Clutch offense, defense in 4th quarter lift Pirates past Lutheran in football thriller

Call it a flip-flop, turnaround or reversal of fortune.

The Port Washington Pirates are simply calling it a football victory, one of those heart-stopping varieties that takes players, coaches and spectators on enough roller-coaster twists to last a season.

In the end, host Port escaped with a 28-27 win over Milwaukee Lutheran in a North Shore Conference game that wasn’t decided until the final minutes.

Overcoming a nightmarish second quarter in which they surrendered 27 points, the Pirates prevailed in their league opener with a combination of clutch offensive and defensive plays, including the winning drive in the final three minutes.

Lutheran had a 27-20 lead and the ball at its 9-yard line after recovering a Port fumble with just over four minutes left. But three plays later, the Red Knights returned the favor when running back Tyrese Luckett fumbled, and Port’s Justin Wicke fell on the ball at the Lutheran 29 with 3:18 to go.
The Pirates wasted little time cashing in. On second-and-11, quarterback Tanner Orten fired a pass to Jacob Lippe, who outleaped a defender for a catch that gave Port a first-and-goal at the 3.

After averting disaster by recovering a fumbled exchange, the Pirates reached the end zone on Orten’s 3-yard keeper and pulled within 27-26 with 1:38 left.

A timeout ensued, during which Port coach John Bunyan opted for a do-or-die, two-point try. Fullback Matt Ruppel came through, slicing his way into the right side of the end zone for the winning conversion.

“We had problems all week with our kicking game and knew we would go for two,” Bunyan said. “It was just a matter of what play to call.”

Despite a brief celebration, the Pirates knew they weren’t out of danger. Lutheran saw to that with a desperation drive orchestrated by quarterback Josiah Hedrington. Aided by a late-hit penalty on Port, the Red Knights reached the Pirates’ 26 with 1:17 left.

However, Hedrington — who threw for 214 yards and three touchdowns — misfired on three straight passes toward the back of the end zone. On fourth down, he tried the left side of the end zone, but Lippe batted the ball away from his secondary position.

Port took possession and, with Lutheran out of time-outs, Orten sealed the win with two kneel-downs.

“I didn’t think it would come to that side,” Lippe said of his defensive play. “I just tried to stay between my man and the ball and get a hand on it.”

In surviving, the Pirates overcame an undersized but athletic team whose quickness caused problems all night. Lutheran outgained Port, 486-412, in total yardage and rallied from a 14-6
deficit to take a 27-20 lead into halftime.

The Pirates got touchdowns on runs of three and 68 yards by Ruppel and a 41-yard pass from Orten to Lippe, but the Red Knights were virtually unstoppable offensively in the second quarter.

Hedrington had scoring passes of 19 yards to Isaiah Owens, 69 yards to Derick Harris and five yards to Henry Reimer. Luckett added a 5-yard touchdown run, and Lutheran went into the break on a roll.

The only things slowing the Red Knights were blocked conversion kicks by Ruppel and Tyler Beach — plays that loomed large in the outcome.

“Milwaukee Lutheran has really good quickness and good size at the receiver positions,” Bunyan said. “They’re tough to match up with. But I was really happy with the way our defense responded in the second half and kept them off the board.”

In the second half, the Pirates forced Lutheran into three failed fourth-down plays, two punts and a turnover on six possessions. Early in the fourth quarter, the Red Knights drove to the Port 4, but Hedrington was stopped on a fourth-down run.

Although the Pirates had drives end on failed fourth-down tries and a fumble, they got their offense moving just enough.

Ruppel collected a game-high 211 yards rushing on 23 carries. Fellow senior Orten was 5-for-13 passing for 93 yards and added 40 rushing yards on 15 carries. Lippe, a sophomore, had three receptions for 76 yards.

“This is a huge win for us, a must win,” Bunyan said. “I’m really proud of the way our kids hung in there.”
Port (2-1 overall) will face an even tougher challenge this Friday when it hosts Whitefish Bay (2-1) in another NSC game at 7 p.m. Bay, which shared the conference title with Homestead last season, is coming off a 35-3 win over Cedarburg.

Image Information: SOPHOMORE JACOB LIPPE tried to leap over a Milwaukee Lutheran defender on a running play in Port Washington’s 28-27 win last Friday.  

*Photo by Sam Arendt*