

Warriors yearn to finish perfect year

Written by Jim Ecker

Sunday, 16 November 2014 17:10 -



Washington Coach Paul James was in a playful mood after the Warriors topped Bettendorf in the semifinals of the Class 4A football playoffs Friday night in the UNI-Dome.

James will never boast or brag, especially about himself, but he momentarily stumped a couple of reporters when he mentioned this will be his second trip to the state finals with the Warriors in five years.

James led Washington to the championship game in 2003 during his first stint as head coach and is returning again in 2014, which makes two trips to the finals in 12 seasons.

Two trips in five years did not make sense, until James slyly explained: He coached Washington in 2003, 2004 and 2005 and coached again in 2013 and 2014, so that's two trips in five years. He conveniently left out the seven-year span from 2006 through 2012 when he was Washington's athletic director but not the coach.

James was just having a little fun with reporters after the Warriors rallied from a 10-0 deficit against Bettendorf and earned a date with Dowling Catholic in the finals this Friday night with a 28-17 verdict.

James and the Warriors fell short in the 2003 finals against West Des Moines Valley, 17-7, and now they'll be facing another strong outfit from West Des Moines. Washington has never won a state football title and it won't be easy, but it would be a fitting achievement for a man who has been loyal to his school for four decades.

Washington ran roughshod over opponents this season with a bruising running attack, but the

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Warriors took to the air against Bettendorf when the Bulldogs made it tough to run. Washington was averaging a robust 284 yards on the ground, but Bettendorf held them to a season-low 92 yards on 41 carries.

James, who coaches from the pressbox, saw what was happening and made a terrific in-game adjustment, calling passing plays out of Washington's double-tight end formation, something they rarely did this season. The results were remarkable.

Washington quarterback Reid Snitker, who was passing for only 71 yards per game, had a tremendous game through the air, throwing for 162 yards and two touchdowns. He began the game with a pick-6 that gave Bettendorf an early lead, but was near-flawless the rest of the night.

Snitker finished 7 of 10 for an average of 23 yards per completion. He would have been 8 of 10 for more than 200 yards, but another perfectly thrown ball was dropped on a deep route.

Snitker hit Isaiah Nimmers with a 34-yard TD pass to begin Washington's comeback and he hit Landen Akers with a 45-yard touchdown in the fourth quarter to expand a 21-17 lead.

You know you have a good football team when your opponent takes away what you do best, and you simply compensate and beat them with something else. That's what the Warriors did against Bettendorf.

Washington's defense, rock-solid all year, also rose to the occasion with another strong performance led by all-world linebacker Connor Vincent, who made several spectacular plays, perhaps none better than when he stopped Bettendorf quarterback Cyle Cox on a fourth-down run at a key point in the fourth quarter.

Vincent said he gave himself a headache on that play, but he was more of a headache to the Bulldogs. Earlier in the game he tackled the Bettendorf tailback for a nine-yard loss and recovered a fumble at the 6-yard line, leading to an easy Washington touchdown. He also

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sacked Cox on the final half to keep the Bulldogs off the scoreboard.

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James searched his memory for a few seconds before comparing Vincent to two of the best linebackers in school history.

"He kind of reminds me of the Puk brothers - J.J. and Kevin," said James. "Those were two darned good linebackers."

James was their position coach when the Puk brothers played for Washington in the 1980's. J.J. Puk became an all-Big Ten linebacker at Iowa and Kevin Puk played at Stanford.

Washington defeated an awfully good team when it topped Bettendorf in the semifinals, but Dowling Catholic is probably even better than the Bulldogs. Dowling whipped Xavier, 44-13, in the Class 4A state finals last year and has all-state quarterback Ryan Boyle running the show again this year.

Boyle ran for four touchdowns and passed for two TDs against the Saints last year. He's passed for 1,866 yards and 17 touchdowns this season and he's run for 979 yards and 16 TDs. What's more, he's thrown only one interception in 210 passes.

The Warriors know they'll have their hands full with Dowling, and Dowling knows it will have its hands full with Washington. It could be a tremendous game Friday night.

Washington has never won a state football title. Vincent said it felt great to reach the championship game.

"That's really the only word I can use to describe it," he said Friday. "All the hard work is paying off."

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"Exciting. Electric," said Vincent, looking toward the finals. "I'm sure it will be fun."