

Dec. 1 CJ III State Football Final

Neptune presents a dangerous QB, a proud tradition and a winning coach

By Rich Fisher

Fish4Scores.com

Dec. 1: So, what about this Neptune football team?

Well, it is good.

It is fast. *Real* fast.

It is athletic.

It is 10-1.

And like Steinert, it is starving for a title.

Unlike the Spartans, Neptune has a rich playoff history.

The Scarlet Fliers (10-1) have won three championships, but none since beating Middletown South, 58-13, in 1998. They have been to eight championship games, but none since losing 28-13 to Long Branch in 1999.

In three of the previous four years, Neptune has bounced a Mercer County team from the playoffs, eliminating Hamilton West in 2007 and Lawrence in 2008 and '09.

Steinert was 0-6 in the playoffs until this year.

What does all that mean entering Saturday's 4 p.m. Central Jersey Group III championship game at Rutgers?

Absolutely squat, in the eyes of Neptune coach Mark Ciccotelli.

"I don't get caught up in that 'Who's been there, who hasn't been there, how long it's been?' or all that kind of stuff," Ciccotelli said. "Those kids over there at Steinert are hungry, their coaches are hungry and they want to make history. We have to match that intensity, work ethic, drive and desire."

Ciccotelli knows of what he speaks.

He is in his first season as Fliers head coach. Prior to that, he won two CJ Group III titles during a seven-year stint at Freehold Boro, including last year's 14-12 victory over Middletown South in the finals (after South beat Steinert and Hamilton in the first two rounds).

Freehold also won it in 2008, but the year prior to that, Ciccotelli's third-seeded Colonials were upset by sixth-seeded Monroe

He knows anything is possible at this point.

"Before I got to Freehold, they were in one section final and didn't win it," Ciccotelli said. "We were fortunate enough to beat a program like Middletown South. What happened in the past doesn't mean anything now."

What happens on Saturday means everything, and Neptune has won nine straight entering the contest.

The Fliers lone loss this year came in game two, a 20-14 double-overtime setback to Red Bank



Neptune first-year coach Mark Ciccotelli, shown last year when he was still at Freehold Boro, won two state titles with the Colonials.

'(The Spartans) are a team, when you look at them, they almost look like a team of destiny.'
Neptune coach Mark Ciccotelli

Catholic (which finished its season 10-1).

“I think we’ve grown each week,” Ciccotelli said. “It’s tough when you take over a program in the first year. The kids are getting to know myself and a new staff, and the staff is getting to know the kids. We were just diving in, getting better every day or week throughout the course of the year.”

The Fliers have already reached two goals – winning their opening game and winning a Shore Conference division title. The last goal is a state title.

Neptune enters the game having won big and having squeaked games out. It received a huge scare at Allentown before pulling out a 40-33 overtime decision in the first-round of the playoffs.

After blowing out Northern Burlington in the semifinals, Neptune played Asbury Park in a Thanksgiving game that rivals Steinert-Hamilton in intensity. While the Spartans sat their starters the entire second half in a 40-22 win, the Fliers front liners had no such luxury in a 29-28 win.

“We played the starters right to the end,” Ciccotelli said. “It was a brawl, a battle, a big-time rivalry. They’re a Group I school, but they have more than Group I talent. It was a great game if you were a fan. Back and forth and up and down.

“We would have liked to have gotten our starters out. You always worry about physical games and kids getting banged up, but it’s a rivalry game. To throw it right before the biggest game of the season is tough. We would have liked to have been in Steinert’s shoes and pulled the starters, but it didn’t happen.”

Neptune does wear Steinert’s shoes in one respect, and there are nimble feet inside of them. Both teams are powered by a versatile senior quarterback.

Adam Riese has run for 719 yards and 11 touchdowns and thrown for 1,920 yards and 24 TDs. He is poised to join Nottingham’s Esayah Obado as the second quarterback in Mercer history to throw for over 2,000 yards.

But the Fliers counter with the dangerous Jaheem Woods, a 6-2, 185-pounder who is strong of arm and fleet of foot. Woods has rushed for 1,025 yards and 11 touchdowns and thrown for 1,227 yards and 14 TDs.

“He’s done a phenomenal job,” Ciccotelli said. “We run a shotgun spread, very similar to the old West Virginia team back in 2006. So for us, he’s the prototypical guy. We ask him to run it, throw it, make our checks and our audibles.”

Woods’ favorite target is Geoff Fairbanks, a 6-2 junior who has 34 catches for 631 yards and seven TDs. Ikie Calderon is a big-play threat with 14 catches for 404 yards and three TDs.

Aside from Woods, Neptune has a stable of running backs, led by David Gutzmore, Jazzmar Clax and slot backs Myles Martin and Isaiah “Ikie” Calderon. The foursome has combined for 1,084 yards and 16 TDs.

Defensively, Steinert coach Dan Caruso said that Neptune likes to blitz. He notes the Fliers will send five men routinely (they play with three down linemen), and will send the house on occasion.

Neptune should have an advantage with its speed, but Ciccotelli likes what he has seen of the Spartans on film.

“They’re a good football team,” he said. “They’re well coached, they play very well. They play very hard, their quarterback is a stud and their receivers are very good.

“They’re a team, when you look at them, they almost look like a team of destiny. You can tell they’re getting better each and every week and peaking at the right time.”

One of the coach’s main concerns is the ability of wideouts Keon White, Vanel Dossous and Jordan Dunn, who have exploded over the past three games.

“I think they throw the ball very well, those slots can run and those kids can play with anybody,” Ciccotelli said. “We can’t let them get an explosion on us and have a big day. And we have to be able to execute our offense.”

Which is basically what it all comes down to in Ciccotelli’s mind.

“We can have all the speed you want, but we have to execute and play good football,” he said. “We don’t get caught up in what they’re going to do. We’re gonna do what’s our strength.

“They’ll do what they do, we’ll do what we do. The team that executes best and comes out with the least amount of mistakes will come out with the win.”

Spoken like a man who has been there before.

And gotten the job done