

Victory Over Ghosts Lifts Neshaminy Spirit

By Mike Kern

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Even though second-year Neshaminy High football coach John Chaump lost three all-area talents from last season's 11-1 state playoff team, and had to replace all but one starter on his offensive line, he still thought he had the makings of another decent squad.

But it was one thing for him to feel that way. Convincing his players, he realized, would be another.

Now, they know, too. Last night at Neshaminy's Harry Franks Stadium, the Redskins beat a very strong Abington club, 35-27. So finally, there is no longer any need to wonder, since the Redskins indeed appear to be every bit as solid as Chaump believed.

"Abington is a tank. They're big, strong and fast. And this time, we were better," said Chaump. "It was a giant step. Our kids needed a game like this, so they could believe in themselves. I hope they're at the point now where they understand they're for real.

"We're starting some juniors, and some of the seniors were only on JV last year. We did

have some good skill people returning, but the kids just didn't know how good they were. And as a staff, neither did we. But that's no longer the case. We're here."

With an exclamation point.

Neshaminy, which opened with a 35-0 rout of Bishop Egan, simply couldn't or wouldn't throw the ball a year ago, a flaw that proved to be its undoing in a 24-0 loss to Cedar Cliff in the first round of the PIAA Class AAAA playoffs. That day, the Redskins didn't even make one first down, against what amounted to a nine-man defensive front.

But Chaump has apparently learned his lesson. He moved game-breaker Jon Hall from tailback out to wide receiver, to make room for Rob Latronica in the backfield. Against Egan, Hall caught a pair of touchdown passes from James Franklin, who split the quarterback duties a year ago with Dan McClave, now graduated. Last night, Hall added two more scoring receptions, covering 35 and 49 yards. And Latronica, who ran for 180 yards last week, rushed for 115 on 15 carries, including an electrifying 55-yard broken-field jaunt for six points in which he somehow eluded what seemed like the entire right side of the Abing-

ton defense.

"When you have the luxury of having two kids who can run like we do, it doesn't make too much sense to have one of them on the bench," said Chaump. "Jon Hall has great speed and great hands. People who play us are going to have to put two men on him. So he's doing his job, even when he doesn't touch the ball.

"Last year, we ran him 25 times a game, and the bruises mounted. He gained 1,000 yards [on the ground] in basically seven games. We didn't want him to take that pounding. We had to open things up. Other people constantly put everybody on the line of scrimmage. There was no place left to go."

Franklin, who threw on the first six plays, wound up completing 5 of 14 for 112 yards. Abington, on the other hand, prefers the overland route, with junior Shawn Wooden (25 carries, 161 yards, two TDs) handling the majority of the workload.

The Ghosts, who were coming off an emotionally huge 15-14 win over Bishop McDevitt, trailed at the end of two quarters, 14-7. But for the second straight week, Jason Hughes returned the second half kickoff all the way (86 yards in this instance) to tie things up. But on

Neshaminy's next snap, Latronica went 55 yards to just as quickly untie it. A bad snap from center on an Abington punt attempt then gave the Redskins the ball at the Ghost 14, and Latronica scored two plays later from 2 yards out.

Abington came right back once again, first on an 8-yard pass from Tinker Harris to Hughes, and later an 18-yard run by Wooden that pulled the Ghosts to within 28-27 with just under eight minutes left. But Abington couldn't convert a somewhat surprising try for two points. After a change of possessions, Jason Hillaert blocked a punt to set up a clinching five-play, 29-yard scoring drive which Franklin capped with a 2-yard option keeper around right end at the 2:37 mark.

Next Friday, Neshaminy travels to Central Bucks West, which is trying to extend its unbeaten streak to a state-record-tying 56 games this afternoon at Cardinal O'Hara.

"If we had allowed ourself to look ahead for one second, we would not have won this one," said Chaump. "I'm sure they're a great team. And it should be a tremendous game."

Of course, he had sensed so all along.