

SPORTS

H.S. football: Kingsway's ability to forget creates lasting memory of championship run

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TOMS RIVER – All it took was a little amnesia to create one of the greatest memories in the history of the Kingsway High School football team.

After watching Toms River North put together a 92-yard scoring drive to tie the game with under a minute left in regulation, the Dragons never panicked and responded with their own brand of late-game heroics as Luke Van Brill hauled in a 36-yard pass from Nate Maiers for the decisive score with seven seconds left for a 21-14 win in the South Jersey Group 5 championship.

Kingsway (7-4) captured its first sectional title in 20 years and will play in its first-ever Bowl Game against Central Jersey champion Hillsborough (12-0) in two weeks. The date and site of the game is to be determined.

“I’ve never been around a football team that just can clear things out of their minds and forget about things that go wrong and refocus in on the things that go right,” Kingsway head coach Mark Hendricks told his players after the game. “You guys have a lot of passion and purpose for what you do. Right there at the end of the game encapsulates everything that has happened in our entire football season.”

While the Dragons endured plenty of nightmares along with way like a season-opening 38-0 loss to Shawnee and three other setbacks by a combined 101-13 score, the squad’s ability to quickly forget and move on to the next challenge is a big reason they advanced to the championship game.

It also played a pivotal role in Kingsway’s grabbing the title.

Leading 14-6 in the fourth quarter, Kingsway pinned Toms River North on its own 8-yard line with two minutes to play.

“We pinned them down there and I’m starting to smell (the title) a little bit,” Maiers said. “They hit a big play and then they score, I’m just saying you got to be kidding me.”

Van Brill said, “All I’m thinking is we messed up, but we got to go back and score. We can do it.”

With just 51 seconds left in regulation and the ball sitting on their own 39-yard line, Hendricks had a decision to make.

“Are we playing for overtime here or going for it?” the coach asked. “Early on in the drive, I felt we had to go for it. Luke made a big catch (on the first play of the drive) to get the sticks moving. Then, we missed on the third-down throw but, fourth-and-1, Nate had a big run (for 16 yards) to keep it moving.”

Maiers had a new set of downs to work with but only 15 precious seconds left on the clock. He heard a familiar play call from his coach.

“On the last play Coach Hendricks says it all the time, ‘Go No. 3 down the seam, opposite hash, it’s wide open,’” the junior QB said.

The coach was right.

Van Brill broke free of the defense and hauled the pass in about the 20-yard line and went untouched the rest of the way for the title-clinching touchdown.

“I’m at a lot for words,” Van Brill said about what scoring the game-winner in the championship. “It’s probably the best feeling I’ve ever had.”

Van Brill came up with several big stops from his middle linebacker spot, but it was a special teams play that jumpstarted Kingsway on its opening drive.

Kingsway ran a fake punt, a play they just put in two weeks ago, as Maiers hit an uncovered Van Brill, who went 50 yards for the score.

“We put it in two weeks ago, we had a walkthrough and we ran it,” Maiers said. It couldn’t have started any better for us.”

Toms River North (7-4) went from the jubilation of tying the game in the closing minute to seeing their season sunk on the sourest of notes.

“We didn’t play well enough to win,” TRN head coach Dave Oizerowitz said. “It wasn’t meant to be. We got beat up front on both sides of the ball and they out executed us and out schemed us. The better team won tonight.”

Sophomore quarterback Micah Ford completed all four passes on the drive, including a 29-yard touchdown throw to sophomore Jeremiah Pruitt, who made a sensational leaping catch in the back of the end zone to cut the deficit to 14-12. Ford added the two-point conversion to knot the score.

“I didn’t think there was much hope from where we started that drive,” Oizerowitz said. “We made a couple of plays and tied the game. But they came back and made plays too. What got them in position was the run by (Maiers). We were in nickel and the QB made a play, got them in position and we had to go out of our nickel and then they threw the ball.”

Oizerowitz said he kept the defense on the field on Kingsway’s first possession of the game, but a corner failed to guard Kingsway’s gunner and caused the breakdown that led to the first score.

“We watched them on film (during the week) and they were huge,” Maiers said. “But you know what, we got hot at the right time and that’s what you have to do in football.”

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