJSIAA South IV consolation game.

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