

Seniors carry Del Norte to conference championship

November 1, 2019



On Senior Night, it was indeed the seniors who shined brightest for the Del Norte High football team.

The Warriors dominated the second half Friday night, turning at 14-13 halftime lead into a 48-19 rout over rival Eureka, capturing the Big Four Conference championship in the process at Mike Whalen Field.

Del Norte wrapped up the regular season with a 9-1 record, its best mark since going undefeated in 2007. The Warriors finished 3-0 against their conference foes, and will play host to a first-round game in the North Coast Section Division 5 playoffs in two weeks.

Prior to the game, 16 seniors were honored by the Warriors and their fans. All of them seemed to play a part in the emotional win Friday.

They included:

* O.J. Calleja, the quarterback who directed the offense with almost surgical skill.

* Anthony Slayton, the standout lineman and linebacker who was desperate to beat Eureka for the first time in his Warrior football career.

* Luke King, the three-year starter at center, who followed in the tradition of his older brother, who was the starting center when Del Norte won its last conference championship.

* Connor Long, who came out of nowhere this season to become a key contributor on both sides of the ball.

* Kai Baugh, who came back to Del Norte to play his senior year, who had to overcome a pre-season injury, and who became a nightmare for Eureka quarterback Trevor Bell in the second half Friday, sacking the Logger three times.

There are others, of course, but two stood out on a night when champions were crowned and memories were made.

Kobe Mitchell scored Del Norte's first four touchdowns, two in the first half, and two more in the third quarter. He finished with 160 yards rushing on 19 carries, setting a physical tone that seemed to wear out the Loggers, who needed a win Friday to make the postseason.

And then there was Chase Blackburn, who had one of the greatest halves of football in recent Warrior history.

Playing at times in the shadow of Mitchell, and junior running back Levi Cox-Cooley, Blackburn has played a variety of roles this season on both sides of the ball, and played them well.

But Friday night was close to unbelievable. Playing on the field named after his grandfather -- and where his other grandfather, the legendary Chuck Blackburn, served as the voice of the Warriors for close to three decades -- Blackburn exploded for 218 yards in the third and fourth quarters on just seven carries, averaging 31 yards a carry, and scoring on a pair of long touchdown runs. His best run, where he broke four tackles on his way to the end zone, was called back by penalty.

Oh, he also picked off a Eureka pass on defense.

"Blackburn ... he was just lights out," said first-year Del Norte head coach Nick White, who was showered by his players with a bucket of ice cold liquid in the game's final seconds. "Obviously it was the best game of his career."

Overall, Del Norte finished with an unofficial 487 yards in rushing offense, as Eureka never found an answer to Del Norte's fleet of running backs and its big front line, which included another standout game from junior Tanner Forkner, and big contributions from sophomore Trevor Freeman and senior Noah Yang, both of whom moved into the lineup to replace lost starters.

Defensively, Del Norte were picked apart by the Bell's passing early. But in the second half, the Warriors dialed up more pressure, and according to White, played more fundamentally sound zone defense in the secondary. The result was just a lone touchdown for Eureka in the second half.

For White, who took over the reins from another legendary Warrior, Lewis Nova, the victory could not have been much sweeter.

"I'm so excited for these kids," he said. "It's a great group. We stepped up. It's a great feeling."

Now, Del Norte must wait. On this past Wednesday, North Coast Section officials pushed back the N-C-S playoffs by a week, to allow teams in the Santa Rosa and surrounding region a chance to finish their seasons after games were lost because of fires and power outages in the region.

As a result, Del Norte won't know who it plays in the first round until Sunday, Nov. 10.

The Warriors won't mind the break. Several players are nursing various ailments, including Cox-Cooley, Mitchell and another senior standout, Geo Gonzalez. The additional time might even give standout lineman Eli Larson -- who has been out all season with a knee injury -- a chance to come back for the playoffs.

"We want to rest up, recuperate, and then get ready," White said. "It's a brand new season."

After Friday's game, White met at midfield with his older brother, Jason White, the head coach of Eureka. Not a lot was said. Not a lot needed to be said.

"We just said we loved each other," the Del Norte coach said.

Notes and news

* For Del Norte, this will be the 14th season the Warriors have made the playoffs in the past 17 years.

* Del Norte previously won conference crowns in 2016, 2014, 2007, 2006, 2005 and in 1998.

* In the second half of Friday's game, in the middle of a play, what appeared to be some sort of illegal firework came soaring over the northeast corner of Mike Whalen Field, then crashed to the turf, exploding on the west-side 40-yard line, seemingly missing a Eureka player by inches, knocking him to the ground. Everyone seemed to escape unhurt, and law enforcement and others rushed to where it appeared the firework was ignited. It was reported that the individual responsible was apprehended.