

Warrior Notebook (state championship edition)

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December 12, 2019



Mountain top - For the first time, Northern California champion Del Norte High's football team will play for the California Interscholastic Federation's Class 5-AA championship, on Saturday at Mike Whalen Field in Crescent City. The opponent: Southern California champion El Monte. Kickoff is at 6 p.m. The Warrior Pregame Show on KPOD will start at 5:00.

Third championship - After winning the Big Four Conference title and the North Coast Section Division 5 crown, Del Norte captured the Nor-Cal championship in Sunnyvale with a 21-14 victory over King's Academy last Saturday. No Warrior football team has ever reached these heights.

Over when - Nick Freeman intercepted a last-gasp heave by Knight's Academy quarterback Antonio Gonzalez as time expired, securing the win. It was the second interception of the night for Del Norte, as Kobe Mitchell ended a Knights' drive in the early in the fourth quarter.

The hard way - Del Norte twice fumbled inside its own 10-yard line, giving the South Bay school a short field - on which it scored, tying the game both times. The Warriors also gave up an interception. It was one of the few times this season Del Norte has given up more turnovers than it created.

Cox-Cooley - As the season has progressed, Del Norte's leading rusher, Levi Cox-Cooley, has been somewhat contained compared to earlier in the campaign, with just one 100-yard game in the four previous outings. But against the Knights, the junior was a beast, rushing the ball 29 times for 163 yards and a touchdown. For the season, Cox-Cooley has gained 1,546 yards, the most by any Warrior this decade.

O.J. for TD - Del Norte quarterback O.J. Calleja scored a pair of touchdowns against the Knights, both from one yard out, running behind senior center Luke King and guards Tanner Forkner and Noah Yang. Calleja has gained only 32 yards rushing this season, but he has scored touchdowns 31% of the time. Six of his 10 touchdowns came from one yard out, two others from two yards away.

Frosh step up - Freshman R.J. Loftin moved into the starting outside linebacker role Friday after injuries in the defensive secondary. He wasn't the only ninth-grader who was forced into action. Jacob Dane was pressed into service at right tackle during a critical phase of the game. All the Warriors did was drive for the game-winning touchdown.

The defense - King's Academy had a pair of standout running backs, Noah Short and Jayden Frazier. Against Del Norte, the pair combined for only 16 carries for three yards. The Knights' passing game came in completing 52 percent of its passes. Against the Warriors, King's Academy hit on just 11 of 24 throws.

Powerhouses - The other Big Four Conference team to win a North Coast Section title, St. Bernard's, also advanced to a state championship game. The Crusaders defeated East Nicolaus 45-29 to earn a spot in the Class 6-AA state title game Saturday against South High School of Torrance. The game will be played at 6 p.m. at Humboldt State University's Redwood Bowl.

Earning respect - Ray Hamill of humboldtsports.com deserves a hat tip for this one: In the past four seasons, Big Four Conference teams (Del Norte, Fortuna, Eureka and St. Bernard's) are 6-1 in state playoff games, with all four teams making the playoffs at least one time. The number might be even more impressive if Fortuna had been given the opportunity to play in the state playoffs in 2018, when North Coast Section officials repeatedly delayed the N-C-S playoffs and kept the Huskies out of the state tournament.

Rankings - For what it's worth ... probably not a heck of a lot ... Maxpreps sees Saturday's game as being highly competitive. Maxpreps has El Monte ranked as the 1,447th best team nationwide. Del Norte comes in at 1,448. In the California rankings, El Monte is 124, Del Norte 125.

Run, run - Del Norte runs the ball a lot; 87% of the time, as a matter of face. El Monte runs more. The Lions run the ball 93 times out of 100. The Warriors have thrown the ball exactly twice as often, a mere 88 attempts compared to a miserly 44 for El Monte.

Run, etc. - Both teams are both very good at running the ball. The Warriors are averaging just shy of 7 yards a carry. El Monte averages better than 10 yards an attempt. El Monte is averaging more points per game than Del Norte, 46 to 33.

Road woes - El Monte coach Jessie Cenicerros said his team is not used to long road trips - in this case, from near Los Angeles to Arcata, where the team will be staying. That's roughly 15 hours. Prior to that, Cenicerros

said, their longest road trip this season was “about 10 miles.”

From ashes - Two seasons ago, in 2017, Del Norte posted a 3-7 record, and that included two forfeit wins over McKinleyville. That team included five sophomores who would play key roles on this year’s conference, section and Northern California champion team: Kobe Mitchell, Eli Larson, Nick Freeman, Luke King and Anthony Slayton.

You’re an all-star - The Humboldt-Del Norte League has a policy not to release its White Star selections (it’s all-star team) until the conclusion of the postseason. Suffice it to say that the Warriors will be well represented, including at least two most-valuable players.