

Saints bumped off by Decorah

Written by Tom Fruehling

Tuesday, 03 November 2015 00:35 - Last Updated Tuesday, 03 November 2015 00:48



Call it an upset, if you like.

But to those on the losing side, it was no fluke that unheralded Decorah (a 5-5 team coming in) ended Xavier's undefeated season and advanced to the Class 3A state quarterfinals with a 30-21 win Monday night on the Saints' home field.

"We'd watched them on film and knew they were a really good power running team," Xavier senior Blake Whitten said. "We figured they'd try to shove it right down our throats. And credit them. That's what they did."

With a beefy offensive line that averaged over 250 pounds, the Vikings used a bunch of backs to keep pounding the ball up the middle.

Against a normally stout Xavier defense, they gained 291 yards on 55 carries. A lot of their yards came on first down, and they picked up 20 of those.

"We knew they were a hard-nosed football team," Xavier coach Duane Schulte said, whose team finished 9-1. "And it seemed like they were always second-and-two or third-and-three. They kept moving the ball and keeping it away from us."

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The Vikings, who have now moved to the quarterfinals for the seventh time in the last eight years, were riding high after last Friday's 14-0 opening round playoff shutout over fifth-ranked Independence. Then they got an immediate confidence boost when Xavier's Erik Rodriguez fumbled on the very first play from scrimmage on the Saints 29-yard line.

Six plays later, Decorah fullback Marshall Johnson swept in from 13 yards to put the visitors on the board with just three minutes gone in the first quarter.

One play, of course, does not make a game. "But you don't want to fumble on the first play," according to Schulte.



He pointed to two other back-breakers.

Following a Decorah field goal, the Saints clawed into a 14-10 lead on a 16-yard pass from Bryce Schulte to Whitten and a 9-yard keeper by Schulte. But with just 1:56 left in the half, the Vikings' Zach Lea rumbled 51 yards on a fullback trap to put his team back on top.

The third quarter was scoreless, but Decorah went up 24-14 early in the fourth period when quarterback Cole Steffen threw back-to-back passes of 40 and 36 yards in a three-play scoring series that took just 44 seconds.

"A fumble, the long run and a long pass, that's 21 points right there," Schulte said.

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The Saints rallied back to score on a 4-yard run by Rodriguez to pull within 24-21. When it was crunch time, however, Decorah came through.

Up by only three points, the Vikings took over with eight minutes to go and milked the clock for four minutes before Steffen scored up the middle from six yards out. The key play in the series came on fourth-and-three on 13 when Steffen rolled over right end for a gut-check first down.

"Hand it to them, they played a great game," Xavier senior Nick Stark said. "I think maybe they wanted it a little more than we did."

Whitten seemed to agree.

"A couple of plays might have made the difference, but they really pushed us all night," he said. "We fought back, but I think we dug ourselves too big a hole."

Still, this Xavier team was only the third in school history to have a perfect regular season record.

"This will go down as one of the best Xavier teams ever," Coach Schulte said. "They're a special group of kids. I've known these seniors since they were in the fifth grade, so I've watched them grow up. They've come a long ways, on and off the football field."

Decorah will play at West Delaware in the Class 3A quarterfinals Friday night.

DECORAH 30, XAVIER 21

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First downs 20 16

Rushes-yards 55-291 32-168

Passing yards 115 139

Comp-att-int 7-15-2 13-21-0

Fumbles-lost 0-0 2-1

Punts-avg 3-26 4-36

Penalties-yards 3-35 2-15

Decorah 10 7 0 13 - 30

Xavier 0 14 0 7 - 21

Scoring plays

D – Marshall Johnson 13 run (Parker Lane kick)

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D – Lane 29 field goal

X – Blake Whitten 16 pass from Bryce Schulte (Dallas Klein kick)

X – Schulte 9 run (Klein kick)

D – Zach Lea 51 run (Lane kick)

D – Garrett Wise 36 pass from Cole Steffen (Lane kick)

X – Erik Rodriguez 4 run (Klein kick)

D – Steffen 6 run (kick blocked)

Individual statistics

Rushing

Decorah – Wise 24-103, Lea 10-118, Steffen 8-47.

Xavier – Maliki Wilson 21-116, Erik Rodriguez 5-18.

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Passing

Decorah – Steffen 7-15-2, 115.

Xavier – Schulte 13-21-0, 139.

Receiving

Decorah – Shawn Shindelar 1-40, Wise 1-36.

Xavier – Whitten 6-78.