

Del Norte's state title bid stopped by Lions

December 14, 2019



Del Norte High's vision of its first state football title was washed away Saturday night on a rain-swept Mike Whalen Field, as the undefeated El Monte High Lions rolled to a 32-7 victory in the CIF Division 5-AA California championship game.

El Monte's Davon Booth, the state's leading rusher, scored four touchdowns against Del Norte, including a 52-yarder on the game's second play from scrimmage. He finished with 171 yards rushing, which is actually 23 yards under his season average, and 134 yards below what he gained last week in the Lions' win over Serra High to capture the Southern California 5-AA title.

"He's the best player we have played," said Del Norte head coach Nick White. "He's a special kid. He's No. 1 in the state in rushing for a reason."

Del Norte's offense, meanwhile, was mired in the muck. Despite having tarps on portions of the field this past week, the recent rains left Mike Whalen Field sloppy at best, and a quagmire in places.

Amazingly, it was the team from near Los Angeles that handled the wet, messy conditions the best. In the first half, when El Monte motored to an 18-0 lead, Del Norte fumbled the ball five times, losing two of them.

Del Norte would drop the ball at least four more times, leaving the Warrior offense struggling to make first downs, especially, it seemed, once it got past the El Monte 30-yard line.

"We actually drove the ball decently on offense, but with a negative play every single drive, we couldn't keep it going," White said.

The closest Del Norte came to scoring in the first half came with less than a minute to play, when interior defensive lineman Luke King intercepted a El Monte pass and took off. Only one Lion player was anywhere near the 260-pound senior, who was barely able to knock King off balance just enough to stop the touchdown.

Neither team scored in the third quarter, but Booth and the Lions put the game away in the final stanza. Booth scored first from eight yards out, then on a 35-yard T.D. sweep to seal the victory.

"They are physical, and they are good," White said of the Lions. "We haven't faced many teams bigger than us."

The Warriors were finally able to find paydirt with just under two minutes to play, when Levi Cox-Cooley scored from 3 yards out. The junior running back gained 120 yards on 18 carries. Chase Blackburn closed his Warrior career with 69 yards on nine carries.

The loss closes the greatest season in Del Norte football history.

The Warriors captured a Big Four Conference crown with an undefeated record, won three playoff games to claim their first North Coast Section title, then took home their first Northern California championship, earned last week with its win on the road against King's Academy. That victory gave the Warriors the home berth in the state title game.

"We have had such a great season," White said. "It was very special to bring that game to Crescent City."

(Check out Tuesday's Del Norte Triplicate for a recap on the season.)