

Nov. 5 Football – 'Stars win but not in



Marquise Purnell brings down Eric Shorter after one of Shorter's nine receptions today (Photo by Mary Malone)

Obado, Scales come up big to seal the deal in 'Stars win over Princeton

By Rich Fisher

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Nov. 5: It was with mixed emotions that the Nottingham football team celebrated its 42-28 Senior Day victory over Princeton today.

The day started with former standout receiver Robert Wiggs home from Wesleyan College and standing on the sidelines. Then came an outstanding rendition of the National Anthem by assistant coach Zach "Pavarotti" Campbell.

And the Northstars were thrilled that senior Troy Scales entered the game at crunch time to come up with a huge pass break-up and a game-saving interception.

They were exhilarated by senior quarterback Esayah Obado's 99-yard game-sealing touchdown run with 39 seconds left.

There were lots of other things to like too, such as Obado's effort that included three touchdown passes and two rushing touchdowns; or Wroway Williams' return from injury to gain 86 hard-fought rushing yards; or big games by receivers Luke Westerberg (three catches, 61 yards, 2 TDs) and Ayoub Kamara (four catches, 83 yards, TD).

It was all good stuff.

But in the end, it probably wasn't good enough to get Nottingham into the Central Jersey Group III playoffs.

After the game, coach Jon "Big Dawg" Adams took a phone call with the bad news that Neptune beat Colts Neck, 26-21. The way Adams had it figured, two out of three teams – Neptune, Middletown South or Hamilton – had to lose for Nottingham to sneak in on power points.

Only the Hornets obliged, as the Northstars will hope to host a consolation game as the ninth seed. Nothing is official, however, until the NJSIAA actual pairings come out. This is all projection).

"I'm not a power point math guy so I have no idea but I thought three teams had to lose," Adams said. "One did the other two won. It's unfortunate because I think we have a good team.

"The three teams we lost to are pretty darn good teams (Rancocas Valley, Hamilton, West Windsor-Plainsboro South.) It is what it is and we're gonna be in a consolation game but hopefully it will be home. It's a small consolation for us but we did control our own destiny. We played three teams as good as any in the playoffs and came up on the short side. It's a shame."

What was not a shame is how Nottingham came up with a ton of big plays against an equally outstanding Princeton offense. The Little Tigers' Eric Shorter caught nine passes for 223 yards, while Javon Pannell rushed for 142 yards. Princeton had 425 yards of total offense.

On the first play from scrimmage, Shorter caught an 81-yard touchdown pass from Pannell on a halfback option.

But Nottingham bounced back with an impressive drive, capped by Kamara's 26-yard touchdown catch and the first of six successful PATs by Birthday Boy Albert Ogogo.

The Northstars went up 14-7 when Westerberg caught a 15-yard fade in the endzone but Pannell tied it with an 11-yard scoring run. Kamara then displayed his Meet of Champions sprinter's speed with a 91-yard kickoff return that gave Nottingham (5-3) the lead for good.

Westerberg's 35-yard touchdown catch made it 28-14. Princeton pulled within 28-21, Obado scored on a one-yard run to push the lead to 14 again and Shorter caught a 34-yard TD pass to make it 35-28 with 6:47 left.

The Little Tigers (3-6) then recovered a fumble at their own 48 and had everyone squirming by driving to the 14. After Stuart Hasty made a big hit for no gain on first down, Mitko lofted a pass to Liam Helstrom, who had a good four inches on Scales.

But the safety came up from behind and, although there was contact, made a legal play and batted the ball down to prevent a touchdown.

"I saw him going out, and coach told me about five angles, forward and all the diagonals," said Scales, who admitted he was worried about a flag. "I just took the diagonal and broke up the pass."

Two plays later, Mitko was chased from the pocket and threw high to Shorter, who tipped it just enough for Scales to make a one-hand interception at the two-foot line.

"That felt great," Scales said.

"That was great!" Obado assured.

"Troy Scales made a tremendous interception," Adams said with a laugh. "But could he have just run it a couple more yards for us? I'm not asking for a lot."

The pick left Nottingham in a precarious situation with just under a minute left. The Northstars couldn't take a knee to run out the clock or it would have been a safety.

Obado went straight ahead on first down for nothing.

Then came the shocker, as he went straight ahead again, and suddenly squirted out of the humanity and took off on a 99-3/4-yard touchdown run to tie a world record.

“Our tight end Rob Liedtka and our right tackle Zachary Baker opened up the hole,” said Obado. “I broke one tackle and it was off to the races. Ayoub saved my life at the end. Eric Shorter was gonna hawk me, but Ayoub saved me and blocked him and it was over.”

Adams was as pleasantly surprised as anyone. All he wanted was breathing room.

“I couldn’t believe it, he just squirted outta there,” the coach said. “I was just hoping to get a couple more inches.

“We were contemplating taking a safety. We were gonna let the clock run down, they had used all their timeouts. We were going to take a safety and get a good kick off because Albert has a nice strong leg. And then we would hope for the best from the defense.”

Obado’s score clinched it but Scales provided one more thrill when he intercepted Mitko’s final pass.

“Troy was on the sidelines and he never hung his head,” Adams said. “I just felt our young corner was getting victimized and we needed a little better play at safety.

“I told Gat (defensive coordinator Frank Gatto) to put in number three and sure enough he responded like a senior should and made some plays. We needed a great play and the kid responded.”

Obado couldn’t have been happier for his classmate.

“I love Troy, man,” Obado said. “He’s a hard worker. The hard work paid off. He definitely deserved those two interceptions at the end.

“And that pass break-up. . .that was a helluva play. We really needed that, they could have scored. He stepped up. He made a great play.”

And Obado made several great plays, rushing for 157 yards and completing 10 of 14 passes for 161 yards.

“I know people who run fancier offenses and have better stats than Esayah,” Adams said. “But for me, there’s none better than number seven.”

He was at his best today, and even being shut out of the playoffs can’t detract from that.

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Ogogo continues to provide Nottingham with the consistent place kicking it hadn’t had in a while. Aside from the PATs he also booted three straight kickoffs into the endzone.

“He had a great game,” Adams said. “I know in our school history no one’s ever kicked three touchbacks in a row. I think he could be a college level kicker. He has to work a little harder in the off-season but he’s only a junior and he’ll be a real force for us down the road and next year.”