

Fortuna remains a barrier to Del Norte's march to a football title

October 23, 2019



Del Norte High School football coach Nick White wants his team to forget the past and not worry about the future. He needs them zeroed in on the present.

After defeating powerhouse St. Bernard's last Friday, and with arch-rival Eureka looming on Nov. 1, it might be easy for the Warriors to think about something other than the Fortuna Huskies this Friday night, especially since Del Norte has already defeated Fortuna this season, 29-13, Sept. 27.

Coach White isn't having it.

"We know how good (Fortuna) is," the first-year head coach said. "We will have no problem staying focused."

Game time has been moved up to 7 p.m. for the Big Four Conference battle in Fortuna.

Both teams are 1-0 against conference foes. The day after the 7-1 Warriors knocked off St. Bernard's, the Huskies were beating Eureka on the Loggers' home field, 21-14.

After winning back-to-back North Coast Section division championships, Fortuna has returned to earth with a young team. The Huskies are 3-5 overall. But Fortuna, under coach Mike Benbow, has a history of rising to

the occasion.

Last year, the Huskies were plagued by injuries during the conference season, and finished 0-4 against Big Four teams. But once the post-season started, Fortuna marched through all foes on its way to its second NCS championship.

Benbow has also found plenty of success against Del Norte since taking over the program in 2008, winning 18 of 25 contests against the Warriors, including two of three battles in 2018.

When the two teams met earlier this year in a non-conference contest, Del Norte led by just one, 8-7, at halftime. A pair of touchdown runs by Levi Cox-Cooley extended the lead in the third quarter, but Fortuna narrowed the difference to nine earlier in the final stanza. O.J. Calleja's four-yard run put the game away.

In that first meeting, Cox-Cooley was a monster, rushing for a career-high 250 yards on 22 carries. Overall, Del Norte outgained Fortuna 436 to 91.

What kept the game reasonably close was Del Norte's turnovers, as the Warriors lost two fumbles and threw an interception. Ball security was a major point of emphasis prior to last week's win and it paid off with no turnovers against the Crusaders.

Senior Kobe Mitchell, after missing a pair of games, returned to action for Del Norte against St. Bernard's. Mitchell punished the Crusaders for 153 yards, including a 40-yard touchdown blast up the middle that proved to be the winning score.

Defensively, Del Norte did the two things it wanted to do.

First, it kept St. Bernard's dual-threat quarterback Will Oney contained. He rushed for 65 yards, about 30 under his season average.

Second, the Warriors didn't let the Crusaders hit their trademark big plays - with the exception of a perfectly executed trick play in the fourth quarter. Oney completed 19 of 27 passes, but everything was underneath. The Crusaders finished with just 162 passing yards, about 100 yards under their average.

Unlike St. Bernard's, Fortuna doesn't throw much, alternating quarterbacks. In the first meeting, Del Norte's defense -- led by Tanner Forker -- limited leading rusher Levi Nyberg to 11 carries for minus-one yard.

If Del Norte can win in Fortuna, it will claim at worst a share of the conference crown, with a Senior Night battle with Eureka at Mike Whalen Field wrapping up the regular season. Then, the postseason awaits.

None of that matters to White. Fortuna is the only game on his mind. "We want to get progressively better every year," he said. "That's our game plan."

Go online to www.triplicate.com Friday night for a post-game accounting