

Prairie's furious rally falls short

Written by Clete Campbell

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DUBUQUE – Cedar Rapids Prairie sent up a Hail Mary Friday night and Trey Beckman's almost-answered prayer was the only thing separating the Hawks from an improbable road victory over an undefeated Dubuque Senior team at Dalzell Field.

"It was bang-bang. They were just as close to catching the ball as us knocking it down," Senior Coach John Osweiler said.

A squadron of Rams defenders swarmed the ball in the end zone, knocking down Beckman's game-winning prayer at the horn to seal Senior's breathless 34-28 victory over a relentless Prairie team that never quit despite playing from behind for nearly four quarters in chilly 37-degree temperatures.

"Tonight was a little ugly, but we pulled it out in the end," Rams quarterback Lee Bonifas said.

Down 34-7 with 8:37 left, a slow starting but poised Beckman fired three touchdown passes in the game's final minutes.

Beckman rifled a 15-yard scoring strike to Jalen Rima, a 14-yard connection to Coen Brown and a 25-yard hookup to Rima with 28 seconds left that brought Prairie (1-2) within a touchdown with 28 seconds left.

Prairie recovered an on-side kick to give itself a final chance, but the Hail Mary pass was batted away.

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While Beckman – who threw for 308 yards and 146 to Juquan Simpson alone – was picking apart a flat Senior secondary, the Rams (3-0) weren't coming unglued.

“Our kids are pretty poised,” Osweiler said. “They didn't panic at any time. We made some mistakes we shouldn't have in the fourth quarter. But the kids came up and made a play at the end.”

As close as the Hawks were to victory, two turnovers that led to 14 Senior points prevented Prairie from seizing victory.

“It took us a little bit to get in the groove, but once we did, we were right there,” Prairie kicker Sam Drysdale said. “As the game went on, we competed hard and stepped it up. I thought we came back pretty strong.

“A nice ending would be good, but they were good on defense.”

Facing off against Senior for the first time since they bounced the Rams from the 2012 Class 4A playoffs in a 30-28 nailbiter, the Hawks were faced with the dual dilemma of containing both Bonifas and kinetic running back Colton Iwasaki (who delivered two scores Friday).

Prairie's defense couldn't get a firm grip on either player. Plus, Senior's multi-dimensional running game had the Hawks struggling to pick it up all night.

Sam Jaeger scored on a 4-yard run and Jacob Osterberger reached the house on a 2-yard run as Senior took a 21-7 lead into halftime.

Prairie rallied, putting 21 points on the board and converting an onside kick in the game's final eight minutes. Problem was, the offense didn't get moving until the Hawks had dug themselves

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into a three-touchdown hole.

"We took too long to get started," Prairie Coach Mike Morrissey said. "That was the big thing, starting slow.

"We tried to get a lot of guys down there (on that final play) and hope for a big play. We came close, but again, when you wait that long to get things moving this is the way it goes."

The secret of Bonifas' success in Senior's non-district wins over Dubuque Wahlert and Waterloo West was superb efficiency and accuracy (a 60-percent completion percentage and no interceptions). Bonifas was just as steady Friday night, delivering a turnover-free performance while keeping the Ramscool as the Hawks put July-like heat on them in the fourth quarter.

"Our biggest strength (as a team) is staying calm, staying focused, doing our job," Bonifas said. "One of our biggest things as a team this year is to be a family. When we hit adversity, we don't get down on each other, we stick together and do our thing."

Senior made just enough big plays to overcome a Prairie team that doesn't know the meaning of the word quit.

"That comes from Coach Morrissey," Drysdale said. "He always tells us to give total effort and never give up. No matter what position we're in or how much our backs are against the wall, we always try to push hard and get back in it.

"How hard we fought really shows the character of our football team."

Prairie's schedule offers no rest for the weary. The Hawks fly into district play next week against North Scott.

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“The big thing for us is to keep jelling and make sure our guys are coming together as a team and building on (this),” Morrissey said.