

28-22 Homecoming loss especially painful for seniors

By Cody Chrusciel

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There was no need to look at the scoreboard.

The look of disappointment on the face of any Rowan senior football player told the entire story after Saturday's 28-22 Homecoming loss to Montclair State on Senior Day.

"Coming into this game I knew, win or lose, this would be the last time to play here," said senior superback Ulysses Encarnacion. "You just want to go out on a high note, and being the last time I'll actually get to play on this home turf in front of the crowd, it kind of hurts and it's a little upsetting, but you have to make the best of it."

After Rowan's loss against Montclair, their fourth of the season, the Profs have effectively been eliminated from playoff contention. The last time Rowan failed to make the playoffs was in 2003. They haven't lost four games in a season since 1988.

Rowan had its chances against the Red Hawks (6-2, 3-2). With the Profs trailing 14-12 entering the fourth quarter, Montclair faced a third-and-seven from the Rowan 45. Red Hawks receiver Jeff Papcun caught a pass at the 39-yard line, broke what looked like a sure tackle, and sprinted in for the score to make it a 21-12 game in favor of Montclair.

Later in the quarter, the Profs defense forced the Red Hawks into a third-and-14. Quarterback Michael Jump's pass was incomplete to Papcun, but the Profs were flagged for a personal foul. The penalty, one of eight on the afternoon for the Profs, kept the drive alive and allowed the Red Hawks to score their final touchdown moments later, when Jump hit tight end Jeremy Mercer for a four-yard touchdown strike.

"You hate to lose on those type of plays," said Profs head coach Jay Accorsi following the game. "I think that's been the reason we've struggled this year. We haven't had some of those calls and we haven't been able to make big plays when we need to. That's obviously the difference between being 4-4 and possibly 8-0. It's a fine line."

The Profs lead the New Jersey Athletic Conference with 65 penalties.

"Penalties are huge, especially in tight ball games like we've had all year long," said senior safety Eric Bailey. "We knew penalties were going to come back to bite us if we keep committing stupid silly ones. It's something you have to try to work out and we didn't do a great job of that today."

“It seemed like every time we got momentum there would be some kind of penalty,” said senior quarterback Joe Rankin. “That’s one thing that’s been plaguing us all year. We’ve been shooting ourselves in the foot. You can’t expect to score points when you’re shooting yourself in the foot.”

Rankin got the start for the Profs on senior day. After playing the opening series, which resulted in an interception, Rankin was replaced by the team’s normal starter, Tim Hagerty. The Profs, however, were forced to turn back to Rankin when Hagerty went down with an injury in the third quarter.

“Throughout the year they put Timmy in ahead of me, and throughout each game they tried to work me in a series each half and keep me loose throughout the games just so I’m always ready in case something like this does happen, and unfortunately it happened today for Timmy,” said Rankin, who completed six of 15 passes for 43 yards. “I just went in there and did my best. The offense didn’t produce enough and as a team we just didn’t get it done today.”

Injuries played a large role in the loss. Rowan entered the game without starting right guard Dan Lee. Against Montclair, fellow senior linemen Ted Allen and Brian Kenyon also went down with injuries. The team was also missing Rob Richardson, its starting superback, who is out for the season with a hip injury.

Ironically, Lee pushed the wheelchair-ridden Richardson onto the field prior to the game. Both seniors watched the loss helplessly from the sidelines.

“There’s no question they (the seniors) have been the heart and soul for a while. It’s been difficult for them because three out of their four years they’ve been conference champs and gone to the playoffs, so it’s much more disheartening for them than anybody else because they’ve experienced so much success,” said Accorsi. “You have to understand that we’re spoiled. Sometimes it doesn’t always go how you want it. Breaks don’t always go your way and it seems that this year they’re definitely not going our way and we’ve struggled putting teams away.”

“My experience has been great. It’s not easy to walk away from Rowan football,” said Rankin. “It would have been nice to get a win; we really wanted it, but things don’t always go the way you want in life. They’ve been four great years and I’ve met a lot of great people and played with the best teammates and I think everyone would agree with me when I say that.”

Rowan closes out the season with two more games on the road. This Saturday, the Profs (4-4, 2-3) travel to New York to take on Cortland State (6-2, 5-1). The team closes out the 2007 campaign on Nov. 10 at William Paterson.