

Pirates' grit shows against champ

Written by STEVE OSTERMANN

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Gutsy effort keeps Port in fight with powerhouse Homestead until 2nd half

A 23-point loss in a football showdown with a defending champion usually isn't anything to write home about.

But for Port Washington coach John Bunyan, last Friday's battle with perennial powerhouse Homestead was defined by more than the final score.



Things like toughness, focus and resilience earned the host Pirates kudos despite a 44-21 defeat in their North Shore Conference opener against the WIAA Division 2 state champion.

"I was extremely proud of the effort our kids gave," said Bunyan, whose team stunned the Highlanders by overcoming an early deficit to take a 14-13 lead into halftime.

"We went into the game confident. We knew we were going to have to score some points and play strong defense to have a chance.

"We weren't outworked. We ran our offense and got a lead. But we got worn down a little in the second half and made some mistakes."

Homestead, a juggernaut that has lost only one conference game since 2002, appeared to be on its way to another easy win Friday when it raced to a 13-0 lead early in the second quarter.

However, Port buckled down and got back in the fight quickly. Aided by a pass interference call, the Pirates took their next possession deep into Homestead territory.

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On third-and-11, quarterback Ben Schueller lofted a long pass to the left side of the end zone for wide receiver Darius Will. The senior outleaped a defender and snared the ball for a 22-yard touchdown catch that pulled Port within 13-7 with just over nine minutes left in the half.

After the teams exchanged punts, the Pirates struck again. This time, linebacker Aidan Wojciehowski recovered a Homestead fumble at the Highlanders' 47.

Two plays later, Schueller connected with Marty Franzkowiak on a 32-yard pass that gave Port first-and-goal at the 2. Schueller capped the march with a 1-yard keeper with 42 seconds left, and the Pirates took a 14-13 lead into halftime.

The slugfest continued early in the third quarter.

After struggling to move the ball through the air in the first half, the Highlanders got the rushing attack moving. They drove 65 yards on six plays, all on the ground, to the end zone, with Vincent Wilkerson scoring on a 6-yard run.

A two-point conversion run by quarterback Nick Allen put Homestead up, 21-1, but Port had one more counterpunch.

This time, the Pirates drove 73 yards. After Schueller kept the march alive with a 10-yard keeper on third-and-7, he connected with Will on a 42-yard strike. Three plays later, Tom Rose took an option pitch from Schueller on a 6-yard touchdown run that tied the game at 21-all with 6:33 left in the quarter.

"We had some really big plays. Our kids weren't going to back down," Bunyan said.

The Pirates forced Homestead to punt on its next possession, but then things began to unravel.

A bad snap to Jake Krapfl in punt formation gave the Highlanders possession on the Port 9. A short time later, Allen scrambled for an 11-yard touchdown run that gave his team the lead for good at 28-21.

Homestead continued to use its rushing power and aggressive defense to gain field position. The Pirates gave up a safety when another bad snap to Krapfl sailed out of the end zone.

The Highlanders cashed in with a quick touchdown drive to take a 37-21 lead.

On Port's next possession, Schueller tried to throw the ball away under pressure but was intercepted at the Pirates' 8.

Matt Winters then capped the scoring by rushing for his second touchdown of the night.

"Things got away from us in the fourth quarter," Bunyan said. "Homestead has a big, physical team, and that made it tough."

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"We gave them 16 points on turnovers, and you can't afford to do that."

After holding Homestead to just 40 rushing yards in the first half, the Pirates wound up surrendering 228 yards on the ground for the game.

Port was outgained, 358-203, in total yards.

The Pirates were held to 94 yards rushing, led by Rose's 52 yards on 14 carries.

Schueller was 5-for-15 passing for 109 yards with two interceptions.

"Even though we lost, it was a great effort by our kids," Bunyan said. "They know they can play with anybody."

Port (2-1 overall) will try to bounce back Thursday, Sept. 12, when it travels to Nicolet for another conference game at 7 p.m.

Image Information: AN AERIAL BATTLE ensued when Port Washington's Jake Krapfl and a Homestead player tried to outwrestle each other for the ball on a pass play. Photo by Sam Arendt