

Nine seconds changes everything for Massillon

Chris Easterling
Chris.Easterling@IndeOnline.com

The offseason arrived early for the Massillon Tigers. That's because the McKinley Bulldogs scored late in Saturday's showdown at Fawcett Stadium.

When Alex Winters scored on a 43-yard touchdown run with 1:13 remaining, it seemed to give the Tigers the win, as well as their fourth straight playoff berth. Except that the Bulldogs had an answer, and marched down to get a 4-yard Tyler Foster touchdown run to give them a 23-20 win.

"That was an emotional game," Massillon coach Jason Hall said after his team concluded a 7-3 season. "You're up, you're down. Both teams had to handle adversity. I guess from a fan's perspective, it's everything you'd want from a rivalry game."

Except, of course, for the Tigers, a win. And because of that, there won't be an 11th game for Massillon.

The last time the Tigers weren't playoff participants, it was 2007. And the final score of the Tigers-Bulldogs showdown that day — also in Canton — was 23-20.

Only that one was a Tiger win, in overtime. On this day, the three-point margin favored the Bulldogs.

And because of that, it will be McKinley, and not Massillon, heading to this weekend's first round of the playoffs.

"It feels great," said McKinley safety Ruben Burrows, whose last-play interception sealed the game. "It's great. They're our rivals. Any time you can stop a rival from doing anything, it's amazing."

The thing was, it could have just as easily been a Tiger player saying the same thing as Burrows was after the game. That's because it seemed as if both teams had their chances to be the one ringing the Victory Bell.

Massillon twice took the lead in the fourth quarter. The first came just 36 seconds into the quarter when Tre Hendricks caught a 28-yard touchdown pass from Kyle Kempt to give the Tigers a 14-10 lead.

The second came when Winters ripped off his 43-yard run with just 73 seconds remaining. That put Massillon in front 20-16.

“I thought our kids played tough on both sides of the ball,” Hall said.

The only problem for the Tigers on this day was that McKinley just seemed to have an answer every time. And it wasn't the answer Massillon wanted to hear.

So, just before 5 on Saturday afternoon, the Tigers found themselves somewhere they haven't been under Hall. That's left with nowhere to go after the McKinley game but into the offseason.

For some Tiger players, the reaction was tears. Others reacted with blank stares. Yet others tried to help console their distraught teammates, left with nothing but memories for 2011.

All because the final momentum swing in a game full of them went McKinley's way. And it swung Massillon into an offseason that arrived all too early for its taste.

McKinley scores in final minute to top Massillon

Chris Easterling
Chris.Easterling@IndeOnline.com

CANTON A minute-and-a-half can be an eternity in the game of football. It certainly was Saturday afternoon at Fawcett Stadium as Massillon and McKinley met for the 121st time in their storied history, and it ended up costing the Tigers a trip to the playoffs.

In that time span, the Tigers appeared to secure their first regular-season win over the Bulldogs since 2008. Except that, they didn't, as McKinley managed to wrest the Victory Bell back to their side — along with a playoff berth — with a heart-pounding 23-20 win.

Massillon took a 20-16 lead with 1:13 remaining when Alex Winters tore off a 43-yard scoring run. However, Tyler Foster capped a five-play, 74-yard drive with a 4-yard run with nine seconds remaining to put McKinley head for good.

“We had 1:13,” Tiger coach Jason Hall said after his team finished the season 7-3. “We just had to play defense. Unfortunately in a crucial situation, we missed tackles, got a personal foul penalty. ... They had a good play call to what we were running.”

Foster's go-ahead score was set up by a 41-yard catch-and-run by Jeff Richardson on the second play of the Bulldog drive. Richardson caught an out pattern, then turned upfield, breaking a tackle before finally being dragged down at the Tiger 19.

Massillon, though, was flagged for a personal foul at the end of the play, moving the ball to the Tiger 8.

“I just had to make a big play,” said Richardson, whose five-play, 82-yard receiving day also included a second-quarter touchdown as well. “I saw the corner bite on the pass. He tried to tackle me, and I ran through the tackle and ran up field.”

The frenetic finish was just part of a back-and-forth fourth quarter between the two rivals, one in which each team took the lead twice. Such a finish couldn't have been pictured at halftime, when the teams were tied at 7-7.

Ultimately, though, the only lead that mattered came when the scoreboard clock hit 0:00. And that lead belonged to McKinley, which had entered the fourth leading 10-7.

“We were just going up and down the field going, ‘You’ve just got to believe,’” said McKinley coach Ron Johnson, whose team will take an 8-2 record into the playoffs, while he improved his own personal mark against the Tigers to 3-2 while at McKinley. “Our kids did not doubt.”

Massillon took its first lead of the game on its second offensive play of the fourth quarter, when Kyle Kempt hit a wide-open Tre Hendricks for a 28-yard touchdown to give the Tigers a 14-10 lead at the 11:14 mark of the fourth. It was the second wide-open 28-yard scoring pass Kempt threw in the game, as he also hit Winters on one to tie the game at 7-7 in the second quarter.

Kempt was 10-of-18 for 149 yards with two scores and one interception.

“They were playing man defense,” Hall said of the two Tiger touchdown passes. “When you do hit the middle of the field, there’s no one there. It’s a track meet. Those two plays, that’s what it boiled down to.”

McKinley answered with a scoring drive of its own, marching 63 yards in 10 plays to lead 16-14 on a Foster-to-Terrance Burt 5-yard pass at the 7:27 mark of the fourth. The score came on a fourth-down play.

Foster finished 13-of-20 for 144 yards with two TDs and an interception.

“He manages the game well,” Hall said of Foster. “He doesn’t turn the ball over. For the most part, he had a game-winning drive there and he threw some crucial balls there for big plays.”

The Tigers needed their own fourth-down conversion on what they thought was their winning drive. Facing fourth-and-2 from their own 42, Kempt hit Ernie Baez on a crossing pattern for a 15-yard gain to the McKinley 43.

“We just ran what we call a whip route — misdirection route — to their man coverage,” Hall said. “Ernie got enough space to get open.”

On the next play, Winters ran through the McKinley defense as if it had been parted like the Red Sea. By the time Winters crossed the goal line, the orange-clad faithful in the stands were in a delirium, thinking the Victory Bell was coming back to Massillon.

Instead, it was merely the prelude to one final swing of momentum, one that left those in red and black, and not orange and black, savoring a win on this afternoon.