

Warriors reach championship game with defensive dominance

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With about 90 seconds left in Del Norte High's 28-7 semifinal victory over Moreau Catholic Saturday night at Mike Whalen Field, all those tackles the Warriors had made against the Mariners turned into hugs for each other.

Coaches embraced coaches and players clung to players as Del Norte advanced to the championship game of the North Coast Section Division 5 playoffs, the first time the Warriors have played for an N-C-S title in generations, perhaps ever.

"I am so proud of these kids," said an emotional first-year head coach Nick White after the victory. "They have just played so hard all season long."

Del Norte will play Saturday at Hayward High School in the East Bay against Encinal High, the No. 1 seed in the bracket. The Warriors are the second seed. Both squads will come into the game with 11-1 records.

Moreau Catholic was hoping to advance to the championship game for the second season in a row. But Del Norte's defense emphatically slammed that door. The Mariners' vaunted running attack -- which had averaged almost nine yards per carry during the regular season -- averaged barely two against the Warriors.

"They (Moreau Catholic) has four or five kids that are D-1 (college) players," White said. "But our defense is so good, we just shut them down."

Offensively, Del Norte just grinded the Mariners' defense down with its relentless, battery ram of a rushing game. Del Norte's offense featured 54 plays from scrimmage. Fifty-one were runs. It paid off with 308 soul-sucking, clock-eating, momentum-building yards.

The Warriors scored twice in the second quarter, one on a short run by quarterback O.J. Calleja, the other on Kobe Mitchell's two-yard blast.

But on the ensuing kickoff with 44 seconds left in the half, the Mariners returned the kick deep into Del Norte territory, giving Moreau Catholic an opportunity to build confidence and cut the Warrior lead in half. And with 12 seconds left, the Mariners had the ball inside the 5-yard line.

Quarterback Bowen Dickstein's first pass was off target. His second pass was where it needed to be ... but so was Del Norte's Nick Freeman. He batted the ball out of the hands of the receiver, stopping the drive, and maintaining the Warriors' 14-0 halftime lead.

"Freeman did an awesome job," White said, calling the play a key moment in the game. "That's a matter of a senior stepping up."

Del Norte got the ball to start the second half and was continuing its ground-and-pound offensive attack when a Warrior fumble gave Moreau Catholic good field position. Seconds later, the Mariners busted off their lone big rushing play of the game, a 42-yard touchdown by Devon Arnold to slice the Warriors led to seven.

Momentum was suddenly on the Moreau Catholic side of the field.

But not for long.

Del Norte kept doing what it knew it could do ... run the ball right at the Mariners. The ensuing drive went 75 yards and took six minutes, culminating in Calleja's second TD plunge of the night.

"Momentum wasn't in our favor," said White about the start of that drive. "But that's what championship teams do."

The Warriors led 21-7, and the fourth quarter was a celebration. Moreau Catholic -- which finished the season with an 8-4 record, with two of those losses coming against Del Norte -- found itself unable to mount any type of offense attack.

With the Mariners forced to punt from its own end zone with four minutes left in the game, Kai Baugh busted through and blocked the kick. Fellow senior Kobe Mitchell pulled it in for the score, and the only things left to do was celebrate, and to make travel plans.

Levi Cox-Cooley finished with a game-high 152 yards rushing on 21 carries. Mitchell rumbled for 83 more. Chase Blackburn added 73, lifting him over the 1,000-yard mark for the season.

Since 1982, Del Norte had advanced to the North Coast Section semifinals eight times. This is the first season the Warriors have made it to the title game.

Encinal features an excellent defense and a balanced offense. It reached the championship game Friday night thanks to a last-second field goal, lifting the Jets over De Anza 24-21.