

Fighting to the End: Wall 21, Lacey 14

Lacey's 13-game winning streak comes to an end after a loss to Wall in their season opener

By Scott Stump - September 10, 2011

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Sophomore running back Chris Jensen Credit Bill Normile



Junior running back Kyle Spatz Credit Bill Normile

Given the factors working against Lacey in its season opener against a Wall football team considered to be a top-five squad in the Shore Conference, the young Lions showed the characteristics of another tough Lacey team in a 21-14 loss on Saturday.

“I didn’t quite know how people would hang in there for a full game because we didn’t play a full game in the preseason,” said Lacey head coach Lou Virchillo. “We also missed one kid (Powell) who we desperately needed.”

One of Lacey’s scrimmages was wiped out by Hurricane Irene, and since the Lions do not hit in practice, this was the first real experience at game speed for many players. Also, the Lions were without senior star Jordan Powell, a tight end/linebacker who sat out after recovering from a frightening bout with a MRSA infection on his chin.

Since Lacey graduated all but four starters from last season’s 12-0 juggernaut, a host of players were seeing their first significant action.

Lacey still fought hard, tying the game at 14 with 1:35 left in the third quarter before Wall senior quarterback Steve Cluley threw the decisive touchdown pass to senior wideout Connor Mulholland with 3:10 left in the game.

The Lions still rolled up 251 yards on the ground in the loss, including a career-high 157 yards and a touchdown by junior tailback Kyle Spatz in his first varsity start at tailback.

“I learned that the kids are typical Lacey kids that will play very hard, and that’s a good thing,” Vircillo said. “(Spatz) is a legit runner, and he’s been a legitimate runner since he’s been a kid. He plays bigger than he is.”

Lacey’s 13-game winning streak, the longest current mark in the Shore, came to an end, but the Lions can leave encouraged that they still have talent and just need more experience.

The game was a reversal of roles from last season, when Lacey was a senior-dominated team gearing up for a 12-0 season, while Wall was the young, up-and-coming team. This time, the Crimson Knights entered as the favorite, while Lacey was getting its feet wet with a new lineup. Regardless, the Lions commanded Wall’s respect.

“We still had something to prove,” Mulholland said. “We lost to them in the fourth quarter last year, and it almost happened again this year, but I think we proved that we’re a good football team that is going to be around.”

“We knew they could run the football well,” Barnes said. “They’re big and athletic, their kids are tough, and they have a nice little scheme.”

After the two teams traded three-and-outs to start the game, Wall’s front line asserted itself on a 9-play, 73-yard drive that was capped by an 11-yard touchdown run by senior tailback Jim Giuliano (127 yards rushing, 2 touchdowns) for a 7-0 lead with 3:16 left in the first quarter. The big play on the drive was a 25-yard sprint down the Lacey sideline by Cluley on third-and-11 from Wall’s 49-yard line.

Lacey and its stout offensive line led by Division I-A prospect Tyrell Smith and Lex Knapp, a pair of seniors, answered with a game-tying 13-play, 80-yard scoring drive. The Lions did not even attempt one pass on the drive, which culminated in a three-yard touchdown run by sophomore Chris Jensen for his first varsity touchdown.

Wall came right back with a 9-play, 65-yard drive to take the lead back, 14-7, with four minutes left in the half. Giuliano finished the march with a four-yard touchdown run.

An interception by Wall’s Rich Bomenblit halted Lacey’s next drive, and then Smith and Casey Sirotniak sacked Cluley to thwart Wall’s ensuing possession. The Lions then drove down to Wall’s 24-yard line late in the first half, only for Mulholland to end the threat with an interception to keep Wall ahead 14-7 at the half.

Lacey made a key adjustment in the second half when it took Knapp, who also plays on the defensive line, and shifted him back to linebacker to slow down Wall’s running game.

“We missed (Powell) a great deal, and Wall picked on it, but when we moved Knapp back it helped slow down their power running game,” Vircillo said.

Sirotniak’s second sack of the game ended Wall’s first drive of the second half and helped lead to a seven-play, 96-yard drive that tied the game at 14 with 1:35 left in the third quarter. Junior quarterback Brandon Boos had a 24-yard run after Lacey had been pinned at its 4-yard line by Cluley’s punt, and Spatz exploded through five tacklers for a 31-yard touchdown burst to draw a roar from the Lions’ home crowd.

Wall drove down to Lacey's 12-yard line on its next possession before Sirotniak sacked Cluley for the third time, causing a fumble. The Crimson Knights recovered it, but senior Tyler Block's 35-yard field goal attempt was wide right to keep the game tied at 14 heading into the fourth quarter.

After Wall's defense forced a three-and-out and Lacey shanked a punt, Wall was in business at the Lions' 37-yard line. On third-and-seven, Cluley found Mulholland on a post over the middle for a 34-yard touchdown and a 21-14 lead with 3:10 left in the game. Cluley, who was 6-for-14 for 95 yards, had been hobbled a little bit by taking a helmet to the shin on Sirotniak's sack during the previous series, but delivered a strike when Wall needed it most.

"In the first half, the middle of the field was open a lot," Cluley said. "We were trying to get it there, but a lot of the plays we were calling were taking too long, so at halftime we made some adjustments. When we called that play, pre-snap I knew it was going to be open. It was just a matter of time before it would open it up, and it did."

Lacey had one final drive and inserted sophomore quarterback Tom Kelly, who is more of a throwing quarterback compared to Boos, who is more of a running threat. The Lions drove to Wall's 29-yard line, but an incomplete pass on fourth down by Kelly allowed Wall to take a knee and seal the victory.

Box score

Wall 21, Lacey 14

| . | W | L |
|---------------|-----------|--------|
| First downs | 14 | 14 |
| Rushes-yards | 33-160 | 36-251 |
| Passing | 6-14-0 | 2-10-2 |
| Passing yards | 95 | 11 |
| Fumbles-lost | 1-0 | 1-0 |
| Penalties | 2-10 | 2-10 |
| Wall (1-0) | 7 7 0 7 0 | - 21 |
| Lacey (0-1) | 0 7 7 0 | - 14 |

Scoring summary:

W: Guiliano 11-yard run (Block kick).

L: Jensen 3-yard run (Dolly kick)

W: Guiliano 4-yard run (Block kick).

L: Spatz 31-yard run (Dolly kick).

W: Mulholland 34-yard pass from Cluley (Block kick).

Individual statistics:

Rushing – W: Guiliano 23-127, Cluley 10-33. L: Spatz 21-157, Jensen 4-19, Boos 7-65, Tutella 4-10.

Passing – W: Cluley 6-14-0 95. L: Boos 1-7-2 11, Kelly 1-3-0 1.

Receiving – W: Mulholland 5-75, Gardner 1-20. L: Fernandez 1-11, Popper 1-1.

Interceptions – W: Mulholland 1-0, Bomenblit 1-0.