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NIAGARA SPEARS ARE OVFL CHAMPS!

More than a few fans of the Niagara Landmark Window Spears wondered if it was a sign of things to come. When the torrential downpour finally subsided at the start of the second quarter of the Ontario Varsity Football League's championship game in London Saturday night, a magnificent rainbow appeared across the entire eastern length of T.D. Waterhouse Stadium. Sure enough, the rainbow touched the earth directly behind the Spears bench, and on this night the pot of gold came in the form of the T. Litzen Trophy as the Spears upset the defending champion Mississauga Warriors 25-22 in dramatic double overtime.

Both teams struggled for footing and field position early on, as the rains would not allow either team to settle into their game plan. Carlo Turavani's 16-yard field goal put the Spears on the Board in the first quarter and second quarter interceptions from Blake Allen and Mike Chmielewski helped keep the Warriors at bay. But as the field and the football dried, Mississauga quarterback Jamie Shaw found his rhythm, at one point completing consecutive passes of 43, 27 and 15 yards. However, a timely Spears sack forced the Warriors to settle for a 35-yard field goal from kicker Tomas Chester. A second field goal from 37 yards out staked the Warriors to a 6-3 halftime lead.

With the third quarter came a thick fog, at times completely obliterating both team's benches on the far side of the field. After Spears kicker Carlo Turavani missed from 39 yards out, the Warriors drove the length of the field, taking a 13-3 lead on Holden Morales' 1-yard plunge. Turavani field goals from 21 and 22 yards out narrowed the lead to 13-9, before Chester responded with a Warriors field goal from 17 yards out. With less than three minutes left in the game, it was the Spears' turn to drive the length of the field, as Spears quarterback Ben Wilsack found his own passing rhythm, connecting with Brett Maitland on a 12-yard touchdown catch to tie the game at 16. But the Warriors were far from done, again driving the length of the field, only to see quarterback Jamie Shaw fumble on the Spears 1-yard line. Spears safety Dan Baronas fell on the ball, sending the game into an overtime shootout.

The teams traded field goals on their first respective possessions, Turavani from 18 yards out and Chester from 23 yards. The Spears defense held tough on the next Warriors possession and Mississauga had to settle for an 18-yard field goal and a 22-19 lead. But on the very first play of Niagara's ensuing possession from the 35-yard line, Wilsack threw into double coverage, where the ball was tipped and bobbled by a Warriors defender before Spears receiver Adam Petrina grabbed it out of mid-air and fell into the end zone for the 25-22 victory.

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For Spears Head Coach Dave Howe, it was a storybook ending to a Cinderella season for the first year Varsity team. “It was so hard to see with the fog so thick. I just saw the bobble and then heard the roar of the crowd”, said Howe. “I didn’t know whether it was a touchdown or an interception until I could finally just make out the referee’s signal”.

As the new kids on the block, no one really knew what to expect from the Spears this season...including Howe. “We set some modest goals at the beginning of the season, but it really took us a couple of games to know we could even compete in this league”, said Howe. “We fought all season for a little respect, but we didn’t mind being the underdog either”. After quietly finishing with a 7-1 regular season record, the Spears still had to defeat very strong teams from Essex and Guelph in the playoffs. Even the OVFL website’s “Tipster” picked Mississauga as one touchdown favourites (albeit in overtime).

“To say I’m proud of these guys doesn’t even begin to describe”, says Howe. “They’ve shown so much character and determination all year, they really deserved this. I’m just so happy for the players, the coaches and the fans. It really is the ultimate Cinderella story”.

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Pictures are available upon request. Additional information on the Niagara Landmark Window Spears may be found at www.niagaraspears.com .

Additional information on the OVFL, including standings, schedules and comprehensive individual and team statistics may be found at www.ovfootball.ca .

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