

Pelegrin helps Unionville defense make great strides

EAST MARLBOROUGH >> Defense has been the cornerstone of Unionville football since head coach Pat Clark came on the scene 14 years ago.

Heavy graduation losses, injuries and position changes severely tested that side of the ball this fall, but the Indians have steadily evolved into what Oxford coach Mike Means calls "a typical Unionville defense.

"Overall it is a really fundamentally sound, well-coached unit," he added.

It's the primary reason why the Indians are still alive in the quest to successfully repeat as the District 1 5A champions.

Despite having a sub-.500 regular season record, 11th seeded Unionville blanked No. 6 Springfield (Delco) 9-0 to advance to Friday's quarterfinal against another Central League favorite: No. 3 Radnor.

"Unionville's always been known for a hard-nosed defense. We just have a bunch of kids who've stepped up this season and have developed," said standout senior outside linebacker Alex Pelegrin.

"If your opponent can't score, they are going to have a hard time winning the game," Clark added. "I really believe we are always going to be in games because we defend. That is a part of our program philosophically."

But it's taken some time to get to that point. The Indians (5-6 overall) dropped their first three contests and clearly struggled to deal with a brutal schedule. In fact, four of Unionville's losses this season came to teams still alive in the playoffs (Garnet Valley, Academy Park, West Chester Rustin

and Downingtown East).

“Offense gets a lot of the glory but everybody who is still around are good programs that have a good tradition of playing defense,” Clark pointed out.

The Indians’ setbacks have come against opponents with a combined 51-14 record, but they are 5-3 since the shaky start. And when Unionville’s had success, the defense has been dominant, allowing an average of eight points in the five victories.

“Our kids just played really fast (at Springfield),” Clark said. “They take a great amount of pride in it. We still talk about having a zero-point mentality.

“Unfortunately, in this day and age of football, teams just want to get stops and get the ball back to their offense. We are not in the mood to give up any points.”

While many defenses seem content to give up yardage in the short passing game – which more and more offenses use as a replacement for a running attack – the Indians do not. They play tight, press-coverage on the outside, which allows Pelegrin and the rest of the linebacker corps to stuff the run and get after the passer.

“Our play has really taken off because everybody has a sense of urgency,” said Pelegrin, who leads the team in tackles. “Our coaches are constantly saying that we need to be firing on all cylinders, and that the little things are important. Some little things killed us in the regular season.”

The defense will have to be good once again in order to give the Indians a shot at Radnor. The Red Raiders are 9-2 overall, coming off the program’s first playoff win, and have a potent attack led by quarterback Sean Mullarkey and runner Matt Cohen.

“Their quarterback and halfback makes (Radnor) go,” Clark said. “They really make you defend the whole field. They have kids who can take it to the house every time they touch it. We’ve got our hands full. If we can’t get off the field on defense, we’ll be in for a long night.”

It presents a big challenge for Pelegrin and fellow linebackers Joe Fariello, Matt Julier and Gabe McLaughlin. A starting running back, Fariello is now filling in at the other outside linebacker spot for teammate Sam Schriver, who is out with a broken collar bone. Against Springfield, Pelegrin and Fariello each had an interception.

“It shows the difference between the regular season and postseason,” Pelegrin said. “We realize that we have to go full speed. There is no room for error. So to shutout a strong team like Springfield was a fantastic feeling.”

Clearly the leader of the defense, Pelegrin was an inside backer as a junior, but has seamlessly transitioned to the outside. Clark says that Pelegrin “lives in the weight room,” and apparently the work has paid off.

“We are not the biggest on defense, so everyone went hard in the weight room,” Pelegrin said. “We take it very seriously at Unionville. I believe weight training is the key to football because it translates to the field.”

By lifting weights for up to two hours a day, every day (except game days), the 6-foot, 194-pound Pelegrin is now better equipped to set the edge, and track down elusive ball carriers.

“At the end of last season, I weighed in at 205, but I had fat on me, and I was a lot slower,” he acknowledged. “In the off-season, I slimmed down but also bulked up muscle-wise. I have a lot more muscle than fat now. It’s helped with my speed, especially playing on the outside now.”

Also a starting outfielder for the Unionville baseball squad, Pelegrin is starting to get some interest from college recruiters, mostly at the NCAA Division II and III levels. And he is getting more and more snaps on offense as a fullback. Against Springfield, Pelegrin hauled in a pass for 10 yards and had four rushing attempts for 18 yards, including a clutch third down conversion in the fourth quarter.

But all season, he's turned heads as a defender.

"This year, Pelegrin makes the whole thing go for Unionville," Means said. "He does a phenomenal job of setting the edge and allows everyone else to play free and run to the football.

"He is a handful both in terms of his physicality and speed."