

Football

Lakeland reigns supreme

By Isaac Case

When matching up against archrival Yorktown, Lakeland's Conor Prunty had only known a singular feeling and outcome: agonizing defeat.

Whether it was last season's one-goal overtime loss on the lacrosse field, or the '08 playoff-eliminating loss on the gridiron, it had been all gloom and doom for the junior quarterback.

That is, until Friday, when Lakeland finally had its shining moment.

The Hornets parted the clouds with a hair-raising 34-21 victory over the visiting Huskers, clinching the second playoff spot out League A-Central and a first round Class A sectional game against host Fox Lane on Oct. 23.

If one image embodied the massive reversal of fortune, it was Prunty sprinting off the field as time waned down in the fourth quarter. He had just returned an interception 53 yards to the house and was headed toward the sideline, right index finger raised proudly in the air.

For once, Lakeland was No. 1 in the two-district town. "I've never had a feeling like that against Yorktown — in any sport," Prunty said. "It was just amazing."

Prunty (six-of-eight passing for 153 yards) was amazing against the Huskers. He had a hand in every single one of the Hornets' five touchdowns, throwing for two, rushing for two and returning the INT.

Lakeland senior wide receiver Chris Fazio was just as impressive, putting on a Randy Moss-esque performance. The 6-foot-8 basketball star hauled in all six of Prunty's completions and both touchdowns.

Together, it added up to Lakeland's first victory over Yorktown on the gridiron in roughly two decades.

"We haven't had a lot of success, in general, against Yorktown," Lakeland Head Coach Rob Cappelli said. "But we didn't talk about it all this week. It was the first time we didn't talk about Yorktown or even the playoffs. We just talked about playing power football and grinding it out."

After relying too much on Prunty's arm in '08, Lakeland entered '09 determined to establish a strong foundation with its running game.

Enter senior fullback Mike Fraioli. Heading into the matchup against Yorktown, he had carried the ball an astounding 112 times for 734 yards, scoring 12 of Lakeland's 21 total touchdowns

along the way. Suffice it to say, the Hornets rode the Fraioli Express directly into the decisive Week 6 rivalry game.

In the first half, Lakeland didn't re-write the script, grinding the gears of its running game to set the tone. Fraioli (20 carries, 81 yards) and backup fullback Justin Njoroge (nine carries, 38 yards) racked up yards in between the tackles.

The hard-nosed approach also proved to be effective, as Prunty finished off two blue-collar scoring drives — a 5-yard TD run with 5:25 left in the first quarter and a 1-yard TD plunge with 4:12 left in the second quarter — to give Lakeland a 14-7 lead at the half.

Cappelli credited his workman-like offensive line — Jeff Kravitz, Max Dineen-Carey, Alex Iglesias and Mike Maurer — for plowing open running lanes to move the chains.

"We think we are a power football team," Prunty said. "Hen Hud had a hard time stopping us (last week) and we thought we could pound (Yorktown), too."

As methodical as the Hornets were in the first half, Yorktown remained within striking distance. At the onset of the third quarter, the Huskers finally found their groove.

Following a rare Lakeland three-and-out, Yorktown engineered a model clock-milking scoring drive, which junior halfback Alex Terry (five carries, 39 yards) capped off with a 3-yard TD run to tie it at 14-14 with 7:09 left in the third.

The Huskers harnessed the momentum and time of possession, employing bruising fullback Rob Weigel (16 carries for 88 yards and one TD) and slick wide receiver Matt Fedro (team-high six catches for 73 yards). Tight end Nate Suhadolnik scored the go-ahead TD on an 8-yard catch from quarterback Justin Mabus (11-of-17 passing for 131 yards and seven carries for 71 yards) to give Yorktown its first lead of the game, 21-14, with 9:41 left in regulation.

"I was thrilled with the play of my fullback and the way my offensive line was moving people," Yorktown Head Coach Mike Rescigno said of the stellar stretch to start the second half. "As a team, I thought we did a good job of taking what he was giving us."

As an all-too-familiar story was starting to unravel, Lakeland got off the canvas, spit out its bloody mouthpiece and smiled a toothless smile back at the Huskers.



Photos by Isaac Case

Lakeland's Chris Fazio celebrates after defeating visiting Yorktown on Friday.

"We fought in the third quarter and got back into the huddle and brushed it off," Prunty said. "We go down to these guys in every sport, but we were just determined not to let it happen again."

Cappelli whipped out the playbook, got creative and rewrote a new ending to the rivalry. And it was all centered around unleashing an aerial weapon known as Prunty-to-Fazio.

Fazio snagged five of his six catches during decisive the fourth quarter, including two picture-perfect touchdowns to soar away from the grounded Huskers.

"I knew they were going to expect us to run," Fazio said, "but we like to pound the ball and catch teams with play-action. That's our game plan."

The quarterback-receiver duo carried it out like Eli Manning-to-Plaxico Burress, circa Super Bowl XLIII.

Fazio's game-tying 15-yard TD catch with 7:39 left in the fourth — which he corralled at the very edge of the end zone's back right corner — left Lakeland fans frenzied and Yorktown's sideline irate.

Battling blanket coverage by Yorktown's Fedro, Fazio, who was quickly running out of real estate, simultaneously snatched the ball and did a high wire act to stay inbounds. Even Fazio said he was "surprised" he came down with it.

"(Fazio) had a little space on his receiver so I just threw it up to the corner," Prunty said. "Him being him, he just came down with it. If he just gets a little bit of separation, he can make almost any catch."

Prunty hit Fazio again roughly five minutes later for the go-ahead score on a 20-yard touch pass. Once again, Fedro was no match in coverage.

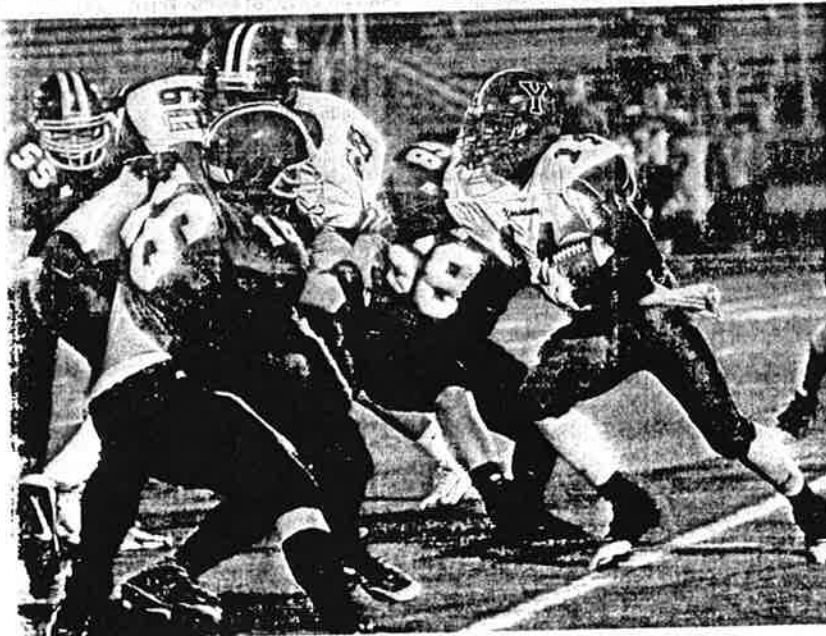
"I consider (Fedro) my best defensive back," said Rescigno, whose squad will look to avenge the loss in a bowl game against visiting Brewster Oct. 23. "But Fazio had a heck of a game."

Heading into the game, Rescigno had no doubt that Lakeland's star wide receiver would be the x-factor.

"You can't coach 6-7, or whatever he is," Rescigno said. "And you can't coach how to defend it."

For Lakeland, Fazio was merely one of the many contributors in a team-wide quest to defend its honor.

And it was a longtime coming.



Yorktown's Alex Terry looks to find a seam in the Lakeland defense.

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