



John Adams (left) and Nottingham exult after Dan Hernandez (right, 43) returned a blocked field goal 90yards to defeat Hamilton 41-35 Saturday. (Photos by Suzette Lucas)

Hernandez return provides miracle victory for Nottingham football

By Rich Fisher

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OCT. 10: You could have looked under every rock, behind every tree and in every port-a-john. You were not about to find anyone who could remember seeing a football game as incredible as Nottingham's 41-35 win at Hamilton today.

Unless, of course, someone got locked in the port-a-john all that time, which meant they missed one of the most memorable contests in township history.

What they missed, was sophomore Dennis Hernandez blocking a potential game-winning 18-yard field goal with no time left, picking the ball up on the 10 yard line, then racing 90 yards down the left sideline to give Nottingham a 41-35 victory.

"I just lined up how I normally do," said Hernandez, who got a key block from Craig Martin and another from Andy Vital on his return. "I went in and tried to block it. I blocked it, I saw it on the ground, picked it up and just started running.

"That was definitely the longest run of my life. I was praying to God no one was behind me. I was just running as fast as I could. I wanted to win that game. I've never done anything like that in my life."

Nottingham coach Jon Adams was just hoping not to see any yellow flags.

"I'm just like "Don't hit anybody in the back! Keep going!" Adams said. "I thought the kid had the angle but Craig Martin threw a great block. Guys were hustling and giving tremendous effort. It was really a team effort to get the kid in the endzone. Just a great job by our team."

It capped a mind-boggling comeback, as Nottingham trailed 35-7 with under four minutes to play in the third quarter. The Northstars proceeded to reel off 34 points in just over 15 minutes to win it.

The victors were as jubilant as a million dollar lottery winner, the losers as despondent as George Bailey before Clarence the Angel came to save him on Christmas Eve.

Neither side could be blamed for their emotions.

In a game that the Hornets had wrapped up and ready to hand to their Homecoming Day crowd, the most unlikely of comebacks occurred in what was a zany game, even by Backyard Brawl standards.

"I have never, in organized football, had a comeback like that," Nottingham coach Jon Adams said. "I challenged their manhood at halftime. I ripped the defense, ripped the offense. This is maybe the greatest win in Northstar history."

Quarterback Mark Newlin, who completed 6 of 8 passes for 101 yards and two touchdowns in the second half, wasn't about to argue.

"There was sooooo much that happened in this ballgame," said Newlin, who also rushed for 15 yards and two TDs. "This game will go down as the best game in Nottingham history. And all I gotta say is I was a part of it."

Which is something Hamilton coach Tom Hoglen will have difficulty saying.

"This is about as low as I've been as a coach, ever," said Hoglen, whose team dropped to 2-2 after doing no wrong for nearly the first three quarters.

Nottingham did score on its first possession on a Newlin run, but Hamilton appeared intent on blowing out their hometown rival after that. Jamie Williams, who rushed for 205 yards but also lost two fumbles, scored on an 80-yard run on Hamilton's first play from scrimmage.

That seemed to set a tone as Hamilton began to pull away. Jake D'Angelo, who completed five of six passes for 112 yards and a touchdown, scored on a one-yard run; Williams scored on runs of 56 and two yards; and then caught a 34-yard touchdown pass to make it 35-7 with 8:43 remaining in the third quarter.

Nottingham's next possession started with a 27-yard completion to Robert Wiggs, but the 'Stars turned it over on downs. Still, that completion was a foreshadowing of things to come.

When Nottingham went back out for defense, Newlin said there was still hope.

"We finally just told the guys 'If we can stop them right here and put it in the endzone we can win this ballgame,'" the senior quarterback said. "That's exactly what we did.

"From that point on, we did what we had to do and won a great game. And I want to thank my offensive line and my receivers. They all did a great job today."

The comeback started innocently enough, as Newlin scored on a seven-yard run with 3:14 remaining in the third quarter.

It seemed a little annoying to Hamilton fans when the Hornets fumbled it away on the next possession and Nottingham capitalized with a 20-yard touchdown pass from Newlin to Adam Devigili. Still, no one was too worried.

But when Wiggs' 15-yard punt return to the Hornet 30 set up a five-yard touchdown toss to Robert Pressley-Harris with 6:33 left, people began to squirm even after the PAT kick was missed.

And it got even more intense when Vital recovered the ensuing onside kick at the Hamilton 34. The Hornets got it right back when Homecoming King Julian Diaz recovered a fumble, but the Hornets turned it over on downs after failed to convert on a fourth-and-one from their own 38.

Nottingham appeared to be done when Kyle Williams came up with an apparent game-sealing interception. But a defensive holding call gave the Northstars a first down on the 17 and three plays later Pressley-Harris scored on a two-yard run and Devigili got loose to grab the two-point conversion pass to tie it with 46.8 seconds left.

At that point, it seemed like enough zaniness had occurred and everyone could relax until overtime.

Ha!

The nuttiness was just starting.

Hamilton got a clutch 43-yard completion from D'Angelo to Marvin Leontus down to the one-yard line with just over three seconds remaining. After the chains were set, D'Angelo spiked it with 2.6 seconds left and William Nelson came in to try an 18-yard field goal. He was perfect on five PAT's so this seemed pretty certain, until Hernandez broke through the line and away from the pack.

"I thought (Leontus) was in to begin with, but I wasn't down there," Hoglen said. "The referee on our side and the referee on the other side weren't down on the goal line, so how they marked it I don't know.

"But guess what. We got a block on the field goal when we had to put it through."

When it was over, the Northstars mobbed Hernandez then carried him off on their shoulders, as he smiled widely through a bloodied lip.

Dennis Hernandez is the man of the week!" exclaimed Newlin. "The kid blocked it and took it down the sideline. That was a great play."

It was a play made possible by Newlin's second-half resurgence. He struggled mightily in the first half with two interceptions, but came through when he had to. One week after tying a school record for catches in a game, Wiggs came up with four more for 67 yards while Andre Simmons rushed for 80 yards.

"My coaches just told me to settle down, go through my reads and keep playing football and that's what I did," the senior said. "Eventually I just started getting loose and they couldn't contain me. My line gave me time to throw the ball and we kept getting points."

"Mark was struggling a little, we told him to settle down and do what he does best," said Adams, who also praised his assistant coaches for their work in the comeback. "He got the ball to his playmakers and guys made plays. We got turnovers and it snowballed on West a little bit. Kind of like it did two

years back when the roles were reversed.”

In that game, Nottingham let it slip away and Hamilton kicked the game-winning field goal. Adams was déjà vu-ing in the worst way.

“I said to Wiggs “Can you believe we’re gonna get beat by a field goal again?” the coach said. “And then guys rushed, made a play. What an effort by Dennis Hernandez to go 90 yards. We told them, we were conceding kicks, we weren’t challenging them.

“We didn’t see anything special to try and block it. Just guys going, shooting gaps, trying to get in there. We had no chance of talking to them because we had no timeouts left.

The kids did it on their own, they did a great job. In the end it became a backyard football game and they made a play. It’s maybe the greatest win in Northstar history.”

And one of the toughest a Hamilton team has ever had to absorb.

“We’re not dead,” Hoglen said. “We just have to come back and play.”

It’s safe to say, though, that neither side will play in a game like this for a long time.

If ever.