

Nov. 19 CJ III Football Playoffs

Steinert's second playoff win may have been more impressive than first

By Ken Weingartner

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Nov. 19: When Steinert beat Wall a week ago for the program's first football win in postseason history, it was obviously a very big deal. After all, Shore Conference teams have dominated Central Jersey Group III over the years, and certainly have been thorns in the sides of Mercer County teams.

When the Spartans knocked off Woodbridge, 32-27, yesterday to advance to the CJ Group III championship game, it also was a very big deal. But beyond the obvious reason of putting Steinert in the title tilt, it was every bit as impressive as knocking off a Shore squad – if not more so – in the postseason.

Woodbridge plays in the Greater Middlesex Conference Red Division, which is arguably the toughest and deepest league in the state. Red Division stalwarts Piscataway, Sayreville and East Brunswick each won a sectional title in the previous two seasons and division newcomer Monroe captured CJ Group III in 2009.

Over the past four seasons, Red Division teams have won five sectional titles and finished second twice.

The Barrons entered last night's game against Steinert showing a win over Piscataway, which plays today in the North Jersey Section 2 Group IV semifinals after upsetting No. 1 seed Hunterdon Central, and losses to Sayreville and South Brunswick. Sayreville last night reached the CJ Group IV championship by knocking off previously unbeaten South Brunswick.

Steinert gave up 392 passing yards to Woodbridge, including 224 to receiver Cody Zalaras, but the Spartans also came up with five interceptions, including four in the second half as they limited the Barrons to just seven points after halftime.

"That's a hell of a football team," Spartans coach Dan Caruso said after his squad improved to 8-2. "Zalaras is a legit player. He did a nice job. Our defensive backs knew they had their work cut out for them because that's a great passing offense. I think a couple times we were in the right place at the right time, got a couple tipped balls; sometimes freaky things happen.



Quarterback Adam Riese's emotions come pouring out after he painted another masterpiece in Steinert's playoff win at Woodbridge Friday night (Photo by John Blaine/purchase photos by e-mailing jbsportsphoto@aol.com).

“Our kids were just being patient against them. They were dropping into their zones and staying with their responsibilities. We got smoked a couple times early, but we made the adjustments.”

Steinert’s defense had six turnovers total. Kazier John, Jeff Mattonelli, Ryan Malagrino, Tyler Zandomenogo and Jordan Dunn had interceptions while Dean Lucchesi had a fumble recovery.

“They have a ton of weapons on that team,” Mattonelli said about Woodbridge. “They can run the ball and that’s probably the best receiving corps we’ve faced all year. They were a great team. This is amazing. I don’t even know what to say right now. It’s crazy.”

Vanel Dossous caught three passes for 130 yards for the Spartans, including a highlight-reel grab along the sideline that he turned into a 68-yard touchdown early in the second quarter. Jordan Dunn had nine catches for 78 yards and Keon White made his only reception memorable, hauling it in for an 8-yard score.

Adam Riese threw two interceptions in the first half, one deep inside Woodbridge territory, but he was able to block out the miscues and focus on the task at hand. After his second interception, he completed 13 of 17 passes for 166 yards. He ended the night 20 of 31 for 288 yards and connected on his final nine throws.

He also scored three times on runs, including the game-winning TD early in the fourth quarter.

“I’m not used to throwing interceptions, but I knew I had to shake them off,” Riese said. “Better teams are going to do that. They’re going to pressure me more. But I adjusted well. I just tried to stay calm and run the offense. I think I did a good job of that. Everyone around me just kept me calm and we moved the ball.

“I’ve never had a game like this,” he added. “No. No way. This was amazing.”

Woodbridge coach Brian Russo was among those impressed with the Spartans.

“We knew they were very talented offensively,” Russo said. “Their quarterback is fantastic. Their offensive line plays one way, so they’re fresh. They have a lot of skill players and are a very good football team.

“Steinert just executed better and deserved to win,” he added.

The Spartans’ run through the postseason – as the No. 7 seed in CJ Group III – also shows the resiliency of the squad. Steinert lost 40-21 to West Windsor-Plainsboro South in its game the week prior to the playoffs beginning, but was able to put that setback in the rear-view mirror.

“After that game we knew we had to have some good weeks of practice because we knew we could make some trouble in the states,” Mattonelli said. “We just had the best two weeks of practice we’ve had all year, so it really helped us.

“It was our goal from the beginning of the year to be in the state finals,” he added. “We set high standards for our team.”

Standards the Spartans met with two impressive wins. In two weeks, they will go for a third.