

HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL

Malvern wraps up magical year

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THE THOUGHT passes through Billy Connors' mind, as he puts it, every so often.

How could it not? The dude is one helluva football player. But when he enrolls next fall at Duke, the Malvern Prep senior will be doing so on a lacrosse scholarship.

"I love playing football. It's my No. 1 sport," Connors said. "But that's not the sport where I signed for a scholarship. It is what it is. When I get down there, we'll see what happens. Maybe I'll ask about being able to try out for football as a walk-on. Maybe free safety, strong safety . . ."

The occasion yesterday in front of 7,000-plus observers at Villanova Stadium was a clash between two of the city-leagues' most covered-in-stardust programs, Malvern and St. Joseph's Prep.

Malvern won, 34-27, but don't think for a minute, not even a second, that the path to a 10-0 final record was easy.

Prep, 7-0. Prep, 14-0. Prep, 21-0. Is that any way to try to make history?

"It was pretty emotional before the game," Connors said. "Coach [Gaspard "Gamp" Pellegrini] called us together and said how proud he was of this group. How he'd never seen a team as tight as this one, and how he'd never had

a connection with a team like he has with us.

"Falling behind like that definitely rocked us. You see things going down the drain. All you can do is not panic. I knew our offense could bail us out. We'd had quarters this year with 35 points, and there was still lots of time remaining. After you play your worst quarter of the year, the only place to go is up."

By game's end, Connors was 15-for-23 for 268 yards and four touchdowns — three to Joe Price (7-172) and one to CJ Mooney.

He began the comeback with a 34-yard, prehalftime scoring run and completed it — with 37.1 seconds remaining, no less — on a 27-yard pass to Price that broke a 27-27 tie. The winning drive, requiring 11 plays, covered 73 yards.

Soon, the Friars were setting new world records for the amount of elation energy expended and Pellegrini, the coach for 31 seasons, was saying, "This team is right at the top. There were three other undefeated teams, and other teams with great players. But this one, with all we did, is the best."

Connors was part of the early mess with an interception. (At cornerback, he later notched two of his own.) His approach was to remain calm while sternly making in-huddle points.

"I said we were going to chip

away," he reported. "I said we were going to move it down the field one play at a time and get on the board before halftime. We did that.

"When we came out for the second half, I said we were going to [steadily] move it down the field and score this time, too. And we did. And we had to really drive the ball. There weren't short fields off turnovers."

After intermission, Connors passed 8-for-8 for 187 yards and four touchdowns. Price snagged six of those passes, turning them into 165 yards.

"I didn't think about how I was having a perfect half," Connors said. "I just wanted to keep bringing us back. What Joe did was no surprise. All year he did that."

Connors finished with eight carries for 42 yards. James Connelly (13-87) and Neil Willis (11-42) helped out. For Prep, Mike Yeager exploded for 193 yards and two touchdowns, including a 15-yarder to tie the game with 5:48 left, on 28 carries. Mark Giubilato accounted for 154 yards of rushing/passing, along with a score in each category.

This sweetheart of a game featured 1,106 all-purpose yards, with SJ Prep the winner at 584.

Connors finished the season 70-for-96 (72.9 percent) for 1,509 yards (15.7 per attempt) and 19 TDs. Price turned 36 catches into



DAVID SWANSON / Staff photographer

Malvern's Joe Price catches winning pass vs. St. Joseph's Prep.

939 yards (26.1) and 13 scores.

As always in recent years, Pellegrini has heard the rumors that he's thinking about retiring. His record in 42 seasons — including 1967-69 at long-gone St. Thomas More, his alma mater, and 1970-77 at SJ Prep, where current boss Gil Brooks was one of his players — is 278-144-9. He's 219-86-8 at Malvern. ★

"Not sure yet," he said. "Have to think about it."

Connors, meanwhile, has not come to terms with the season's end. And he's not alone.

"After the game," he said, "we were all talking about how we wish we could keep on playing. But when you think about what we did . . . It's pretty humbling." ★

2008 end of year Billy Connors article

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