

Not so special teams costly to Knights in season opener

String of punt miscues gives Braves 21-16 win

By Richard A. Kiley

Special teams. Last Saturday, before more than 1,100 fans at McQuaid, the Knights' special teams were anything but that.

Three consecutive miscues on Knight punts led directly or indirectly to 15 points in Canandaigua's 21-16 win at McQuaid and extended its winning streak to 30 games. The streak stands as the longest in Section 5, and the second best in the state.

Oh, there were other miscues on the part of the Knights in both teams' season-opening high school game, including a costly goal-line and a suddenly soft defensive series that allowed the Braves to enter the locker room up 6-0 at the half.

But the special team errors were the difference, and McQuaid Coach Tom Sprague knew that better than anyone.

"I felt it was even in the beginning and even in the end. We made mistakes in between," said Sprague, who is in his fifth season at the all-boys' high school in Brighton. "He (Canandaigua Coach Mike Foster) always has a good, sound team; they don't beat themselves."

On this day at least, McQuaid couldn't say the same.

After a scoreless first quarter, it appeared the Knights were going to break on top first. Senior quarterback Joe Williams, starting his first game on varsity, successfully moved his team from the Canandaigua 42 to the five-yard line. The Brave defense was unable to stop the running of Williams or 185-lb. fullback Dave Schroeder, who pounded out 72 yards on 17 carries for the day.

On first and goal from the five, however, Williams tried to force the ball to junior split end Matt Bergin, and the pass was intercepted by Terry Mulheron. The pick off was one of two by the senior tailback, who also nabbed two touchdown passes for the afternoon.

"I called for a play-action pass, and normally we tell our quarterback to run if no one is open," said Sprague, reflecting on the crucial turnover. "My quarterback didn't see the defender. That's one I wish I had back."

While Mulheron's interception seemed to rejuvenate his teammates, it seemed to dishearten the Knights. The defense, which had not allowed a first down until 2:40 remained in the first half, appeared suddenly porous in the second Canandaigua possession after the offensive miscue.

Canandaigua quarterback Todd Lewis, last year's understudy to Bill Scharr, marched his team 74 yards on eight plays. The only flaw in the scoring drive, which culminated on a three-yard TD pass to Mulheron, was a 10-yard holding penalty. Lewis was an impressive five-for-six through the air and 82 yards for the drive. Overall, he was eight-for-16 for 126 yards for the day. The conversion failed, leaving the score 6-0 at the half.

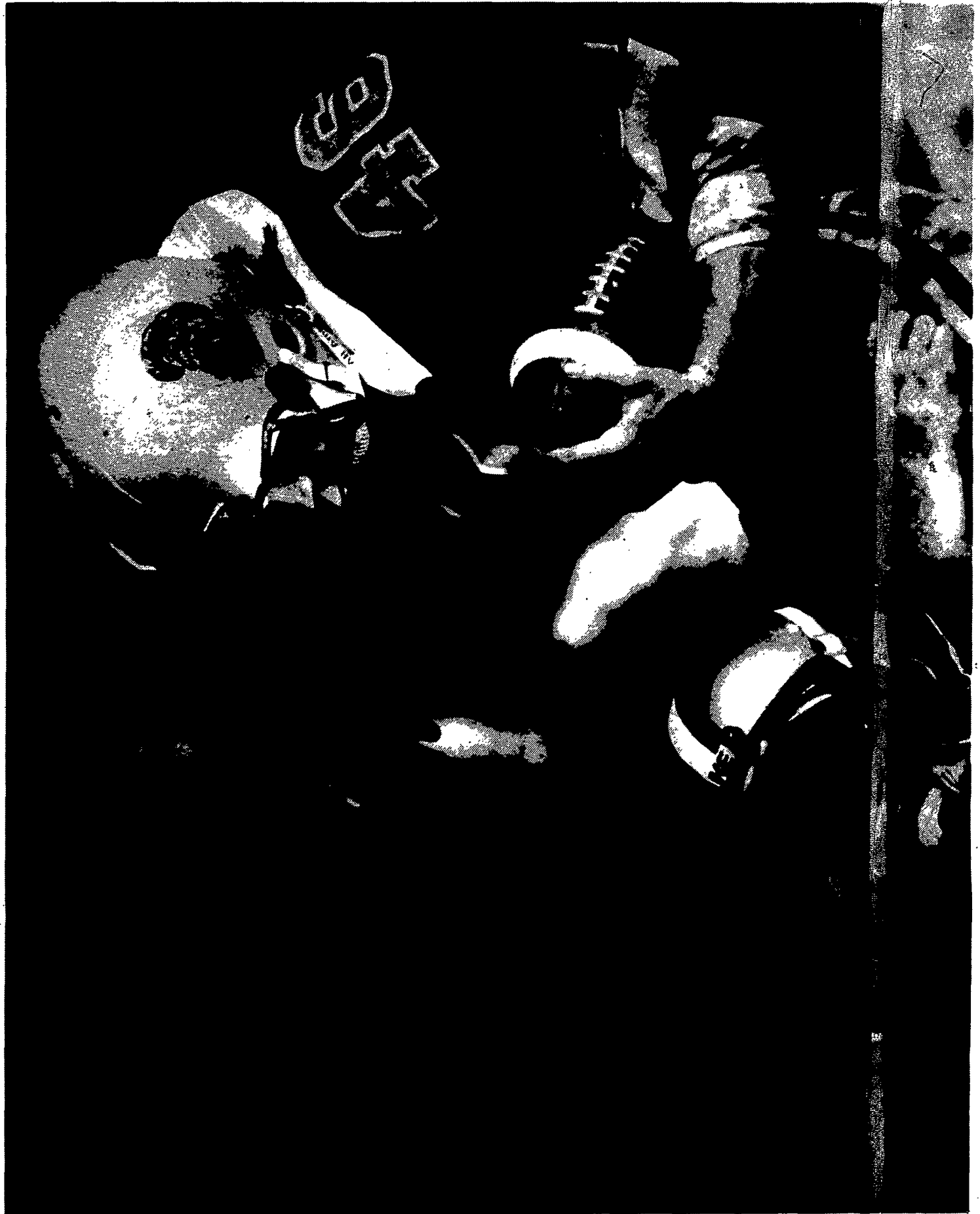
The turning point in the game came in the third quarter when McQuaid muffed three consecutive punts, including two that were blocked by defensive end Pete Lepsch. The Canandaigua junior was virtually untouched on both Steve Schott punts.

"Number eight (Lepsch) wasn't touched, and he should be bumped," Sprague said. "If he's touched, he doesn't get there in time."

The Knights temporarily dodged the bullet, however, when Canandaigua failed to get any points after taking over on the seven. A clipping penalty and four incompletions gave the ball back to McQuaid.

Deep in his own territory, Schott was called upon once again, but this time never even got his hands on the ball. Tom Nientemp's snap from center was well over the head of the 5'11" punter, and the ball bounced out of the end zone for a safety.

The damage from the errant snap wasn't over either. On the ensuing free kick, Canandaigua's Mike Damrau gave his team great field position by returning the ball to the McQuaid 44. Lewis used a mere two



McQuaid fullback Dave Schroeder climbs over two Canandaigua defenders for two of his 72 yards for the day. Schroeder's efforts weren't enough to offset costly mistakes, however, as the Knights fell 21-16.

Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal

plays to up the lead to 14-0. He found Mulheron near the left sideline for 39 yards, and then fired a five-yard touchdown pass to Steve Busbey, who was all alone in the middle of the end zone.

With the Knights still unable to muster any offense on its next series, they were once again forced to punt. And, just like before, Lepsch found a clear path to Schott, blocked the punt and jumped on the ball at the Knight seven-yard line.

Two plays later, second-string quarterback Tom McWilliams tossed one up toward Mulheron, who stepped in front of McQuaid's Paul Roselli to snare the touchdown pass with 2:39 left in the third quarter. The successful conversion made the score 21-0.

McQuaid forced its first big break of the game when Roselli, redeeming himself for being beaten by Mulheron minutes before, recovered a fumble by Canandaigua's Dave

Crudele.

Some gutsy running by Schroeder finally paid off with 6:07 remaining in the game, when the fullback scampered in from the one. An offside penalty against the Braves on the subsequent conversion enabled Sprague to opt for two points. The gamble proved worthwhile when Williams faked an inside handoff to Schroeder and scrambled into the end zone, making the score 21-8.

The Knights got the ball back with 4:22 left, but couldn't get anything going against the Braves' pass defense. But with 2:50 left, a wingback reverse proved good enough for a first down.

After Williams ran the ball to the nine-yard line with :20 left, the 6'3", 190-lb. quarterback found Bergin in the corner of the end zone with :07 remaining. Bergin ran the two-point conversion into the end zone, pulling McQuaid to within five at 21-16.

On the subsequent onside kick, McQuaid recovered the ball at midfield.

Williams' desperation pass with no time on the clock was intercepted by safety Nick Violas to end the game and any hopes of a McQuaid miracle.

Sprague, who was an assistant to Foster in the Eddie Meath All Star Game last month, said Canandaigua's opportunistic and mistake-free play was no surprise to him.

"Canandaigua is always more ready than most teams in the first game," said Sprague, discounting claims that the Braves' loss of 26 seniors from last year's Section 5 Class AA championship team would hurt them. "Foster's teams don't hurt themselves; we made them today. But I was happy with the way we came back."

Reviewing Williams' first start as a quarterback, Sprague said he was pleased with his quarterback's overall performance although "he was very tentative in the first half."

The Knights will face Wilson at home this Sunday at 2 p.m.

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