

South Jersey Football: Haddonfield is the Team of the Year

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(Photo: Chris LaChall/Staff Photographer)

Haddonfield High School's football team took to the field 13 different times this season.

On 12 of those occasions, the Haddons saw a team that would compete in the playoffs.

Two of the foes they faced twice.

No matter. All comers were given the same result – a defeat.

Unbeaten and undaunted, Haddonfield put together one of the most memorable seasons in program history.

For that, the Haddons are No. 1 in South Jersey's Mean 15 rankings and the Courier-Post Team of the Year.

"It was obviously a special journey with a group of special young men who cared about each other," coach Frank DeLano said. "We thought we had a shot. You think you have a shot to do it and the optimistic side says, 'Hey, we can beat anybody. Bring on the Green Bay Packers.'

"Then you look at the schedule and you know it's going to be tough. Our kids just embraced the challenge and they truly enjoyed the journey."

That voyage began with a 4-0 mark that contained wins over eventual-sectional semifinalists in Pleasantville and Cinnaminson.

On Sept. 29, it met an even bigger obstacle with a 22-15 on the road at St. Joseph. The Wildcats carried a 16-game win streak into the game and were the consensus top club in the area.

"Our belief in our locker room, we thought they were underdogs," senior quarterback Jay Foley said on that sun-splashed Saturday afternoon. "We know what we have ... This is just another game in our season. We just did our thing."

Foley's leadership helped guide the group. He possessed a flair for the big throw and a fearless attitude his counterparts fed off.

Davis Smith and Johnny Foley provided talent on the outsides at receiver and defensive back. Drew Gavranich's skilled play at tight end and linebacker end added to the mix.

Backs Chris Brown, Alex Kadar and Tommy Batson were reliable runners who took turns with successful results.

That offense showed what it could do against Camden's strong defense in the SJ Group 2 championship. Against a side that entered with a points-against average of 5.4 per game, Haddonfield took a 23-12 final.

It lifted the school to its second crown in as many years and its fifth in the previous nine campaigns.

"I knew we had the talent to get here," Brown, who ran the opening kickoff back for a score against the Panthers, said afterwards. "We put in all the work, got here and it was awesome."

After a rout of rival Haddon Heights on Turkey Day, the defense showed its strength in the first-ever Central/South Bowl Game.

Against unbeaten Hillside, who'd racked up close to 40 points per game, coordinator Mike Miller's unit allowed just one score. The Haddons met perfection with a 17-7 result.

Seniors Gabe Klaus, Lewis Evans, Matt Pinsky and Jim Kane led the way. Kane came up with a sack and interception against the Comets.

"Fortunately for us, it all worked out," DeLano said. "It wouldn't have worked out with lesser kids with lesser character or lesser goals."

"Everyone wants to be great but are you willing to pay the price? These kids did. To get to this moment, this is the ultimate team accomplishment. This isn't one team making all-state or one kid making all South-Jersey. It's also the ultimate reward of people putting in 17 years worth of blood, sweat and tears."

FINAL MEAN 15 RANKINGS

1. Haddonfield (13-0)
2. Williamstown (12-1)
3. St. Joseph (11-2)
4. St. Augustine (7-4)
5. Camden (10-2)
6. Penns Grove (13-0)
7. Woodrow Wilson (9-4)
8. Burlington Twp. (10-1)
9. West Deptford (7-3)
10. Holy Spirit (8-4)
11. Rancocas Valley (9-3)
12. Delsea (6-4)
13. Willingboro (7-5)
14. Shawnee (6-7)
15. Clearview (8-3)

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