

CHAMPS DETHRONED - BIG-PLAY OFFENSE LIFTS HENNINGER PAST WG

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Very rarely does a top-seeded team advance through the playoffs labeled as the underdog week after week.

That was the tag placed on Henninger this season and, after Saturday afternoon's game, it's certain no team will continue to take the Black Knights lightly.

Henninger won its ninth consecutive game, ousting defending state Class AA champion West Genesee 44-27 to earn its first Section III title since 2000. Henninger quarterback Kihary Blue threw for 297 yards and four touchdowns on 10-of-19 passing to lead an offensive attack that featured big play after big play.

"Even though we're the underdog every week we knew we had to come out and prove our point that we weren't," Blue said.

Next up for the Black Knights is a date with the Section IV champion in a regional playoff at 3 p.m. Saturday at Cicero-North Syracuse.

After falling behind 7-0 early, the Black Knights (9-1) began to play with a chip on their shoulder. Blue connected with senior running back Shaquille Leggett on a 75-yard screen pass that resulted in a touchdown. Whenever West Genesee mounted a challenge, Henninger was ready with a response.

"The paper has been going against us a lot," Leggett said. "We just knew that as a team we had to stay together and not pay attention to the media."

Henninger held a 24-14 lead to start the second half and lined up to kick off to West Genesee. The kick was a laser, bouncing off a Wildcats' player on the front line and ending up back in the hands of Blue. Blue said the low kick wasn't done on purpose and it's the third time it's happened to him this year.

On the next play the Black Knights went for it all and succeeded. Blue found receiver Chris Gaine for a 51-yard touchdown pass to give Henninger a 30-14 lead and the perfect start to the second half.

"(Kihary) is an athlete that can run around and make some plays throwing the ball up for us," Henninger coach David Kline said. "He did a great job today and that's why he's back there because he can make plays."

Just like it did last week in its semifinal win against Liverpool, West Genesee (8-2) found a way to stay alive. Following the Henninger score to start the half, the Wildcats drove 54 yards in seven plays and pulled within 30-20.

That's where the score remained until early in the fourth quarter when the Wildcats made their final push to grab another comeback victory. On third-and-5 from its own 45-yard line, Blue dropped back to set up a screen, but the pass was deflected. The ball fell into the arms of West Genesee's Christos Dimkos, who ran it back 53 yards and cut the deficit to three.

But the Black Knights would not be denied. The following drive Blue connected with Gainey for a touchdown once again, this time from 67 yards out.

"It hurts a lot anytime you get some momentum going and they come back and respond," West Genesee coach Joe Corley said. "It certainly makes it tough for our guys."

It didn't get any easier for the Wildcats on their next drive as the Black Knights tacked on the exclamation point. West Genesee quarterback Jim Marks completed a pass across midfield to tight end Kevin Petrick, who tried to fight for extra yards.

In the midst of trying to advance the ball, Leggett stripped it from Petrick's hands and ran 60 yards for the game-changing touchdown.

"That was such a huge momentum change in the game because they were driving and we were getting nervous," Kline said.

In the end, the game was ultimately decided by turnovers. West Genesee turned the ball over seven times, including three interceptions and two fumbles from Marks, a quarterback who was the model of consistency for his team this season.

Henninger has embraced the underdog role during its run toward the Class AA title. The result has been a relaxed and confident team that uses the big play to deflate the other side. After the Black Knights recovered the opening kick of the second half and scored, Blue was asked if the point of his team's attack is to strike quick.

His response echoed the confidence shown by his team week in and week out:

"Not really, we're just playing football," Blue said. "Just playing football."

Caption: PHOTO Li-Hua Lan/The Post-Standard HENNINGER PLAYERS gather to celebrate their 44-27 victory over defending state champion West Genesee in the Section III Class AA football final on Saturday at the Carrier Dome. For more photos, go to photos.syracuse.com/post-standard Li-Hua Lan/The Post-Standard SHAQUILLE LEGGETT (left) of Henninger tries to wrap up West Genesee's Jake Fietkiewicz during Saturday's Class AA final at the Carrier Dome. The Black Knights captured their first sectional title since 2000 with their ninth consecutive victory.

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