

Warriors March into finals, 28 - 7

November 26, 2019



Just a few hours after winning maybe the biggest game in Del Norte High School's football history, the Warrior coaching staff already had put that victory behind them.

An even bigger game awaits Del Norte this coming Saturday, when it takes on top-seeded Encinal High School in the championship game of the North Coast Section Division 5 playoffs.

The game will be played at Hayward High School near Berkeley starting at 7 p.m.

Del Norte is advancing after a 28-7 win last Saturday over Moreau Catholic High School of Hayward in front of a packed and thrilled Mike Whalen Field crowd in Crescent City, one that saw Del Norte's defense punish the third-seeded Mariners.

Moreau Catholic - which had played for the section title in 2018 - was held by the Warriors to just seven points on only 112 yards in total offense. The Mariners came into the game averaging 41 points and 357

yards per game.

“We were tougher and we were stronger,” White said.

Much as it did in its first-round playoff victory over Alhambra, Del Norte’s defense penetrated the Moreau Catholic backfield early and often. Of the Mariners’ 19 rushing attempts, seven resulted in negative yards.

On the other side of the ball, Del Norte continued its late-season trend of running, running ... and running. The Warriors attempted just three passes against the Mariners. They didn’t need more.

Levi Cox-Cooley, Kobe Mitchell and Chase Blackburn were able to consistently grind out first downs against a big and experienced Moreau Catholic defensive front. The Warriors averaged more than six yards per carry.

Twice against Moreau Catholic, with the ball on the one-yard line, 200-pound quarterback O.J. Calleja took it to the house himself.

Credit goes to, of course, Del Norte’s front line, led by stalwarts Luke King, Tanner Forkner and Anthony Slayton, plus tight end Connor Long. But also give credit to Noah Yang, who stepped into the left-guard position the second half of the season and performed admirably, as well as right tackle Jacob Dane.

Jacob, who?

Dane is a 185-pound freshman, brought up to the varsity squad at the end of his junior varsity season. He wasn’t expecting to see much, if any, action Saturday night - until starter Trevor Freeman broke his ankle, literally on the first play of the game.

Welcome to the varsity, Mr. Dane.

And all he did was hold his own and then some, helping the Warriors advance to the championship game for the first time in recent memory. “Next man up,” said White.

By Sunday, the glory of Del Norte’s first semifinal victory in eight tries had faded. Focus already was on an Encinal team that’s playoff tested and experienced ... although, hasn’t been able to put opponents away late in the season.

The Jets had to beat back a determined No. 8 Fortuna team in the opening round, then withstood a furious comeback by No. 4 De Anza High on Friday night before kicking a game-winning field goal as time expired, to win 24-21 in the semifinal round.

Encinal, which is located in Sutter County 100 miles north of Yuba City, features an offense that’s almost perfectly balanced. The Jets are averaging 144 yards a game on the ground, 142 through the air.

But Encinal is averaging fewer than 30 points a game this season, an anomaly compared to most playoff teams.

Still, you don't have to score a lot when your defense is as stingy as the Jets'. Encinal is giving up just 8.6 points per game, having recorded six shutouts.

Del Norte's defense is right there with the Jets, allowing just 10 points a game.

Last season, Encinal reached the semifinals in the Division 3 playoffs, one division higher than Del Norte played in 2018, when the Warriors also reached the semifinals. Both teams have senior quarterbacks.

Both have good size up front. Both have just one loss.

And both teams are one win away from a championship.

Look for the game preview and reporter's notebook coming in Friday's Triplicate.