

Warrior Notebook (final edition) ...

December 16, 2019



Just shy - Del Norte High School's magical season concluded Saturday night on rain-soaked Mike Whalen Field, as the Warriors were stopped, 32-7, by El Monte High School in the CIF Division 5-AA state championship game. The Warriors finished with a 13-2 record. El Monte was a perfect 16-0.

Over when - El Monte's Davon Booth, California's leading rusher with more than 2,800 yards this season, scored on an 8-yard touchdown run on the first play of the fourth quarter, giving the Lions a 26-0 lead. Booth finished the game with 171 yards on 17 carries and four touchdowns. That's 144 yards fewer than Booth gained in the Southern California championship game.

Fumble woes - Before the game, both head coaches agreed that whichever team had the fewest number of turnovers in the muddy, sloppy conditions would probably win. They were right. Del Norte had two turnovers, both in the first half; El Monte, just one. But that's not the whole story. The Warriors fumbled nine times overall, almost all after falling behind by two scores. Del Norte coach Nick White lamented that those fumbles - even though recovered by Del Norte - slowed or stopped almost every Warrior drive.

A great season - Despite the season-ending loss, this will go down as the most successful season in Warrior football history. Del Norte won its third Big Four Conference championship in six seasons. It swept three playoff games to claim its first North Coast Section title - and it then went on the road to defeat King's Academy for its first Northern California playoff crown.

Three-headed monster - Del Norte's rushing attack in 2019 was the stuff of legend. Running behind a big and powerful front line, the Warriors had three backs gain more than 1,000 yards, unprecedented in recent memory. Levi Cox-Cooley finished with 1,666 yards and 13 touchdowns. Chase Blackburn had 1,140 yards and 13 scores. Kobe Mitchell added 1,070 yards and a team-high 15 touchdowns.

Flat-out won - There have been other quarterbacks that have put up better passing numbers than the Warriors' O.J. Calleja, but few have won more games as a starting quarterback. The senior stepped into the full-time starting role this season after sharing QB duties last season with Ethan Price. In Del Norte's two seasons with Calleja behind center, the Warriors posted a 22-5 record.

The Kings - Next season will see the first time since 2013 that a King brother hasn't started at center for Del Norte. Ethan King held the post first, for three years. Then, Luke King stepped into the role for three more. Both earned all-conference honors. (Luke King, by the way, spent Saturday morning wrapping gifts for less-fortunate children as part of the "Shop With A Hero" program sponsored by the Crescent City Rotary Club.)

Mr. Automatic - Lost in all the success of the team and the numbers put up by the Warrior running attack was the incredible season of Del Norte kicker Kenji Adams-Lee. The senior had close to 60 extra-point attempts. He made all but two, a remarkable percentage at the high school level, even the college level. Adams-Lee also handled punting duties and was more than solid. His acrobatic leap and catch of a high snap in Del Norte's first game at Moreau Catholic probably saved the victory for the Warriors. He will be missed.

Defensive wizard - A name not mentioned that much this season was defensive coordinator Darrin LaFazio. "Faz" was retained by first-year coach Nick White, and the Warrior defense was nothing short of outstanding this season. In the regular season, Del Norte's defense gave up an average of just 11 points a game, which is excellent. In the post-season, well, it's off the charts. The Warriors held all five playoff teams under their scoring average by at least two touchdowns, including Alhambra (18), Moreau Catholic (34), Encinal (17), King's Academy (17) and El Monte 14). That's called rising to the occasion.

Pick City - When Luke King intercepted an El Monte pass near the end of the first half on Saturday, he became the 11th Warrior with a pick this season. Connor Long led the way with three. Altogether, Del Norte's defense came up with 17 interceptions. Last year's team had seven.

Says thanks -- From the El Monte High Facebook page: "We would like to thank Del Norte High School as well as the entire Crescent City community for your generosity and hospitality for the 5AA state championship game. You are a true example of what sportsmanship and pride look like. Thank you for the lasting memories."