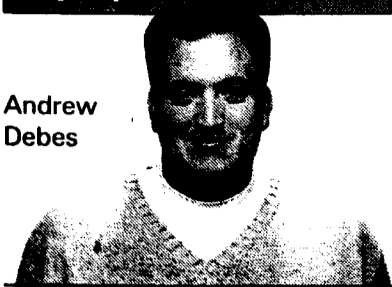


My opinion



Andrew Debes

Pa. pulls off comeback at Big 33

The Pennsylvania team, which started seven Penn State recruits, edged Ohio for an unusually close 21-20 victory in the Big 33 Football Classic.

By NICK ZULOVICH
Collegian Sports Writer

HERSHEY — With six minutes left in Saturday's Big 33 Football Classic and Ohio ahead of Pennsylvania, 20-14, some fans started heading for the exits, leaving a game that was not explosive by all-star game standards.

But then Ohio's Jason Flora missed the extra point attempt after a Sean Penny 20-yard touchdown run, and that crease of hope was all the Pennsylvania squad needed.

Those fans who tried to beat the traffic early out of Hersheypark Stadium missed Pennsylvania engineering a classic, game-winning drive with just 1:24 left.

After a Dan Ellis completion to Penn State recruit LaVar Arrington that got Pennsylvania to the 1-yard line, Ellis scored his second touchdown of the game on a quarterback sneak, giving Pennsylvania the win in dramatic fashion, 21-20.

"We knew we could score. We were moving the ball in the second half," Ellis, a Virginia recruit, said. "They were playing off on the slot man and we ran that a couple times. We couldn't have drawn up that drive any better."

That final drive for Pennsylvania began on its own 20-yard line after Ohio had missed a 47-yard field goal. With only one timeout left, Pennsylvania coach Jack McCurry said the game plan was to throw deep out patterns in order to work the sidelines.

McCurry's club executed the plan to perfection — Ellis found tight end and Penn State recruit John Gilmore on a 33-yard recep-



Collegian Photo/Kurt Redeker

LaVar Arrington dives into the endzone during the second quarter to score Pennsylvania's first points of the game and tie the score at seven.

The Pennsylvania squad beat Ohio, 21-20, in the Big 33 Football Classic Saturday at Hersheypark Stadium.

Arrington deals with pressures like a pro

HERSHEY — Just seconds after the final whistle blew at the conclusion of the Big 33 Football Classic, dozens of fans swarmed around LaVar Arrington as if he were a black hole producing an extraordinary amount of gravitational pull.

Soon after the autograph hounds started pushing commemorative Big 33 football cards in his face, sportswriters began thrusting microphones towards him while barking questions at him.

Are you happy with the game's outcome?

"We got the 'W,'" Arrington said, staying focused on the plastic football he was signing for a little girl. "That's all that counts. That's all that matters."

As time passed, more children surrounded the 6-foot-4, 228-pound running back. His massive shoulders and powerful arms gave him a commanding presence that made him stand out even amongst the other football players.

Arrington, who is generally considered to be the best prospect in the country, was obviously disappointed with the way the game went. The 1997 Big 33 Football Classic was supposed to be his game — his moment to shine. The kind of night young athlete's dream about.

However, Arrington's night turned out to be less than ideal.

"It was just a nightmare game for me," he said with a calm, but clearly irritated voice. Instead of being the focal point of Pennsylvania's offense, Arrington was little more than an afterthought.

He made the best of the four handoffs he was given, gaining 20 yards and scoring a touchdown, but those are not the numbers you would expect from such a highly decorated high school player.

"I didn't know what to expect coming into tonight," Arrington said as he gave one of his wristbands to a boy wearing a Penn State cap. "I came out here expecting a little more action, I know that."

With every declaration of his bitterness, the writers in the area got more and more excited. How often do you get to hear someone associated with the Penn State football program speak so honestly and so bluntly?

Seizing the moment, the writers around him kept firing questions at a machine gun pace.

Were you disappointed you didn't get more chances?

"Wouldn't you be?" he questioned as he looked up from the kids who surrounded him for the first time. "I am disappointed, but hey, I'm not going to complain."

Yet, it was obvious that is all he wanted to do.

Pennsylvania's coach, Jack McCurry, was Arrington's coach at North Hills High School. He knew the talent he had at his finger tips, but he used Arrington sparingly, citing that Ohio covered him too well — something Ohio reveled in.

Though they were disappointed they had lost, the pride the Ohio players gained from containing the man who is supposedly the best high school football player in the nation almost made up for losing the game.

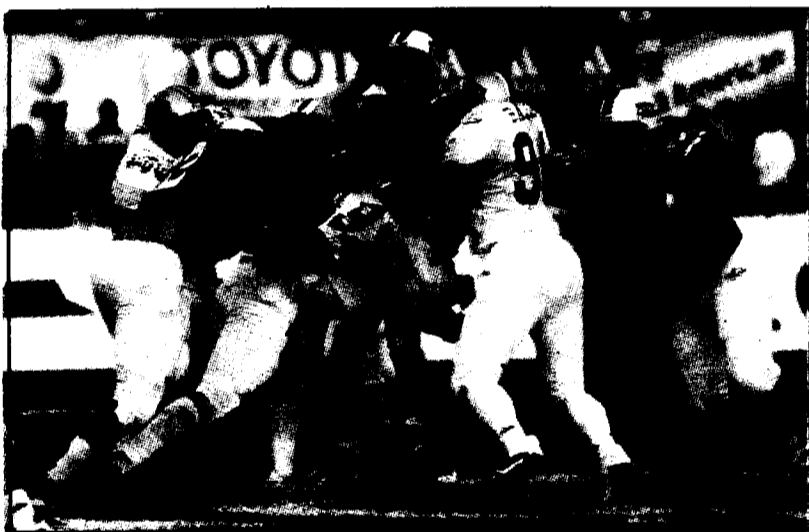
"I don't think he's worth all the hype," said Ohio receiver Chris Chambers. "All the newspapers and all the writers — everyone said he was the man. I think he's a good player, but he's not all that."

While it is true Arrington did not live up to the hype, it is safe to say he was not given many opportunities to show his abilities.

In the closing moments of the game, as Pennsylvania was driving down field for what would prove to be the winning touchdown, Arrington was given a chance to be the hero.

Arrington made a clutch catch near the end zone, but was ruled down on the 1-yard line, despite the fact that he knocked over the pylon. It set up Dan Ellis' game-winning touchdown, but simply defeating Ohio wasn't enough for

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Collegian Photo/David S. Spence

Pennsylvania quarterback Mike McMahon gets a throw off under pressure during the Big 33 Football Classic. Pennsylvania beat Ohio, 21-20, Saturday at Hersheypark Stadium.

Ohio-bound Combs stands out in Big 33

By NICK ZULOVICH
Collegian Sports Writer

HERSHEY — In a game designed to showcase the individual talents of some of the best high school recruits in the nation, Derek Combs showed why he was in the Big 33 Football Classic.

Combs lined up in the slot on the final play of first half of Saturday night's game. After being bumped at the line of scrimmage by a Pennsylvania linebacker, Combs ended up one-on-one with cornerback Travis Blomgren.

Blomgren and Combs were step for step with each other down the middle of the field when Ohio quarterback Andy Keating lofted the ball 30 yards down field. Blomgren got his hand on the ball first, trying to slap it away from Combs. But Blomgren fell to the turf instead of the pigskin racing to paydirt.

"We knew they were going deep. We just had a bad defensive breakdown," Blomgren said.

Blomgren got his revenge in the fourth quarter when he made a touchdown-saving tackle against Combs after he had blown past most of the Pennsylvania defense for a 44-yard gain.

Combs, the Ohio High School Player of the Year who will attend Ohio State this fall, finished his day at the Big 33 Football Classic as the MVP for the Ohio squad. Combs finished with 140 yards of total offense, 77 rushing and 63 receiving.

The first Ohio touchdown was also courtesy of Combs on a 10-yard run up the middle. He was hardly touched by a Pennsylvania defender, which both frustrated and impressed Pennsylvania coach Jack McCurry.

"He's an outstanding back that has the

ability to find a crease. My hat is off to him," McCurry said. "We wanted to try to funnel everything into the middle and try to get as many people as we could to the ball."

Ohio coach Vern Long knew the capabilities of his 6-foot-2, 188-pound tailback and said he put Combs in situations where he could shine.

"He's a great player, a great young man and is going to have a great college career," Long said. "He's talented, he can run and make things happen."

Combs hopes he can have the same success with the Buckeyes in the coming years.

He said the week of practice for the Big 33 Football Classic will only help when he gets to training camp.

"It's getting me used to running the ball in pads, conditioning and catching the ball," he said.

Though not pleased with the outcome, Combs gave some advice to the Ohio squad for the next year.

"It was competitive. I give a lot of credit to Pennsylvania," he said. "Next year, Ohio will have to represent a little better."

tion and followed that up with a 13-yard strike to Ben Erdeljac, driving Pennsylvania to the Ohio 34-yard line.

Two plays later Ellis tried to find Arrington on a post pattern over

the middle, but Ohio was called for pass interference, moving the ball to the Ohio 13 with only 10 seconds remaining in the game.

Ellis called Arrington's number again and Arrington thought he had scored the game-winner on his 12-yard reception in the right flat. Just before being pushed out of bounds by Ohio's Mike Clinkscale and Joe Cooper, Arrington appeared to touch the pylon as he dove for the right-front corner of the end zone, but the referees said his knee was down.

"I got in the end zone," he said emphatically after the game. "They didn't want to give me that, but I got in."

Up until the final drive of the game, Pennsylvania struggled offensively. McCurry's squad went three-and-out in three of its five possessions of the first half. The only offense Pennsylvania could muster was a 42-yard reception by Rutgers recruit Delrico Fletcher. Arrington scored on the ensuing play on dive over the left tackle.

Meanwhile, the Ohio offense had its way for most of the first half. On its first possession of the game,

Ohio MVP Derek Combs capped a 53-yard drive with a 10-yard touchdown run, giving Ohio a 7-0 lead.

Ohio went into the intermission with a 14-7 lead when Combs scored again on the last play of the first half, hauling in a 56-yard pass play from quarterback Andy Keating.

"Our quarterback suggested that play, and he certainly knew what he was doing," Ohio coach Vern Long said.

With 193 yards of total offense in the first half, Long said his was disappointed his club didn't put more than 14 points on the board in the first 24 minutes.

The lone Ohio turnover of the ball game was one reason Ohio did not score more often in the first half. Ohio drove down to the Pennsylvania 27-yard line, but Travis Blomgren intercepted Greg Zolman's pass in the end zone, spoiling Ohio's scoring opportunity.

"I just watched the quarterback's eyes and broke on the ball," Blomgren said about the play. "The quarterback looked right at the receiver."

Blomgren was one of the stars on

defense for Pennsylvania. He finished with four tackles and broke up three passes.

Penn State recruit Joe McKinney had a game-high eight tackles, but was not completely satisfied with his performance at middle linebacker.

"I could have done better," McKinney said. "It would have been nice to know a couple guys out of the game."

Toledo recruit Jim Barker and Cooper each had four tackles apiece for Ohio. Chad Huelsman had two tackles for a loss plus a quarterback sack.

The coaches, players and most of the 15,295 fans in attendance thought the Big 33 Football Classic would be a high-scoring affair. But the spectators who remained instead saw a storybook ending.

"I definitely thought it would be a high-scoring game," Pennsylvania offensive lineman Josh Mitchell said. "But it came down to being just a regular high school, hard core, gridiron game. I think it's because everybody worked so hard all week, the things weren't given up like they usually are."

Future Nittany Lions meet on and off field

By ANDREW DEBES
Collegian Sports Writer

HERSHEY — Brandon Short ran onto the Hersheypark Stadium field and grabbed Pennsylvania's LaVar Arrington after he made the 12-yard reception that set the stage for the climatic ending of Saturday's Big 33 Football Classic.

Short, a linebacker for the Nittany Lions, hugged the Penn State recruit and gave him a congratulatory slap on the helmet.

Short drove down to Hershey to watch some of his future teammates play in the high school all-star game.

He didn't leave disappointed.

"All the Penn State guys looked real good," Short said. "Hopefully they'll look that good when they get to State College."

Eight Lion recruits played Saturday, seven of whom were featured in Pennsylvania's starting lineup, including the USA Today Pennsylvania Player-of-the-Year, Arrington.

Arrington is widely considered the crown jewel of this year's recruiting class, but his role in the game was small.

Despite having limited opportunities, Arrington still managed to gain 30 all-purpose yards and score Pennsylvania's first touchdown of the game.

While Arrington's performance fell short of

the hype, fellow recruits John Gilmore and Travis Blomgren shined.

Gilmore had a game-high 71 receiving yards, including a clutch catch for 33 yards during Pennsylvania's final drive.

"Gilmore had a great game," Arrington said. "I'm real proud of him."

Even though his play was exceptional, Gilmore understands he has some more work to do before he will be able to give similar performances in Beaver Stadium.

"If they want to redshirt me, that's fine," Gilmore said. "It will just give me another year to develop."

On the defensive side of the ball, Blomgren played well, grabbing the only interception of the game. While he did get burned by MVP Derek Combs for a 56-yard touchdown reception at the end of the first half, his performance as a whole was solid.

Blomgren saw the game as a stepping stone to bigger and better things.

"I'm real excited about going to Penn State," he said. "This will help my confidence a lot when I get there."

Not only did the game showcase the talent of the new recruits, but it gave the players a chance to get acquainted. The week before the Big 33 Football Classic provided a lot of time for the players to hangout and get to know each other.

"We've become real good friends and gotten to know each other better," said Joe McKinney, a Lion linebacker recruit. "It's just brought us a little bit closer."

All the players agreed that Big 33 week provided a great bonding experience for the incoming recruits.

The only ones who are more excited about this recruiting class than Penn State fans are the players themselves.

"They are great guys and great athletes," Blomgren said. "This is a great group of guys going to Penn State this year. The next couple of years could be interesting."



Collegian Photo/David S. Spence