

J-Hawks make breakthrough playoff flight

Written by Clete Campbell

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MOUNT VERNON – Valentino Green ran in fifth gear without brakes Wednesday night, as if he was trying to outrun the Union Pacific trains barreling alongside Ash Park.

“I had to fight for my team,” he explained, “they fight for me.”

Fittingly, Green and the Jefferson J-Hawks never stopped running full speed en route to a breakthrough playoff victory. For this victorious, special feeling and moment were 23 years in the making.

Playing the same brand of thunder-and-lightning running football that carried them here, the J-Hawks scored their first postseason victory since 1992 with a 61-43 super shootout victory over Dubuque Senior.

Quarterback Jared Eivins scored four touchdowns, the dazzling Green produced 234 yards of electric offense plus a hat trick of scores, and Devonte Taylor delivered a game-sealing 24-yard interception return as the J-Hawks (7-3) scored a milestone program victory.

"We've wanted to change history and tradition at Jefferson," said Eivins, a veteran of the J-Hawks' recent hard times.

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The triumph was an especially sweet reward for Coach Brian Webb, the architect behind the J-Hawks' stunning revival. Webb guided Jefferson through rough 1-8 campaigns in 2012 and 2013 and kick-started the program's turnaround with last year's ground-breaking 4-6 playoff run. But as Webb said, the J-Hawks have already turned the page toward their second-round playoff test next Monday.

This isn't the end, Webb said, only Jefferson's playoff beginning.

"It's rewarding, but this is not the end for us," Webb said. "This is not our end goal. We'll celebrate tonight, but we want to win the next one. We've got a short turnaround. We've just got to keep grinding."



The first quarter and much of the first half of this playoff dual of Mississippi Valley Conference foes belonged to Senior (4-6), as the Rams sharply executed their option-driven running game. Senior marched 11 plays and 63 yards on its opening drive, striking first blood on Jacob Osterberger's 15-yard run up the middle off a beautifully sold QB option keeper by Lee Bonifas.

With the Senior defense delivering a clutch hold on fourth-down-and-2 from their own 42, the Rams kept the early momentum and cashed their next drive into another seven points. Bonifas – who was absolutely brilliant early – doubled Senior's early advantage to 14-0 with a sweet 21-yard fade scoring pass to an alone Shane Sweeney. The play worked to perfection as the J-Hawk secondary bit on the pass going to a receiver over the middle.

The J-Hawks were anything but rattled. Jefferson's offense kept calm and retaliated with a

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73-yard end zone push capped by Tavian Rashed's 5-yard right scoring sweep.

Senior, sticking with its effective option game, answered with its third scoring drive in as many attempts. Bonifas' 1-yard goal-line surge extended the Rams' lead to 21-6.

Facing a must-score possession, Jefferson stayed in the game with a 87-yard, 10-play march set up by Eivins' 43-yard pass to Green. Jefferson sealed the drive with Eivins' second-effort 1-yard push over the goal-line.

Two missed extra points left Jefferson in a 21-12 hole heading to halftime, but unshaken on how to turn the game around.

"We had a lot of confidence. We know we can score points fast," Green said. "We knew we had to go out and score fast and get the first punch in (in the third quarter)."

No one knew how stunning the swing would be. Jefferson opened the tide-turning third quarter with a bang on Manny Olutunde's adrenaline-fueled 58-yard kickoff return. Olutunde's fireworks became even bigger when a Senior horse-collar tackle penalty tacked another 15 yards onto the return and set Jefferson up at the Rams' 16-yard line.

"Anytime No. 34 (Olutunde) gets the ball, big things are going to happen," Webb said.

Two plays later, Eivins powered into the end zone from 4 yards out for a pivotal score that drew Jefferson within 21-19 and served as the latest salvo in a back-and-forth gridiron prize fight in which both defenses played shaky bend-but-don't-break football. The Rams' 'D' broke more often than the J-Hawks in the second half.

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Four minutes after Eivins' score, Green jetted in on a 6-yard power sweep to give Jefferson its first lead at 27-21. Jefferson blocked Senior's punt attempt on its ensuing failed possession, and 98 seconds later was ahead 33-21 following Eivins' pretty 31-yard fade scoring pass to Green.

"It was a roller-coaster, back-and-forth game," Senior coach Dale Ploessl said. "We just gave up too many big plays.

Jefferson's game-changing 28-point run saw the J-Hawks score four touchdowns in 6:30. The Rams, making their third playoff appearance in four years, couldn't keep a firm handle on Jefferson's elusive option running game, which rumbled for 280 yards with Green (103 on just seven carries) leading the way.

"We couldn't stop a lot of things defensively, but we had gut-check time at halftime," Webb said. "Right now, we're pretty electric on offense."

Still, behind Bonifas (who produced 284 yards of offense and five touchdowns), the Rams refused to go quietly into the chilly October night. Bonifas hit Collin Seymour on a 62-yard hook-and-ladder scoring pass and snuck into the end zone on a 1-yard QB keeper to give Senior a 35-33 lead with 1:47 left in the wild third quarter.

But the decisive fourth quarter was almost all Jefferson – to the tune of a wowing 28 points.

The J-Hawks' running game -- getting stellar work from its offensive line -- pummeled and gashed the Rams' winded defensive line at will for big gains. Eivins' 2-yard score with 9:26 left put Jefferson back in front at 41-35.

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Eivins capped his huge game with a 24-yard score with 7:24 to play that upped the J-Hawk lead to 47-35. Green added a 55-yard breakaway score and Taylor's Pick-6 with 4:19 left put the game on ice.

From there, there was no stopping the J-Hawks from flying onward to a place they haven't visited in a generation: A playoff victory.

“This is great momentum, but we still have a lot more to accomplish,” Eivins said.

JEFFERSON 61, DUBUQUE SENIOR 43

. DS CRJ

First downs 17 14

Rushes-yards 53-216 41-280

Passing yards 163 154

Comp-Att-Int 10-24-2 5-9-0

Fumbles-lost 2-0 1-1

Punts-avg. 4-46.2 2-47.0

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Penalties-yards 4-49 5-35

Senior 7 14 14 8 - 43

Jefferson 0 12 21 28 - 61

Scoring plays

DS – Jacob Osterberger 15 run (Ben Kubitz kick)

DS – Shane Sweeney 21 pass from Lee Bonifas (Kubitz kick)

J – Tavian Rashed 5 run (kick failed)

DS – Bonifas 1 run (Kubitz kick)

J – Jared Eivins 1 run (kick failed)

J – Eivins 4 run (Zeb Render kick)

J – Valentino Green 6 run (Devonte Taylor pass from Eivins)

J – Green 31 pass from Eivins (pass failed)

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S – Collin Seymour 62 pass from Bonifas (Kubitz kick)

S – Bonifas 1 run (Kubitz kick)

J – Eivins 2 run (Green pass from Eivans)

J – Eivins 24 run (run failed)

J – Green 55 run (Render kick)

J – Devonte Taylor 28 interception return (Render kick)

S – Bonifas 41 run (Shane Sweeney pass from Bonifas)

Individual statistics

Passing

Senior – Lee Bonifas 10-24-2, 163.

Jefferson – Jared Eivins 5-9-0, 154.

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Rushing

Senior – Bonifas 26-121, Jacob Osterberger 17-73, Sam Schnee 9-24, Team 1-(-2).

Jefferson – Valentino Green 7-103, Tavian Rashed 10-65, Eivins 10-54, Manny Olutunde 7-37, Mason Short 5-25, Team 2-(-4).

Receiving

Senior – Shane Sweeney 6-65, Collin Seymour 2-83, Tucker Mai 1-12, Schnee 1-3.

Jefferson – Green 3-131, Short 1-17, Olutunde 1-6.