

Warriors win — but it was close

December 3, 2019



After arguably the greatest victory in Del Norte High School football history last Saturday night, the Warriors learned Sunday where they'll play next.

By winning the North Coast Section Division 5 championship, Del Norte has qualified for the California Interscholastic Federation State Playoffs in the 5-AA Division. On Friday, they'll be in the regional semifinals against The King's Academy in Sunnyvale. Game time: 7:30 p.m.

On Saturday, Del Norte defeated top-seeded Encinal High, 14-13, at Hayward High School in the East Bay. And they did it in dramatic fashion.

With the Warriors leading by a point with just minutes to play, Encinal drove the length of the field, getting the ball inside Del Norte's 10-yard line with 20 seconds remaining. The Jets sent in their field goal unit for a 25-yard attempt that would win the game ... and the division championship.

That's when Warrior senior Chase Blackburn rushed from the edge and blocked the kick by senior John Brinkley, sealing the victory and sending several hundred Del Norte fans who had made the seven-hour trip

into frenzied celebration.

"I told him he's my hero," said Nick White, who in his first season as Del Norte's head coach has led the Warriors to unprecedented success and a 12-1 record.

The Warriors led Encinal 14-7 at halftime, as Del Norte's run-heavy offense was able to move the ball effectively against a standout Encinal defense.

Blackburn scored the first Warrior touchdown, on a 15-yard run midway through the second quarter, to tie the game. Quarterback O.J. Calleja then gave Del Norte the lead late in the first half on a one-yard sneak, set up moments earlier by Levi Cox-Cooley's 34-yard run.

Del Norte kicker Kenji Adams-Lee made both extra points – which proved to be crucial.

Encinal adjusted defensively in the second half and effectively shut down the Warrior offense. Del Norte had gained 179 yards in the first two quarters, but just 62 in the second half.

After a scoreless third quarter, Encinal hit a home run when running back Isaiah Smith broke a 67-yard touchdown sprint midway through the fourth quarter. But when he overdid a resulting end-zone celebration, that drew a penalty, pushing the PAT back 15 yards. A procedure penalty against Encinal tacked on five more yards.

The 40-yard extra-point kick was close, but missed. Del Norte kept its lead.

And the Warriors never gave it up ... although in the closing minutes, as Encinal moved down the field, it was looking increasingly bleak, especially when quarterback David Romero-Reinholz scrambled 26 yards for a first down with less than half a minute left in the game.

A subsequent Del Norte penalty on that play moved the ball half the distance to the goal line.

The Jets spiked to stop the clock, setting up the 25-yard Encinal field goal attempt from the right hash mark. And setting up Blackburn to become a hero for Del Norte fans of all ages.

For the Warriors, the running back trio of Cox-Cooley, Kobe Mitchell and Blackburn combined for 203 yards on 42 carries. Calleja hit two of three passes for 27 yards, including a drive-sustaining screen pass to Mitchell that set up Del Norte's first score.

Defensively, Kai Baugh put pressure on Romero-Reinholz throughout the game, forcing Encinal to adjust its blocking schemes in the second half. Eli Larson, playing just his second game of the year following knee surgery, was also effective.

"That's what we do," White said. "We control the ball and play great defense."

Neither team had a turnover – remarkable, considering the game was played in wet, breezy conditions (although not as severe as predicted).

Del Norte actually had more fans in the stands at Hayward High than the Jets, even though Encinal is only 30 minutes or so away.

Now, it's time for King's Academy. The Knights won a Central Coast Section title Saturday night by the same 14-13 score as the Warriors. It was the second CCS crown in a row for King's Academy, which sports a 10-3 overall record this year.

Much like Encinal, the Knights feature a balanced offensive attack, albeit with more firepower than the Jets. Junior Noah Short has more than 1,550 all-purpose yards despite a nagging ankle injury. Defensively, Short leads the team in sacks and interceptions, and ranks second in tackles.

But, "I don't care who we play, or where we play," White said Saturday night, "we're still playing football."

Check out Friday's Triplicate for the game preview and reporter's notes.