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High Schools

Malvern roars back to stun Prep

By Rick O'Brien
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

With Malvern Prep trailing by three touchdowns midway through the second quarter, it looked as if coach Gamp Pellegrini might have to retract his declaration earlier this month — before St. Joseph's Prep became available for a Turkey Day meeting — that this squad was his best in 31 seasons at the school.

However, the Friars, battered on defense in the early going by a powerful rushing attack, ultimately showed they were indeed worthy of Pellegrini's praise. They tightened things up on defense, notched four straight touchdowns and fought past the stunned Hawks, 34-27, before a near-capacity crowd at Villanova Stadium.

Malvern, ranked No. 2 in Southeastern Pennsylvania by The Inquirer, finished the season with a 10-0 record. It was the program's fourth unbeaten season under Pellegrini. He guided the Friars to a 10-0 mark in 1980 and 1995, and they were 9-0 in 2001.

"That's an outstanding football team," Pellegrini said of St. Joe's, "but our kids really hung in there and never gave up. They never thought they were out of the game."

Last year on Thanksgiving Day, at the same venue, the Hawks spoiled Malvern's bid for perfection. St. Joe's rolled in the inaugural meeting, 33-6, and the Inter-Academic League champions had to settle for a 9-1 record.

"This is a great way to cap the season," Billy Conners, Malvern Prep's senior quarterback, said. "They're a

great team. I think we just had a little too much offensively for them."

That had a lot to do with the 5-foot-11, 175-pound Conners. The first-year starter completed 15 of 22 passes for a career-high 267 yards and four scores. In the second half, with the Friars in come-back mode, he converted all eight of his throws for 186 yards and three TDs.

"I have to give all the credit to my teammates," Conners said. "We have so many weapons on offense. I couldn't do it without them."

Conners, headed to Duke to play lacrosse, threw for 1,508 yards and 19 TDs in just 10 games this season. Yesterday, doubling as a cornerback, he had a pair of interceptions and was involved in three tackles (two solos).

Friars' Price delivers in the clutch

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On his winning touchdown reception, with 37 seconds to play, Malvern Prep's Joe Price, looking like a gazelle in an open field, sprinted across the middle and hauled in a 27-yard strike from Billy Conners.

While it appeared Price was in top form in the second half of yesterday's Thanksgiving Day matchup with St. Joseph's Prep, when he caught three touchdown passes to help spark the Friars to a 34-27 come-from-behind victory, he was actually not at peak capacity.

"I was cramping up a lot," Price said. "I had cramps in my left calf, the right calf, both of my hamstrings. That's why I didn't play much on defense."

Price was more than busy on offense.



Malvern Prep QB Billy Conners (5), who threw for four TDs and ran for one, is congratulated by teammate Bobby Panchisin.

"He's a wonderful leader, an outstanding football player, and a great kid," Pellegrini said.

The top target for Conners, tabbed as Malvern's most valuable player, was senior wideout Joe Price. In the sec-

ond half, he turned three of six receptions into scores. His TD catches covered 40, 71 and 27 yards.

The winning score came with 37.1 seconds to play. After the Friars moved the ball 46 yards on 10 plays, to the

St. Joe's 27, Conners stood tall in the pocket, waited and delivered the ball across the middle to Price.

Overall, Price totaled a career-best 171 yards on his seven catches. "It was such a meaningful game for us, espe-

cially because we came in here 9-0 last year and lost like we did," he said.

The No. 10-ranked Hawks (8-4) led, 21-7, at intermission. They scored on their second and third possessions, on a 34-yard pass from Mark Gubbialo to Dan Turner and a 7-yard run by Mike Yeager (30 carries for 204 yards, two TDs), to make it 14-0.

Of Malvern's second-half passing success, St. Joe's coach Gil Brooks said, "We were trying to pressure [Conners], but we couldn't get to him."

Nine other opponents, including five Inter-Ac foes, can relate to that.

St. Joseph's Prep 14 7 0 0 — 27
Malvern Prep 9 7 14 12 — 34
SJP: Turner 34 pass from Gubbialo (Skalamera kick)
SJP: Yeager 7 run (Skalamera kick)
SJP: Gubbialo 17 run (Skalamera kick)
MP: Conners 24 run (Trier kick)
MP: Mooney 17 pass from Conners (Trier kick)
MP: Price 40 pass from Conners (Trier kick)
MP: Price 71 pass from Conners (kick failed)
SJP: Yeager 15 run (kick failed)
MP: Price 27 pass from Conners (Trier kick)

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2008 MP 34 SJP 27 article on game and Price, box score

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