

Cheshire Academy beats Avon Old Farms for the NEPSAC 2023 Championship

By: Molly Golden

For the first time since 2016, Cheshire Academy football has brought home a NEPSAC title. Cheshire Academy beat top-ranked Avon Old Farms in a thrilling 35-28 battle on Friday, November 17th. Four-star South Carolina commit QB Dante Reno threw two touchdown passes, one of those passes being the game winner to Five star Penn State commit TE Luke Reynolds with 34 seconds left at a tie score.

The Cats have not been bowl eligible since 2016, something first-year head coach Bill Mella was able to do with his talented roster on the offensive and defensive side of the ball. Coach Mella held previous coaching positions at Avon Old Farms, so this game was personal to him. AOF was coming off an extremely successful season, with a regular season of 7-1 and one of the nation's top quarterbacks, Ryan Puglisi, a Four star Georgia Commit. This game was going to be a battle of top-rated talent, and the Cats knew this heading into the match-up.

After an almost scoreless first quarter, Avon's Owen Moreland ran a short five yards for the touchdown with 1:36 left. The Cats were struggling to find some offense until late in the second quarter with Dante Reno finding Luke Reynolds in the endzone for the touchdown to tie it up 7-7. Avon was able to respond back fast with Puglisi finding Connor Cronin for a 13 yard pass to bring AOF up 14-7 with less than 30 seconds left before halftime. Not until Reno, Reynolds and LB Eli Newby ran a hook and ladder, with Newby running 40 yards deep for the Cats touchdown heading into the half even at 14-14.

Heading into the second half at an even score, the Cats drove down the field quickly and ended with a short five-yard run from CB Chris White, a Yale commit, for the touchdown. Giving the Cats their first lead of the game being up 21-14. AOF quickly responded with the 78-yard run from Moreland to even it up once again at 21-21, ending the CA lead. Not until Sophomore Tristain Washington, off of a kickoff return, headed all the way downfield for the touchdown, a 92-yard run which brought the Cats back up 28-21 with 1:12 left in the third quarter.

The Cats headed into a monumental fourth quarter with the lead. The Cat's defense was unstoppable in this matchup as well, racking up multiple turnovers, including a crucial stop midway through the quarter. However, this was not enough to stop the powerful Avon offense, who were able to find Kristian Strong for a touchdown. Avon was able to tie it up with 5:00 minutes left at 28-28. The Cats got the ball back and had five minutes to score, it was do or die. The cats were able to run the clock down and push downfield, but they still needed to score. With less than one minute remaining, Dante Reno hit Luke Reynolds with a 23-yard pass for the touchdown. Bringing the Cats up 35-28, this was the pair's second touchdown of the night and the game winner. The game was sealed with a Chris White interception, earning the Cats their first NEPSAC Championship in 8 years.

Luke Reynolds knew he had that game winning catch, he had this to say about it "Reno and I actually came out pregame and had some catches just like it, it was another day in the office...I knew I had it, I caught the ball, put my feet down, turned my body a little bit." Videos on the catch have been circling social media for weeks, with one racking up over 30,000 views. Captain Bryce Hruibac was overcome with emotions after the win, this was his last career football game at Cheshire so he was taking it all in. "The feeling is unreal, I have never won a football championship in my life. This was selfishly my last game and I wanted to go out with a bang and we did that...There is no better way to end it on a championship win." Speaking of defense, Eli Newby, a veteran on the team, performed extraordinarily on the defensive and offensive side of the ball. He was nothing but grateful after the win. "I'm feeling amazing, you see the vibes out here and all the smiling faces, I'm glad we could end like this." Newby was a part of the final play of the game and knew he had it in him to get the job done. "There was a lot of emotion and we had to get the job done and there was only one way to do it." Quarterback Dante Reno transferred to Cheshire but fell into the brotherhood instantly as a leader on and off the field, he knew his team had it in them to shock the world. "I love these guys and it was a great team win, nobody really thought we could beat these guys, but it was a great team win and I'm super proud of them." Reno was on the same page as Reynolds in the game winning touchdown and he was extremely confident in the play and never felt better. "I knew throwing the ball that he would come down with it, we came out of the time out and was just like alright, lets throw the ball to luke and have him go get it and that's what he did and got the touchdown.

The Cats ended their season 7-2, with wins over schools such as Brunswick School and Taft School. A historic season for Head Coach Bill Mella and his team that will never be forgotten. Cheshire stars such as Dante Reno, Luke Reynolds, Nino Francivlla and Eli Newby are off to top Power 5 College Football schools. Future stars like Tristain Washington and Teriq Mallory are back for more years to come.

This is Molly Golden of Molly's Minute, signing out for Cheshire Academy Football 2023