

Metro-East Lutheran Opens Eight-Man Football Era in 26-8 Loss to Rockford Christian Life

by Colin Feeney, Contributing Sports Writer
September 1 2019 6:06 PM

SEE VIDEO:





EDWARDSVILLE – The new era of eight-man football at Metro-East Lutheran opened up on Saturday afternoon at Knights Field, and the Knights gave a very good accounting of themselves despite dropping a 26-8 decision to Rockford Christian Life.

Metro-East decided to go to eight-man football this past spring, and the Knights played hard and never gave up throughout the game, which could be a sign of things to come in the future. In the end, the Eagles came up with many of the answers.

“It’s a tough, hard-nosed team,” said Knights coach Bob Keplar. “I mean, they’ve got some kids that play hard, they bring it. For us, we had a lot of athletes, but a lot of new-to-football kids, so today was kind of a learning experience. It was a good defensive show today on our behalf, in my opinion. I think that our defense did really good, it was bad conditions on the field; it was real muddy. Offensively, it was a nightmare, because you couldn’t get footing. The ball was slick, I mean, we had a lot of issues with that. But all in all, for the first week, I mean, obviously, I want to win, but it’s a learning experience. We’re going to go into next week, try to make some improvements, and make things better.”

Keplar singled out some of his players for good performances on the day.

“I’d say Tyler Williams was definitely, by far, one of our best players today,” Keplar said. “He ran the ball well, he made a lot of key tackles, he was our big hitter. He took a lot of lumps and bruises, that’s why he didn’t come out much in the second half, because, I mean, the kid was just taking a beating. Outside of that, we had a couple of players that played OK, not their best games ever, but like I say, Zach Keplar, he’s played better games, made some good plays here and there, but we’ve got to have our kids that are our key kids, they’ve got to step up 110 percent.”

It was indeed a very physical and bruising game, and a number of Knight players were injured during the course of the game, including a pair of key backfield players in Williams and Xavier Miller.

“And it really put a hurting on our backfield,” Keplar said. “Some of our speed kids were out, which kind of put us in a jam with some of the plays, so it limited what I could call. So, when you start running thin on your depth like that, it changes things. So, unfortunately, we could never really bounce back from it.”

Keplar also talked about some of the positives of the game that worked well for Metro-East.

“I thought, overall, our blocking was pretty good,” Keplar said. “We really didn’t have a lot of pressure from the interior. On most of it, it was that number 32 (John Boeke) at linebacker, I mean he was a big, aggressive kid, and he met us on the edge, and he did what he was supposed to do. I say, when you’ve got a mismatch, I’ve got my smaller, faster kid at wing because of his speed, but he can’t deal with that size coming off the edge.”

Defensive end Jameson DeCarlo also helped to cause havoc on the Knights’ offensive attack.

“He was another fast kid on their behalf,” Keplar said. “He was a good, physical kid, and I heard that, when I was in the eight-man meetings, that a couple of athletic kids can make a big difference in this game. And it shows, that’s for sure. I think we can definitely play better football than we did today. I think today, it was our first game out, our first time with all these kids grouped together at the positions they’re in, and I think we’re going to get better each week.”

It was a very defensive – and quickly played – first half, as both sides played well defensively. The first score of the game came late in the first quarter when DeCarlo took off on a 59-yard touchdown run with 22 seconds left in the period, but the conversion was missed, leaving the score at 6-0 for the Eagles. Late in the second quarter, a

Christian Life drive climaxed with a seven-yard touchdown pass from Dylan Alley to Boeke, but a two-point pass fell incomplete, making the halftime score 12-0 in favor of the Eagles.

The Eagles recovered the second-half kickoff at the Metro-East 40, then after a penalty, went to work, with Boeke carrying the ball up the middle three straight times in impressive fashion to put the ball at the Knight 28. A bad snap and a pair of incomplete passes ended the drive, and the Knights took over. Metro-East couldn't advance the ball, and on fourth down, Boeke fielded a punt at his own 44, ran up the far side and went in the end zone for the touchdown, a return of 56 yards. A two-point conversion run was good, and the Eagles took a 20-0 lead with 6:38 left in the third.

The Knights' next possession started out promisingly, but penalties and a stout Christian Life defense held Metro-East at bay, but the Knights recovered a fumble at the Eagle 22 to get another chance. Three plays later, a 38-yard field goal attempt by Sebastian Beraldo was blocked, ending the drive.

Christian Life then recovered a Metro-East fumble in the fourth quarter and took only three plays to go 38 yards in 1:17, the first play being a 19-yard run on a keeper by Boeke, and the final play a seven-yard touchdown pass from Boeke to Alley with 5:15 left. DeCarlo was stopped on a two-point run, leaving the score 26-0 for Christian Life.

The Knights got on the board after the ensuing kickoff, as Ben Ide and Cameron Gusewelle made good runs, Gusewelle going 21 yards on a reverse to give the Knights a first down. Ide then took a handoff and went left, went down the sideline and ran 38 yards for the first Metro-East touchdown of the new era with 3:27 left. A two-point play failed, leaving the score 26-8, but Christian Life was flagged for unsportsmanlike conduct on the touchdown play, putting the kickoff at the Eagle 45.

The Knights recovered an onside kick to give them another chance to score, and both Zach Keplar and Ide ran the ball well, getting to the Christian Life 14. But on fourth down, a pass fell incomplete, and the Eagles took a knee on the last play to give them their 26-8 win.

The Knights start their inaugural eight-man season 0-1 and play on the road for the first time next Friday night at Champaign Judah Christian in a 7 p.m. kickoff.

"I'm hoping that it's going to be a dry field, so that won't be an issue," Keplar said with a laugh. "We can maybe get better footing. I'm hoping that Tyler's healthy, and he's back next week because he's a big part of our offense. And I think our defense did really good; I mean, if our defense improves each week, I think we're going to be better and better every time. Like I say, we just gotta keep plugging away day after day, and not

give up. I've been in some games where it's been a lot worse than that, so I'm not horrified. It's just the fact that I think it was a first-time experience, and hopefully, we've got that out of our system now, and we can play better."



[Dan Brannan also contributed to this story.](#)