

GL-Connellsville meeting of WPIAL Quad South teams searching for identities

BY RANDY SKUBEK
Bulletin Sports Editor

Two punt returns, of 57 and 65 yards, for touchdowns.

Touchdown runs of 69, 65 and 20 yards, to name a few.

Sound familiar?

No, those weren't some of the ways Gateway piled up points on Greater Latrobe last week, although the numbers are similar.

That's how McKeesport Area scored — mostly on big plays — on Connellsville, also a week ago.

So, when Greater Latrobe (0-1, 1-2) and visiting Connellsville (0-1, 0-3) get together in Friday's (7:30 p.m.) WPIAL Quad-A South Conference matchup at Memorial Stadium, something has to give.

Against Gateway and McKeesport Area, it was their defenses.

"They're searching for an identity, too," GL head coach Ray Reitz said of the Falcons, "sort of like we are."

So far, the season has been a struggle for the Wildcats, their first under Reitz and the wing-T offense. They've scored just 28 points in three games, and 21 of those came in the opener against Derry Area.

Last week, it was both sides of the ball. Not only was Greater Latrobe shut out, for the fifth straight time by Gateway, it simply couldn't slow down — let alone stop — the lightning-fast Gators, giving up 49 points to the team ranked No. 1 in the WPIAL and No. 4 in the state.

"Their speed bothered our kids, but we really didn't compete, either," Reitz reflected. "They're a good team, don't get me wrong, but we gave

them too much respect.

"We didn't come out to play, that's all. We were beat before we got on the field, basically."

The Wildcats seemed tentative against Gateway. And that only made things worse.

"Our kids got to play with more confidence," Reitz stressed. "And I think that goes hand in hand with aggressiveness.

"We really didn't change anything from the first two weeks. We just came out with no confidence at all.

"The kids are frustrated. They got to learn how to win, that's all," continued Reitz, who did a lot of that — 48-6 with two WPIAL Class AA titles and one PIAA championship in his previous four years — at Jeannette.

"You've got to compete first, and we'll get there. It's just going to take time, and I realize that.

"Gateway is a very good football team. That's what we want to strive to be like, but it's going to take time.

"We just sort of got away from our fundamentals and the game got away from us. Again, the bottom line is, it's going to take time."

The one bright spot for the Wildcats was the running of senior fullback Brad Burkley (6-0, 190), who rushed for 86 yards on 11 carries, including 52 of the 70 they went late in the first half only to be turned away right at the goal-line. With his 86 yards, Burkley now has 180 on the season in 37 carries (4.9 average) with one touchdown.



BRAD
BURKLEY

However, Greater Latrobe never got another sniff of the end-zone against Gateway. As a team, the Wildcats had just 116 yards — and a measly one passing.

"If you lose by one or 50, it doesn't matter. It's still only one loss in the conference," Reitz reasoned.

"That's the way we're looking at it.

"Don't get me wrong. It's no fun getting beat that badly, and I think the kids feel just as bad as we do as coaches.

"I'll move on because it's only one game, but it's not as easy for the kids. It's tougher for them.

"They just out-classed us. We've got to move on."

And Reitz believes his team will be able to do just that. The way he sees it, this is a bounce-back game Greater Latrobe in more ways than one.

"I think the kids will be OK. I have no doubt that they'll be fine mentally," Reitz predicted.

"If we beat Connellsville, we're still in the playoff race. It's a whole new season then."

Things have not gone well for Connellsville, either. The Falcons have not only been shut out twice, by Woodland Hills and McKeesport Area — two pretty good teams — they gave up 37 and 55 points in those two games while being outscored, 98-6, with the only touchdown coming in a one-point defeat to Uniontown in their season-opening rivalry.

"I think they're well-organized and well-coached," Reitz said of Jeff Immel's Falcons. "I think he's doing a good job

with them.

"They have a storied tradition, and they're trying to get it back."

Connellsville was dominant in the 1980s and '90s under Dan Spanish. The Falcons are now working on their fourth coach in seven years since Spanish was let go after the 2002 season.

Immel has brought the wing-T to Connellsville, too. And, like Greater Latrobe, it's been a learning process for the Falcons.

"It's not a conventional wing-T," Reitz indicated. "They run it out of a pro-type formation, but it's still a lot of the wing-T stuff."

Connellsville did have some success moving the ball against McKeesport Area, but, just like GL vs. Gateway, couldn't punch it in. Immel inserted fullback Spencer Mowry (6-3, 190, Jr.) into the game early in place of Anthony May (6-2, 210 Jr.) and he rushed for nearly 70 yards.

Directing the Falcons' version of the wing-T is quarterback Matt White (5-10, 180, Jr.). Their top threat, however, is Sean Keffer (5-10, 160, Sr.), who will line up in the slot and out wide.

"They try to get him the ball as much as they can in space," Reitz said. "And he does have some speed.

"We're familiar with what they do. Hopefully, that'll help.

"You've got to come to play," Reitz reiterated. "We're not a team that can look past anybody at this point.

"We just got to get back to fundamentals. That's basically what we're going to do this week."