

Warrior gridders are looking to get back on track against Fortuna

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Homecoming ... the time when alumni look back and remember. For this year's Del Norte High School football team, it'll be the time to look ahead and forget.

After losing last Friday in Klamath Falls for the first time this season, the Warriors will take on rival Fortuna this Friday at Mike Whalen Field - on homecoming night. Game time is 7:30 p.m.

Del Norte fell 21-14 to Mazama High last week, ending a four-game winning streak the Warriors owned to start the season.

Despite injuries and mistakes, Del Norte still had a chance to win. Trailing by seven with less than a minute to play, the Warriors were inside the Mazama 10-yard line. Two plays got them to the 5, but a fumble ruined third down and an incomplete fourth-down pass left Del Norte 4-1, rather than 5-0.

Against Mazama, the Warriors committed their first turnovers of the season. And the team recorded its customary blizzard of penalties. Then, two of its best players -- Kobe Mitchell and Timmy Thompson -- suffered injuries and were unavailable.

Time to put all that behind them, now, and brace for Fortuna, the two-time defending North Coast Section champion.

The good news for Del Norte is, this is an inexperienced Husky team that has won just one of four games this season, having lost Sept. 13 to archrival Ferndale of the Little Four Conference, 13-7.

The bad news is, Fortuna had last week off, giving coach Mike Benbow an extra week to prepare for Del Norte.

Fortuna has lost a who's-who of quality seniors from last year's team, including quarterback Zac Claus, defensive stalwart Sheaden Kadle, and a pack of running backs that terrorized defenses seemingly forever.

This year's team has been blitzed by Cardinal Newman, lost to Miramonte in a shootout, beat a 1-3 Kelseyville team, then lost to Ferndale, which had dropped eight straight to the Huskies.

The week off undoubtedly has given Coach Benbow the opportunity to not only fire up his troops, but install and practice new wrinkles in the Huskies' offense and defense.

Job one for Del Norte will be re-establishment of its running game. In their four wins prior to last week, the Warriors had averaged 307 yards rushing per game. Mazama held them to 194.

Second, quarterback O.J. Calleja will try to find his early-season mojo, when he was completing 70% of his passes. Against Mazama, the senior connected on just three of nine throws for 18 yards.

Defensively, Del Norte did a good job against a Mazama team considered one of the best Class 4-A programs in Oregon. But a couple of big plays at inopportune times -- with 33 seconds left in the first half, then while leading by a point late in the third quarter -- proved to be the difference.

The Del Norte coaches are hopeful Mitchell and Thompson will be available for Fortuna. If not, the Warriors brain trust will have limited options. With barely 20 players on the varsity roster, head coach Nick White and his staff will have to mix-and-match on both sides of the ball.

Once it faces Fortuna, Del Norte will travel to Weaverville for an Oct. 4 game with winless Trinity Valley. Then, it will be the Warriors' turn to have a bye week before starting Big Four Conference action Oct. 18 as St. Bernard's comes to Crescent City. The Crusaders are now the lone undefeated team in the conference.

Log on to www.triplicate.com after Friday night's game for a recap of all the action.