

Sep. 11 Fish4Scores.com/JoJo's Tavern Athlete of the Week

Adams feels Hedden is head of the class when it comes to O-linemen

By Rich Fisher

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Sep. 11: Entering this high school football season, all eyes in Mercer County were on the Nottingham High offense, wondering who would take over for a plethora of graduated skill players at receiver and running back.

But what we all so often forget, is that no skills can be showcased without an offensive line. And Nottingham knew it was in good shape there.

While the young headline grabbers are learning their positions, the men in the trenches need to open the holes and protect the passer.

On Saturday, in what is as big an early-season game as you can find, Nottingham opened with a 21-20 win over Steinert. It amassed 305 yards of total offense on 47 plays, an average of over six yards per play.

That doesn't happen without the offensive line work of Zach Baker, Mike Olmeda, Aaron Levinson, Aaron Comacho and center Matt Hedden.

Especially center Matt Hedden.

"It starts with him," said coach Jon "Big Dawg" Adams. "Matt Hedden, in my opinion is the best lineman in this league. No offense to anybody, but I'm prejudiced, and I think I'm correct in saying that.

"Films don't lie. He does a lot of things up front, changing calls and things and coming to me and telling me where we can go with the football. It starts with him."

For his efforts, not just on Saturday but for his stellar four-year career, Matt Hedden is the *Jo Jo's Tavern/Fish4Scores.com Athlete of the Week* for the week ending Sep. 11.

"Steinert has a very good defensive front," Hedden said. "We were mainly concerned with all the blitzes and how they do our stunts. We did OK picking up the blitzes, but we can definitely improve there."

Perhaps they can, as every team must improve from opening day. But it's a pretty good starting point for the line when it does not allow a sack and just three of 47 plays went for negative yardage.

And while guys like Wroway Williams and Esayah Obado praised the work of the line, Hedden passed it right back.

"I knew coming in we had a lot of experienced guys on the line, so we had to carry a lot of the load with the running game and picking up the blitz," Hedden said. "But Wroway, as a sophomore, and all the new receivers did a great job all off-season to get ready. We weren't worried about us having to take care of everything, we knew they could do the job."

Hedden, who came to Hamilton Township from football-crazed Phillipsburg, became the Northstars starter faster than anyone anticipated. During his freshman year of 2008, Nottingham's regular center broke his leg playing softball as a picnic.

There were a lot of growing pains for young Matt, but he must have done something right as Kendrick Williams had a record-setting rushing year.

"With Kendrick as the running back, it's not too hard to block," Hedden said with a laugh. "But it was rough. Being 14 years old against kids who are 17 and 18, I got thrown around pretty good. But the other guys playing around me picked me up."

As rough as things were, it was an invaluable learning experience.

"It was huge," he said. "Having so much experience that first year, it helped me progress so

much. Coming into this season, I know how different defenses line up, what to look for. I've seen it all."

And while he is the recognized leader of the line – as most centers are – Hedden quickly notes he's not surrounded by sad sacks trying to keep up. Baker is a three-year starter and the two Aarons got rotated in frequently last season.

"The other guys help me out," Hedden said. "I call out the blitzes and where kids are supposed to go, but they pick up on that, they know how to do it themselves. They're experienced doing all that so it takes the pressure off of me."

Hedden, who is just starting the college process (although the name "Syracuse" has been bandied about), prepared for this year by playing lacrosse last spring.

"It brought down me down in weight but picked me up in speed and helped my footwork," he said. "What I lacked in the weight room I picked up in skills."

At 6-1, 225 pounds Hedden isn't considered a huge lineman but his technique is well above average. Like most linemen, he enjoys run blocking over pass protection.

"I always like working on the run block," he said. "Pass blocking is the easiest. You stand back and shield off the other guy. Run blocking is more determination, you have to put it to them to open holes."

In other words, it's a case of hit or get hit.

"Yeah," Hedden said with a laugh. "We always say when we're run blocking we're the hammer, when we're pass blocking we're the nail."

If Saturday's win is any indication, the Northstars will empty the toolbox this season as they have a nice mixture of run and pass.

"That's what we're so excited about," Hedden said. "My freshman year we were basically a running team, my sophomore year we struggled, and last year we were mostly a passing team. This year is the most well-rounded offense we've had since I've been here."

And that offense has the right man leading the way in the trenches.