

T.J. regroup, runs past Franklin Regional

By Travis L. Pickens

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PITTSBURGH - Franklin Regional coach Greg Botta knew his team had to accomplish two things to beat Thomas Jefferson on Friday night in a WPIAL Class AAA semifinal.

The Panthers (10-2) did neither.

Thomas Jefferson quarterback Dominic DeCicco ran for 96 yards on 18 carries, threw for another 41 and accounted for half of the Jaguars' four touchdowns in a 30-9 win in front of a standing-room only crowd at North Hills' Mortorelli Stadium. Thomas Jefferson (12-0) advances to the WPIAL final at Heinz Field against Blackhawk on Friday at 4:30 p.m.

"DeCicco is a threat every time he touches the football," Botta said. "We knew we had to contain him and we didn't do that."

Botta said the other key was to avoid turnovers. For a half, the Panthers did.

But early in the second half, the turnover bug bit.

Trailing 13-9 in the middle of the third quarter, Franklin Regional wide receiver Joey Rockovich made a diving, juggling catch of quarterback Lenny Gallo's pass. The pitch-and-catch put the Panthers at Thomas Jefferson's 22 yard line. The next play Matt Giugliano ran a sweep around the right side for three yards but fumbled the ball away near the sideline.

Five plays later DeCicco found Dan Giegerich wide open for a 31-yard touchdown pass and a 20-9 lead. The next series, Gallo fumbled at his own five and defensive lineman Adam Zampatti recovered. Four plays later the Jaguars took a 23-9 lead thanks to Mike Pappas's 29-yard field goal.

"We just kept building that lead up," Thomas Jefferson coach Bill Cherpak said. "Physically I think we wore them out in the second half, I really do. We just made some plays."

Sophomore running back Brian Baldrige, who finished with 134 yards on 17 carries, made a lot of those plays. The 5-foot-9, 175-pounder found the end zone from a yard out four seconds into the second quarter, trimming the Panther lead to 9-6.

"We got off to a little bit of a slow start," Baldrige said. "We just kept sticking with the plays that they would give us. We kept running the same play and got our offense going. We were pretty much unstoppable after that."

The next series, Thomas Jefferson went 76 yards on 14 plays capped by DeCicco's 11-yard touchdown run. The Jaguars, who threw only once on the drive, ate up 6:10 in taking a 13-9 into the locker room.

"The biggest thing we wanted to do was control the line of scrimmage," Baldrige said. "Last year (Franklin Regional) was a lot more physical on the line at Heinz Field. That was our main goal."

In the first quarter it was the Panthers - who beat Thomas Jefferson, 31-14, in the WPIAL final last year - that dictated the game. Franklin Regional opened in a no-huddle, five wide receiver spread offense and promptly marched 71 yards for a touchdown. But Gallo's 9-yard touchdown pass to Trevor Wildman was negated due to an illegal shift.

"Penalties were crucial to us," said Botta, whose team converted only one of three red zone trips into points. "You play a team like (Thomas Jefferson) you've got to be almost flawless. We were far from it."

The Panthers led, 9-0, after the first quarter on the strength of a safety and a 1-yard touchdown run by Lee Howatnek. But it was all downhill from there as Thomas Jefferson's defense stiffened and Franklin Regional went to its normal shotgun, two-back set.

"They hadn't shown that (offense) on any of the films we had seen," Cherpak said of the Panthers' five-wide spread attack. "They run some spread with the one back but not with five wide (receivers). That caught us a little off guard until we adjusted."

Thomas Jefferson 30, Franklin Regional 9

Franklin Regional	9	0	0	0	-	9
Thomas Jefferson	0	13	10	7	-	30

First Quarter

FR - Team safety. Pappas tackled in end zone, 6:05

FR - Howatnek 1 run (Sundin kick), 2:03

Second Quarter

TJ - Baldrige 1 run (kick failed), 11:56

TJ - D. DeCicco 11 run (Pappas kick), 0:50

Third Quarter

TJ - Giegerich 31 pass from D. DeCicco (Pappas kick), 6:33

TJ - Pappas 29 field goal, 3:25

Fourth Quarter

TJ - Giegerich 3 run (Pappas kick), 7:34

TEAM STATISTICS

	FR	TJ
First downs	12	15
Rushing attempts-yards	30-116	52-284
Passes (Comp.-Att.-Int.)	9-20-0	2-6-0
Yards passing	124	41
Total yards	231	325
Fumbles-lost	2-2	1-1
Penalties-yards	9-77	7-65
Punts-average	4-12	0-0

INDIVIDUAL STATISTICS

Passing: Franklin Regional - Gallo 9-20-124-0. Thomas Jefferson - D. DeCicco 2-6-41-0.

Rushing: Franklin Regional - Gallo 11-73, Giugliano 4-26, Howatnek 9-12, Fox 4-3, Rockovich 2-2. Thomas Jefferson - Baldrige 17-134, D. DeCicco 18-96, Giegerich 13-40, Bota 3-10, Z. DeCicco 1-4.

Receiving: Franklin Regional - Segiel 3-45, Ward 2-29, Rockovich 1-32, Fox 2-18, Bevilacqua 1-(-9). Thomas Jefferson - Giegerich 1-31, Drager 1-10.