

Nov. 17 CJ III Football Playoffs



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Stellar defensive play by linebacker Alex Svecz (35), end Dean Lucchesi (29) and lineman Enoch Assante has helped Steinert limit opponent's points in the season's last six games (Photo by Dennis Symons Jr./purchase photos at www.dennissymons.com).

Steadily improving defense has Steinert playing for a berth in CJ III finals

By Rich Fisher
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Nov. 17: In watching Steinert's memorable win over Wall last Friday night, one couldn't help but feel the game was a microcosm of the Spartans season where their defense is concerned.

In its first possession, Wall picked up 15 yards, 10 yards, minus-3 yards and 15 yards on its first four plays from scrimmage. Only a dropped pass stopped the Crimson Knights from going further.

On their second possession, the Knights' first five plays produced gains of six, 11, 11, 20 and seven yards.

That's 84 yards on nine plays, or 9.3 yards per play. A couple mistakes helped the Spartans escape without Wall scoring.

And then, in its final 47 plays, Wall gained 159 yards, an average of 3.4 yards per play.

OK, now take a look at the season itself, which stands at 7-2 as seventh-seeded Steinert prepares for Friday's Central Jersey Group III semifinal at sixth-seeded Woodbridge.

In their first three games the Spartans allowed a total of 68 points, which averages out to nearly 33 per game. In its last six, Steinert has allowed 73 points, an average of 12.2 per game. Throw out the 40-point clunker against West Windsor-Plainsboro South and the average in the other five games is 6.6 per game.

In what has become a trademark of the defense since Bob Ziegler took over as coordinator, the Spartans defense seems to get better as time goes on. And it hasn't taken major adjustments to get the job done – in-game or in-season.

“Against Wall, the whole game plan was to stop their quarterback,” Ziegler said. “We keyed on him and expected him to run more than he did. We made them work for all their yards.

“But as for in-game adjustments, we didn't have to do a whole lot of things. We knew when they ran the ball, it was going to be toward the tight end and their passing routes were going to be deep. We just stayed away from the big play.”

As limited as that sounds, it was pretty much the same philosophy that turned things around during the season.

“The only real change we made was moving AJ (Mostrangeli) to linebacker/defensive line,” Ziegler said. “After the Lawrence game (in which the Cards scored 34 points) we began to simplify things on defense a little. We made some personnel changes but it was mostly a change in attitude on the defensive side of the ball. No major overhaul was needed.”

What was needed, was steady improvement from the defense.

Entering the season, head coach Dan Caruso felt certain that a veteran offense could put points on the board. The key would be how quickly the defense could jell, particularly with sophomore Ryan Malagrino playing a key linebacker spot.

“Ryan has done so well at Mike backer this season,” Ziegler said. “It's a lot of responsibility to place on a sophomore but Ryan has been up to the task.

“He is a sideline to sideline linebacker with outstanding strength and good instincts. He has gotten better every week and played his best game of the season last Friday against Wall.”

There were other questions as well, not the least of which was at free safety where junior Eddie Ashley was greener than the Spartans uniforms.

“Eddie has played great,” Ziegler said. “He has been a surprise since he did not play last year. I had heard he was a good athlete, but his speed and toughness on the field was a pleasant surprise. I'll take him over any free safety in the league.”

Another concern was on the defensive line.

Not anymore.

“John Leverett and Enock Asante have filled in nicely,” Ziegler said. “And Matt Parmigiani has played every down at nose tackle. And Mostrangeli has been great as well. His intelligence and



The emergence of Eddie Ashley at free safety has been key to Steinert's improved defensive play over the course of the season (Photo by Dennis Symons Jr/purchase photos at www.denissymons.com).

versatility have helped us to play both the odd and even fronts this year.”

Defensive end Dean Lucchesi has also been in on some big plays at times this year, and it hasn't hurt Malagrino's development that he has veterans on each side of him.

“Our two outside linebackers, Kazier John and Alex Svecz, have been awesome,” Ziegler said. “Kazier brings such intensity and raw emotion to a defense that is ‘business as usual.’”

And finally, the play of cornerback Jordan Dunn has been nothing short of outstanding, as he has locked on the other teams' best receivers with sheer tenacity.

“Having Jordan as a shutdown corner has also been great,” Ziegler said. “He allows us to play man to man on a regular basis.”

And while Ziegler is the maestro of it all, he is quick to laud his position coaches Brad Harris and Joe Ferrara.

“They help myself and the kids out so much,” Ziegler said. “Day in and day out.”

And each day seems to get better when it comes to Steinert's defense.