

Ypsilanti Lincoln recovers late fumble, hangs on for a 33-32 win over Dexter

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The best things come to those who wait? Whoever said that never waited out the slow-melting glacier of losing that has blanketed the Ypsilanti Lincoln High School football program for a generation.

Since the Railsplitters most recent two-game winning streak - which came in Week 3 of the 1998 season - losing football has chewed up and spit out enough players and coaches to fill 10 Lincoln yearbooks. If only all of them could have been present Friday at Lincoln, the celebration might still be going.

After defeating Tecumseh last week, Lincoln led Dexter by one point following a Dreadnaughts touchdown with 1:45 left in the game. Electing to go for two points - and the win - Dexter gave the ball to junior fullback Travis Chaffee, who appeared to be bulldozing a path toward the end zone.

But Lincoln linebacker Michael Glenn swatted the ball out of Chaffee's hands, into the air, and onto the end zone turf, where the ball and the game went up for grabs. After about 15 seconds, senior linebacker Ismail Samii emerged from a pileup with the football. Referees signaled Dexter's two-point try had failed - Lincoln would hold on for a 33-32 win.

"We worked hard all week and deserved this win real bad," said Lincoln sophomore running back George Miller, who was hunched over in pain and having trouble breathing after playing the game with injured ribs. He rushed for 121 yards and a touchdown on 12 carries. "It shows we're not the same old Lincoln."

Sure, Lincoln might be the first-ever 2-2 football team to give its coach, Chris Westfall, two water-jug baths. But if anyone has earned the right for an exaggerated celebration, it's Lincoln - make that, first-place Lincoln.

Of course, Lincoln also looked for a while like the same-old team Miller referenced. Dexter scored the game's first two touchdowns on an 11-yard run by Sequoyah Burke-Combs and a 3-yard run by senior quarterback Alex McMurray, taking a 12-0 lead.

Even when something went right for Lincoln - senior quarterback Andrew Dillon connected with Marcus Williams, who had never before played receiver, for an 82-yard touchdown pass - Dexter came right back with another touchdown. Senior Mason Mabry intercepted a Dillon pass and returned it 27 yards for a touchdown.

Dillon gave the Railsplitters hope going into halftime, though, when he broke loose for a 57-yard touchdown run with 57 seconds left in the second quarter. Lincoln trailed 18-13 after a mixed first-half performance.

"There's nothing about a slow start that a fiery halftime can't fix," Westfall said.

Lincoln took its first lead early in the second half, when Dillon completed a 25-yard touchdown pass to senior Ryan Bottorff, making the score 19-18. Lincoln extended its lead to 26-18 on the first play of the fourth quarter when Miller ran for a 25-yard touchdown.

Dexter came back, though, with the first of two touchdowns by Chaffee. His 6-yard run set up a two-point conversion that tied the game at 26-26 with 7:41 left.

Lincoln responded with a 12-play, 3:22 drive. Running four plays that went at least 10 yards, Lincoln took little time making its way inside Dexter's 10-yard line. But once inside the red zone, Lincoln struggled to score, pushing it to fourth-and-goal from the 4.

"It was a happy, but nervous huddle," Miller said. "We had to keep each other calm. Without (Dillon), I don't know if we would have made it through."

Following a timeout, Dillon completed a 4-yard touchdown pass to sophomore Kendall Thompson for what turned out to be the game-winning score - and the most clutch win Lincoln has pulled off in a long time.

"We're learning," said Dillon, a four-year varsity player who rushed for 122 yards and threw for 184 yards and three touchdowns. "We've never been in that situation before. We're learning what we need to do to get a big win."

As it turned out, this big win required a forced fumble and a recovery in the end zone - a play that tested Westfall's heart.

"We're lucky the ball hit the ground, though it was terrifying," he said. "I'm thinking we're either taking a knee, or running our 2-minute offense."

It turned out to be a rare moment for the Lincoln offense to enjoy taking a knee and running out the clock.

"It's very exciting," Westfall said. "These kids have a monkey on their backs from all the losing - we're helping them break it."