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Halloween no treat for Wolves as Trevians prevail 23-21

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Niles West's third consecutive trip to the IHSA Class 8A Playoffs ended in the same way as he previous two, with a first-round defeat, this time at the hands of CSL South antagonist New Trier. Junior Jon Barron's 17-yard field with two second remaining sealed a devastating 23-21 New Trier victory.

It was perhaps appropriate that the game was played on Halloween, as Robert Naughton Field in Northfield became a haunted house and the site of loss to the hated Trevians that was eerily similar to a 22-21 defeat two weeks previous.

In fact, just about the only difference was that this defeat ended the season for the Wolves and the football playing days of many West seniors. The 23-21 loss left a sinking feeling in pit in the stomachs of the team and the many fans that made the 20-minute trip north to cheer on their Wolves.

The game started with an ominous feel as West fumbled the opening kickoff. Although they recovered, the Wolves saw their opening drive end in a punt. It didn't take too long for the Trevians to get deep into Wolves territory and didn't take long for the game to see its first pivotal play. With the Trevians facing a third and five from the West 36-yard line, a dump pass to junior halfback Matt Kelly exceeded all Trevian hopes as it not only picked up the first down, but went all the way to put New Trier up 7-0 midway through the opening frame.

The Wolves' ensuing drive ended in disaster when the intended receiver, junior Matt Hohs, slipped on the turf and an opportunistic New Trier defender picked off the pass. Back on the attack, New Trier found its way back into the red zone, but the Wolves' defense scored a moral victory when it forced the Trevians to settle for a Barron field goal. Nevertheless, the Wolves trailed by two scores and had shown little-to-no life on offense.

The Wolves then drove to the Trevian 40-yard line, where they were faced with fourth down. Head coach Mark Egofske made a critical decision, opting to spark his team by going for it. His faith was rewarded with a 40-yard touchdown run by junior sensation Rashard Mendenhall. With a successful extra point, the Wolves were back in the game, and the drama had just begun.

On its next possession, the Trevians drove deep into West territory, but the Wolves' defense again responded by tightening up and

forcing the Trevs to settle for another field goal attempt. This time, Barron shanked the kick, and the Wolves took over down still down by three with enough time left in the first half to set up a field goal attempt of their own. The offense didn't get as deep as it would have liked but was able give sophomore kicker Ryan Verissimo a chance to make a miraculous 50-yard kick. Verissimo displayed a lot of leg as the kick reached the goal posts, but it trailed wide left, and the teams headed into halftime with the score 10-7 in favor of New Trier.

The Trevians opened the second half with possession and had seemingly taken back the momentum when senior quarterback Dusty Napoleon found fellow senior Ryan O'Rourke for a 42-yard touchdown pass, but a holding penalty against New Trier gave the defense new life. Not to be denied, the Trevians converted on fourth down, keeping the drive alive for Kelly, who scored from eight yards out to restore the 10-point Trevian lead.

New Trier didn't have the 10-point advantage for long as senior quarterback Mike Pantazis placed a deep pass into the arms of Rashard Mendenhall who scored his second touchdown of the evening, this time a 62-yard reception on the first and only play of the drive. The score put the Wolves back within three points with 8:31 remaining in the third quarter.

On the subsequent drive, the Trevs got into the red zone again, but yet again, the West defense placed the clamps on the New Trier offense and forced Barron to try his third field goal of the night. The kick was good, and New Trier was up by six. Although the Trevians had extended their lead, the defensive effort was still big because West was still down by only one score.

The Wolves' following drive ended with another field goal attempt, this one from 41 yards away. We'll never know if Verissimo could've done it, because the snap was high and the drive was over.

Undaunted and needing a crucial stop, the Wolves' defense answered the bell, stopping the Trevians dead in their tracks and forcing a punt.

West couldn't capitalize offensively and was forced to punt.

However, the Niles West defense again denied the Trevs on their next possession and gave the offense the ball back as the stage was set for arguably the most dramatic four minutes in Niles West football history.

The brothers Mendenhall, Rashard and senior Walter, joined forces to take the Wolves down the field as they had done all year. Despite their efforts, West was faced with a fourth and four at the New Trier 24-yard line. It was then that an unlikely hero emerged. Matt Hohs redeemed himself for his earlier gaffe and then some when he sneaked through the defense and was wide open for Pantazis' throw. Hohs promptly ran in for the touchdown, and the Wolves led for the first time all night. With 2:54 remaining, the defense dug in to stop New Trier one more time. Déjà vu anyone?

The final New Trier drive started with good field position and quickly the Trevians had got down to the West 25-yard line. A screen pass to Kelly led to a 15-yard gain and put the Trevs at the 10 with just 46 seconds left. A Kelly run fell just short of the goal line with five ticks left on the clock, but the Trevians had a timeout left, and they were able to stop the clock and set up a 17 yard chip shot. Barron's kick was true with two seconds left.

The ensuing kickoff return, much like the season as a whole, was nothing short of wild, and after several laterals and an illegal forward pass, the game, season and football careers of many were over.

The mood in the Niles West end zone after Egofske's post-game speech was one of raw emotion. It was as if all the seniors had realized at the same time that it was over for almost all of them and that they were to never put on pads and helmets again. Even the biggest men on the team were inconsolable as only the sound of muted weeping could be heard. Some could hardly stand and needed to be helped off by coaches and teammates. Likewise, the stands were filled with watery eyes of parents and students alike as the season ended.

Assistant coach Mark Rigby tipped his hat to the Trevians. "They saw in the last game [our offensive motion], and this time they put guys in motion almost every play. And, their quarterback is a good one," Rigby said.

Egofske was saddened by the end of the season, but took solace in the team's bright future, "You feel horrible for these kids," Egofske said, "but we have Rashard [Mendenhall], good quarterbacks and a stable of good young players [returning]."

The future does indeed look bright for the Wolves, and in ten short months, they'll be back at it again.

