

Juniors help lift Del Norte to win over Fortuna

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On a team dominated by 16 seniors, a pair of juniors helped carry the Del Norte High football team to victory Friday over Fortuna on homecoming night.

With Levi Cox-Cooley pounding out the yards on offense and Tanner Forkner stopping the run on defense, the Warriors captured a 29-13 non-conference win at Mike Whalen Field. The win lifted Del Norte to a 5-1 overall record, and helped ease the pain of last week's loss at Mazama High in Klamath Falls.

Cox-Cooley rushed for 250 yards on 22 carries, scoring a pair of touchdowns, highlighted by a 67 T.D. scamper on the first play from scrimmage after halftime, when Del Norte led by just a point, 8-7.

On the other side of the ball, Forkner seemed to know whenever Fortuna's leading rusher, Levi Nyberg, was going to get the ball, meeting him behind the line of scrimmage time after time.

Nyberg came into the game averaging 117 yards a game and 5.7 yards per carry. Against Del Norte's defense, the Huskies' running back ran the ball 11 times. He lost yardage on six of those carries, and twice had no gain. In the end, he was limited to just a single positive yard carrying the ball.

The only thing that kept Fortuna in the game was Del Norte's own miscues, especially in the first half. The Warriors twice lost fumbles in the first quarter while moving the ball easily, and the Huskies turned one of

those turnovers into a short-field score. Fortuna's other touchdown followed an interception of a O.J. Calleja pass deep in Del Norte territory in the third quarter.

The Warriors were also haunted by penalties, with more than 140 yards assessed against Del Norte, including 90-plus in the first half alone. The Warriors have been over 100 yards in penalty yardage every game this season, and Coach Nick White is frustrated, especially with a cascade of procedure penalties.

"Oh, we're going to address it in practice," the first-year head coach said, in a way that left no doubt about his seriousness regarding the issue.

Fortunately, Cox-Cooley and Del Norte's running game was capable of overcoming even a multitude of mistakes. Playing without starting fullback Kobe Mitchell, the Warriors shifted Chase Blackburn into the role. Along with gaining 61 yards on nine carries, Blackburn proved an effective blocker, which proved crucial to Cox-Cooley's success.

"He does whatever we ask," White said of Blackburn, a senior. "He's such a smart football player."

After giving up the first quarter touchdown to Fortuna, Del Norte responded in the second stanza, with Geo Gonzalez scoring on third and goal from the 14-yard line. On the point-after-touchdown, a high snap forced holder Calleja to stand up and throw into the end zone, where Connor Long made the grab and give Del Norte the single-digit lead at halftime.

Cox-Cooley extended the lead with his first T.D. in the opening seconds of the second half, then followed that up with a six-yard T.D. with 90 seconds left in the quarter. Del Norte was in command.

But Del Norte's third turnover -- that's five in the past two games -- set up Fortuna with a short field, and the Huskies cashed in. Suddenly, Fortuna was within nine points with almost a full quarter to play.

Del Norte's offense then put together a long scoring drive, taking four minutes to work their way down the field, culminating in Calleja's first rushing T.D. of the season. Del Norte's defense did the rest, just as it had all night long.

The Warriors dominated the stats. Del Norte outgained Fortuna on the ground 362 to 53. Calleja bounced back from a tough game last week to finish three-of-five passing, good for 114 yards with the one interception.

Fortuna is now 1-4, coming off back-to-back North Coast Section championships. Regardless of the Huskies' record, White was pleased to get a win over Fortuna's Coach Mike Benbow.

"They are so well coached, they don't make many mistakes," White said.

Del Norte will return to the road Friday when it goes to Weaverville for its last non-conference game against Trinity Valley. The Wolves are 0-4 this season after going winless in 2018. The Warriors will then have a bye, before starting Big Four Conference action Friday, Oct. 18, at home against undefeated St. Bernard's.

In junior varsity action, the Warriors returned to their winning ways with a 51-8 victory over Fortuna. Hunter Giddings scored a trio of touchdowns, as Del Norte improved to 4-1 this year.

Elsie Swerderski was named the Del Norte High homecoming queen during ceremonies at halftime of the varsity game.