

## SUBURBAN AND WAYNE TIMES

### Central League Football: Marple turns back Conestoga

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BERWYN - Turnabout is fair play ... supposedly.

Twice since 2001, Marple Newtown has watched the Conestoga football team celebrate its clinching of the Central League championship or a district playoff berth on its own field. Ouch!! How reprehensible, given the Cold War-like attitude between the two squads. Friday, it was Marple doing the clinching, earning its way into the AAA playoffs with a 33-14 win at Teamer Field. Ridley getting a playoff berth on Teamer would have been more palatable to 'Stoga. And a spirit of détente doesn't appear to be anywhere on the horizon.

Kind of a crazy game, too. Marple is cruising along at 17-0 early in the third quarter, only to see that evaporate to 17-14 before the fourth quarter is more than two plays old. And as quickly as the 'Stogies grabbed momentum by the scruff of the neck, the Tigers did a marvelous job of scruffing it right back. The Tigers even lost and recovered a fumble on the same play, preserving a drive that earned it a field goal just before halftime.

"Marple came out running the ball and playing defense," said Pioneer coach John Vogan. "We were able to move the ball when we didn't hurt ourselves. But give Ray (Gionta) and his kids credit. They took advantage of our mistakes and that's what a good team does."

That Marple ground game to which Vogan alluded to crunched out 237 yards on 44 carries, more than half of that total belonging to John Rutecki (122 yards). It spoiled a 246-yard, two-TD performance by Steve Richter, who spent a good part of the night trying to avoid people such as Pete Massaro. It began as the Tigers churned out a seven-play, 45-yard drive - all runs - to put the first score on the board, with quarterback John Liberty doing that sneak thing from the 1 with 11:33 showing in the half.

Then, came the two-possession-in-one possession, where Marple's John Gallagher fumbled, then it was fallen upon by several Conestoga defenders. But it was Marple who eventually recovered for a first down at its own 17. The Pioneers held at the 1, so Marple settled for Ted Seiler's 19-yard field goal at the 1:05 mark of the second quarter.

'Stoga had a shot to put up some points before the half expired. It drove to the Marple 13, with time for one more play in the half. Richter's pass into the end zone hit the artificial surface.

Rutecki's 46-yard run set up Gallagher's 2-yard touchdown run with 9:03 remaining in the third quarter, ending a six-play, 63-yard drive.

With their hip pads down around their socks, the 'Stogies came to life when Nihja White caught a fade pass from Richter for an 11-yard touchdown at 6:18 of the third quarter.

With 'Stoga defense beginning to tighten the screws on the Marple running game, the offense struck again. White first caught a slant pass for 30 yards before latching on to a 13-yard scoring pass with 11:18 to go in the game.

Marple stuck a big pin in the Pioneers' momentum balloon when Pat Aigeldinger intercepted Richter at the 'Stoga 46 and returned it to the 39. A personal-foul penalty aided the Tigers before Liberty threw a dive pass to Gallagher for a 17-yard touchdown with 8:33 showing.

Richter had to leave the game temporarily with an injury, so backup Jim Bassett was the one who had to suffer the indignity of being sacked by Massaro in the end zone for a safety, making it 26-14.

Gallagher's return and a personal foul on the ensuing kickoff put the ball at the Conestoga 2. Two plays later, Liberty punched it in on another quarterback sneak.

"They run that belly play, and they run the quarterback keeper, and they do it well," said Vogan. "We came back in the second half, but we gave up that turnover."

And it was the 'Stogies' turn to witness Marple's playoff celebration.