Written by Steve Ostermann
Wednesday, 11 November 2009 18:05

Rockets can’t overcome tough foe, sweltering weather in season-ending playoff loss

The Cedar Grove-Belgium Rockets didn’t mind going into last Saturday’s football showdown against St. Mary’s Springs as an underdog.

They knew that scoring an upset on the top-seeded Ledgers’ home field would be a tough task, but that wasn’t the only problem.

The Rockets also ran into a sunny, 75-degree day at Fruth Field in Fond du Lac that played in the hosts’ favor.

After hanging close for one half, Cedar Grove-Belgium eventually succumbed to a talented foe — and the heat — in a WIAA Division 5 quarterfinal game, 34-7.

“We knew that St. Mary’s Springs was the best team in Division 5, and they certainly played like it,” said Rockets coach Chris Zablocki, whose squad trailed by only 14-7 at intermission before running out of steam in the second half.

“It was a tough, physical game, a great game, but we had a lot of kids who play both ways. St. Mary’s had 28 returning seniors and most played only one way.

“We just got tired. We couldn’t match up with them for the whole game, especially in a heat wave.”

Springs (12-0) dashed the Rockets’ dream of returning to Madison for another Division 5 title game by taking control with a blend of hard-hitting defense and crisply executed offense.

Senior quarterback Mitch Beau — who completed eight of 15 passes for 133 yards and rushed for 104 yards and three touchdowns — was the biggest bugaboo in Cedar Grove-Belgium’s nightmare.

“Beau is really talented,” Rockets linebacker Spencer Jacque said.

“He read our defense very well and knew what to do in every situation.”

After the Springs’ defense stopped the Rockets twice on three-and-out possessions to start the third quarter, Beau led a 54-yard touchdown drive that put his team firmly in charge. In addition to completing a 17-yard pass for a key first down, he rushed six times for 13 yards, including a 1-yard sneak that gave the Ledgers a 21-7 lead with less than three minutes left in the quarter.

For good measure, Beau threw a 10-yard touchdown pass to tight end Eric Steffes on the first play of the fourth quarter and capped his big day with a 1-yard scoring run.

“Beau is a phenomenal athlete, a great quarterback,” said Zablocki, whose 11-1 team hadn’t allowed more than one touchdown in any previous game this year.

“He can run with the ball and has a rocket for an arm.

“Our defense did a great job for one half against them, but it’s really tough to hold them down for a whole game.”

Wearing black uniforms on an unexpectedly hot day didn’t make the Rockets’ job any easier. Another major factor was the loss of tailback Nic Vrubley, who sustained a shoulder injury early in the second quarter.

The senior, who rushed for more than 1,500 yards this season, was unable to carry the ball the rest of the game, though he did continue to handle kicking duties.

“When you lose such an instrumental part of your game plan, it has a great effect,” Zablocki said. “Ian Evans did a good job filling in for Nic, but we still missed having him back there.

“Nic has a way of hitting the holes so quickly, and we just didn’t have that against their defense.”

Evans contributed on the Rockets’ lone scoring drive, finishing a 12-play, 76-yard march with a 1-yard touchdown run.

After Beau put Springs up, 7-0, early in the second quarter, Cedar Grove-Belgium responded with a passing attack that caught the Ledgers off guard.

Quarterback Kyle Bruggink completed three passes for gains of 18, 11 and 19 yards during the drive, as the Rockets pulled even with 4:19 left in the half.

But coach Bob Hyland’s Ledgers wasted little time stealing the momentum back. They ripped off a 10-play, 60-play drive of their own, including a crucial 20-yard keeper by Beau on a third-and-6 play near midfield.

When Beau tossed a 3-yard touchdown pass to split end Erik Martin with just 46 seconds left, Springs owned a 14-7 lead — and left the Rockets facing their first halftime deficit of the season.

“That was a really big play by them, but we still thought we were in a great position going into the second half,” Zablocki said.

“We knew we would get the ball to start the half, but we just couldn’t establish a drive after that.”

Springs’ defense stymied the Rockets at every turn after the break, holding them without a first down and just 29 offensive yards.

Cedar Grove-Belgium trailed, 21-7, when cornerback J.J. Mitchell intercepted a Bruggink pass late in the third period — a turnover that led to Beau’s second touchdown run.

With Vrubley out, the Rockets’ potent three-pronged rushing attack had to rely on Evans and Jacque, a fullback who led them with 55 yards on 15 carries.

Jacque, one of nine Cedar Grove-Belgium starters who played both ways, said not having Vrubley in the backfield forced the Rockets to work extra hard.

“We played with them for the first half, but the heat definitely wore on us,” he said. “Losing our starting tailback changed our rotation, so Ian and I had to play more without getting a break.”

The frustrating finale overshadowed another outstanding season for the Rockets — at least

temporarily. But the disappointment should eventually give way to pride for a team that went 24-2 the past two years, including a state-runner-up finish in 2008.

“They’ve had another great year, and I want them all to remember that,” Zablocki said.

“This is the first group of seniors that I’ve been with for four years, and they started a tradition of excellence for Rocket football that they should be really proud of.”

Jacque, one of 12 seniors on the Cedar Grove-Belgium roster, concurred.

“I think we had a togetherness and work ethic that was special,” he said. “After losing in the state title game last year, we bonded together and wanted to take another run at it this year.

“We just came up a little short.”

In this Saturday’s Division 5 state semifinals, Springs will play Lancaster (12-0) while Arcadia (10-2) takes on Brillion (12-0). The winners will meet in the state title game Nov. 19.

QUARTERBACK KYLE BRUGGINK (12) and his Cedar Grove-Belgium teammates struggled to find consolation after their season ended with a 34-7 loss to St. Mary’s Springs in a WIAA Division 5 playoff football game in Fond du Lac. Photo by Sam Arendt

CEDAR GROVE-BELGIUM back Ian Evans broke through the line for a short gain in Saturday’s season finale. Photo by Sam Arendt