

Lions state their case

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Lacey's Jake Dabal continues to run and drags Middletown South's Tim McArdle (20) and David Elkhatib as they try to tackle him during the third quarter.
(STAFF PHOTO: PETER ACKERMAN)

LACEY — With a division title already in its back pocket and the No. 1 seed in the NJSIAA South Group III playoffs locked up, Lacey's game against Middletown South on Saturday was essentially meaningless.

Yet it meant everything to the Lions.

Jake Dabal returned a fumble 78 yards for a touchdown, Jarrod Molzon accounted for 135 yards of offense and the defense continued its dominance as Lacey, No. 2 in the Asbury Park Press Top 10, beat No. 3 Middletown South, 27-7.

The Lions (9-0) avenged shutout losses to the Eagles from each of the past two seasons, completed an undefeated regular season and stated their case for the No. 1 spot in the Asbury Park Press Top 10. Matawan, the defending Central Group II champion and the Shore's only other unbeaten team, has been in the top spot all season.

"This was probably the most important game for us of the year," Dabal said. "It's big because of our history with them, losing to them the past two years in a row.

"We know they're always a tough team. It's always going to be a good fight, and we wanted to come out there and take it to them. About the rankings, it doesn't matter to us. Who cares what they say?"

The Lions opened the game with a nine-play, 87-yard drive that culminated in a 3-yard touchdown run by Dabal to take a 7-0 lead. Dabal's run was set up by a 44-yard gain by Molzon on a shovel pass from Craig Cicardo.

Middletown South then drove to the Lacey 14-yard line, but on third-and-10, defensive end Tom Murray sacked Howie Brey, forcing a fumble. Dabal scooped up the loose ball and returned it for a touchdown with 2:04 left in the opening quarter.

"To me, that's the turning point," Eagles coach Steve Antonucci said. "We score, it's 7-7, and you're right in the game. The momentum really switched when they picked up the fumble and scored a touchdown. Now you're down 14. It changes what you're doing."

Cicardo, who completed 7 of 7 passes for 111 yards, scored on a 1-yard run late in the second quarter to give Lacey a 20-0 lead at halftime. His 8-yard run extended the lead to 27-0 with nine seconds left in the third quarter.

Lacey's defense held Middletown South (6-2) to 55 yards rushing on 34 attempts and forced three turnovers. Linebacker Matt Uveges intercepted a pass, recovered a fumble and had a tackle for a loss, and lineman Dave Vieira had a sack and a fumble recovery.

Those two also combined on a hit that knocked Brey out of the game on the second play of the second half. Antonucci said Brey suffered a concussion on the play. His replacement, former starter Scott Meeker, scored on an 8-yard run in the fourth quarter.

Meeker was 15-for-22 for 127 yards and lost two fumbles on snaps in the third quarter. Wide receiver Taylor Rogers caught 10 passes for 83 yards.

Robert Ziegler: 732-642-4266, rziegler@app.com