

Del Norte's defense does number on Crusaders

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It was billed as a battle between two high-powered offenses. Hmmm. It would seem nobody sent the memo to Del Norte High's defense.

The Warriors stymied St. Bernard's high-flying attack Friday night, knocking off the Crusaders 27-20 in the first game of the Big Four Conference football season at Mike Whalen Field. It was the second time in as many years the Warriors have claimed victory over St. Bernard's after losing five in a row.

How solid was Del Norte's defense? Consider this:

- * The Crusaders came into the game averaging just over 40 points a contest. Del Norte held them to half that amount.
- * St. Bernard's quarterback Will Oney had averaged 257 yards per game this season. Against the Warriors, he passed for 162.
- * Receiver Lane Thrap had 38 catches for more than a 1,000 yards in 2019 for St. Bernard's. Del Norte's defense limited him to a pair of catches for wait for it ... six yards.

"Our defense did an outstanding job," said first-year Del Norte head coach Nick White, whose team is now 7-1 overall this season. "We had a game plan, and our kids did their jobs."

The game really wasn't as close as the final score might indicate. Del Norte led 27-6 midway through the fourth quarter. But the Eureka-based team took advantage of a botched Del Norte punt to cut the margin to 14. It then marched 96 yards in the final 2 1/2 minutes.

However, by the time the Crusaders scored to make it a one-touchdown difference, just five seconds remained. When Tanner Forkner fielded the St. Bernard's on-side kick attempt, the victory was complete.

With the field mushy and muddy, and rain coming down on and off throughout the game, ball security was a priority. Del Norte did not have a turnover, something that was a point of emphasis in practice this week. The Warriors' Kaleb Price picked off an Oney pass in the second half, the ninth interception for Del Norte this year.

It would appear converting on third and fourth downs was also a focal point. Chase Blackburn's 50-yard run on third-and-long on the opening drive set up Del Norte's first touchdown. A third down trick play -- Blackburn taking the pitch, then pitching it to Kaleb Price, who threw to a wide open O.J. Calleja at the end of the first half -- gave Del Norte a 20-6 halftime lead.

Then, in the third quarter, on fourth-and-five, it was Kobe Mitchell breaking through the Crusaders' front line and motoring 40 yards to score, giving Del Norte the cushion it needed.

It was Mitchell's first action since hurting his leg a month ago. Healthy and rested, the senior turned into a blunt weapon, pounding the Crusaders' defense for a game-high 153 yards on 23 carries. He also played a key role on defense, helping keep Oney in check.

"He plays with such passion," White said of Mitchell.

Overall, Del Norte ran the ball 47 times for 270 yards, a testament not only to Mitchell, Blackburn and other backs, but the front line, especially up the middle, anchored by center Luke King.

For now, Del Norte is alone in first place. Saturday night, Fortuna will be at Eureka, with the winner joining the Warriors at 1-0. Next week, Del Norte will be in Fortuna, before closing the regular season at home Nov. 1 against the Loggers.

Del Norte defeated Fortuna 29-13 earlier this season in the non-conference battle between the teams. And while the Huskies come into tonight's game with a 2-5 mark, he sees Fortuna as a major obstacle.

"We've played them, so we know how good that team is," White said. "I told the kids to enjoy this win tonight, because we are going back to work."