



Paul Finch

With the help of his teammates, Aquinas' Arel Gordon evades a trio of Nyack defenders during the first quarter of the state Class A football championship game at Syracuse's Carrier Dome Dec. 1.

Clutch plays carry AQ to state title

Mike Latona/Catholic Courier

SYRACUSE — Fourth-down conversions. A key interception in the waning seconds.

Throughout the state Class A football final, Aquinas Institute put forth its best effort when it was most urgently needed.

"In big games like this, you step up and make big plays. That's what it comes down to," said Little Irish senior quarterback Mark Zappia.

Linell Greene made a game-saving interception with just over 1 minute remaining, and the Irish survived a late comeback by the Indians for a 20-15 win Dec. 1 in the Carrier Dome. The victory gave Aquinas its second consecutive Class A championship.

"It's the best feeling in the world, back-to-back state champs," exulted Greene, a senior defensive back, shortly after he exchanged high-fives with AQ fans hanging over the bleachers' first-row railing.

Aquinas, the state's top-ranked team, finished with a 12-1 record. Previously undefeated Nyack ended up 12-1 as well.

AQ drew first blood, going up 7-0 when senior tailback Calvin Hall made a 6-yard touchdown run with 1:01 remaining in the first quarter. Nyack made it 7-7 on Alex Jeanty's 5-yard scoring run with 53 seconds to go before halftime. But AQ took a 13-7 lead into the locker room after a quick drive that ended with a 3-yard TD run with :03 left by senior tailback Arel Gordon, who was named the game's Most Valuable Player.

The third quarter saw the Irish

make another strong drive for what proved to be the winning touchdown. On fourth-and-12, Zappia fired a 24-yard strike to senior receiver Ian Goodberlet, giving AQ first-and-goal at the Nyack 9-yard line. Three plays later, in another fourth-down situation, Hall smashed into the end zone from 1 yard out with 2:52 left. Goodberlet added his second extra-point kick of the day, and it was 20-7.

In addition to the two big fourth-down plays on that drive, the Irish offense had converted a fourth-and-4 to set up Hall's first touchdown. AQ Coach Dave Nieman said that with his club's ability, he saw no need to play conservatively with punts or field-goal attempts.

"This offense is a scoring offense. When we have the ball in our hands, we want to score touchdowns," Nieman stated.

Kudos for fourth-down success also belong to the AQ defense, which stopped the Indians on a fourth-and-goal play at the 3-yard line early in the second quarter.

The Little Irish defense came up big in the turnover department as well: Along with Greene's interception, AQ recovered two Nyack fumbles in the second half and held a 3-0 edge in takeaways for the day.

Despite these successes, Nyack rallied with a relentless ground attack that produced a 3-yard scoring run by Judin Pierre-Louis with 8:01 left in the game, making the score 20-13. Aquinas was then forced to punt but, with 1:08 left, Greene made his memorable interception at the AQ 15-yard line on a throw from Nyack quarterback Eric Clegg. Greene leaped high to snag the ball away

from Indian tight end Will Leone.

Still, the game wasn't clinched. AQ took an intentional safety with :31 remaining to bring the score to 20-15, and Nyack then got past midfield before Clegg made a last-ditch pass on the game's final play. The ball danced off Leone's fingertips at the 10-yard line, and as it hit the ground, AQ players and coaches rushed the field in relieved exuberance.

"Two times in a row, my senior year. You can't beat it," Goodberlet said.

Added Nieman: "When we won last year, I told the team it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. To do it again, I can't put it into words."

Thoughts to Consider



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