

## Defense leads Lions to championship

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(Lacey's Brian Mykoliw (56) and Mqatt Uveges react)

After Lacey captured its fourth NJSIAA South Jersey Group III championship with a 56-7 rout over Delsea Regional on Saturday, former defensive standout Mike Stuppiello stood on the field, smiling as he watched his former teammates gather for a celebratory team photo.

"I'm proud of these guys," said Stuppiello, who graduated last year and was a freshman on Lacey's last sectional winner in 2006. "This could be Lacey's best team ever."

That very well could be possible.

Coming into this season, many thought the 2006 team, which had a great defense and tended to score just enough points to win big games, was Lacey's best. But this season's team has to be, at least, on par with that crew.

"I don't know if our team is the best in Lacey history," said senior defensive end Dylan Joslin, who earlier this season used the word "immaculate" to describe the Lions' defensive unit. "But

it's got to be up there. We had a better offense this year, and our defense definitely was one of the best ever."

During Saturday's final against Delsea, the Lacey defense looked vulnerable for a total of 11 seconds. Otherwise, it allowed the Crusaders very little while forcing eight turnovers during the final 36 minutes. And during the second half, Delsea managed to cross the 50-yard line once — with about two minutes left in what already was a blowout by halftime.

"We just did what we normally do," senior lineman Dave Vieira said. "We went after the ball with intensity on every play and didn't let up. Everybody did the job they were supposed to do and that's why we went undefeated."

But it was more than simply "undefeated." This Lions defense was, as Joslin called it, immaculate. Dominant at every turn, to say the least.

"Our linebackers get to the ball really well," said senior linebacker Matt Uveges, who forced a fumble and recovered another on Saturday. "Our D-line does a great job of closing holes, and our secondary is great at checking receivers and giving us time to do what we have to do in front of them.

"We might have a mental lapse once in a while," said senior Jake Dabal, who doubles as a running back and cornerback. "But as soon as the other team scores, we usually buckle down and don't allow much more to happen. We did that all season, pretty much."

The Lions' defense allowed an average of five points per game this season, 60 points total in 12 games.

"That is insane," said senior defensive back Zack Torrell, also the team's leading receiver. "But it all has to do with our chemistry. Most of the seniors on this team have been playing together since we were 7 or 8 years old. We know we're all going to do our jobs as best we can. We trust each other."

And it's that trust in each other that brought this group of Lions to a sectional title game, and ultimately another championship.

"As the quarterback and the leader of the offense, it's so much easier to play the game knowing that your defense isn't going to give up many points," senior Craig Cicardo said. "I can't say enough about our defense. They've given our offense a lot of opportunities to put points on the board. They're the biggest reason we won this championship today."

Well, a team averaging 35 points per game on offense can't give all the credit to the defense, but it's easy to understand Cicardo's point. When your defense makes it nearly impossible for the other team to score and racks up loads of turnovers, the field-position war becomes one-sided, just as it did Saturday.

"Our defense has been doing this all season," head coach Lou Vircillo said. "And they did it again today."

Uveges gave a lot of credit to Vircillo for the team's defensive prowess.

"Coach V's philosophy is 11 monkeys to the banana," he said. "We take a lot of pride in our defense, and we always do whatever we can to help the offense."

Whether it has to do with stellar athletes, great heads-up play, or excellent coaching, the Lions accomplished what no other team in the Shore Conference did this season — go undefeated while winning a state sectional crown.

And their defense was largely to credit for that.

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