Rushing back with success

Football team reaches state quarterfinals

Addi Jones

Sometimes teams are motivated to repeat past success. Other times, teams are motivated to avoid past disappointment. The latter was the case for Yutan High School's football team, who missed playoffs last year but used their motivation to make it to the state quarterfinals this season.

"I think it was pretty expected that we were gonna make the playoffs. But it felt really good after not making it last year. Last year was the first time in like six years that we hadn't made the playoffs. So it felt really good to get back," senior Maddox Wentworth said.

As the tenth seed, Yutan had a first-round match against seventh-seed Norfolk Catholic, the three-time defending state champion, but the team approached the game like any other.

"We knew that the only team that could beat us was us. The only reason we wouldn't execute is our own doing. So I think us knowing that we can do it and that nobody else is gonna stop us besides us was a very helpful mindset," senior Owen Sutter said.

The Chieftains' mindset worked as they beat Norfolk Catholic 36-8.

"Winning was great, but really the best part was watching how well we played. The boys played one of their best games, and beating Norfolk Catholic by almost 30 points on their field was a great accomplishment," head coach Dan Krajicek said.

The team set the tone early when they scored a touchdown on their first possession and then forced Norfolk Catholic to punt the ball on their fourth play of the drive.

"After we scored our first touchdown, Norfolk had the ball and we forced a three-and-out. During that possession, I had a tackle for loss of yards in the backfield that everyone was super excited about," junior Otto Henkel said.

Senior Owen Sutter pushes the Norfolk Catholic runner back. This was Sutter's first year playing defensive line, where he led the team with 4 sacks this season. (Jocelyn Sutter)

Not only did the team have big offensive plays throughout the game, but their defense also helped keep them in the game.

Sophomore Kaleb Fenner runs the ball while he avoids getting tackled by a Norfolk Catholic defender. Fenner had 1,490 rushing yards this season. (Jocelyn Sutter)

“We had some long runs on the pitch play, but those don’t happen without good blocks, and the entire O-line just blocked, really, really well,” Sutter said. “Turbo (Keiser) made a one-handed pull-down tackle when nobody else was around, which saved them from scoring.”

One player who contributed to the win in a big way was sophomore Kaleb Fenner, who broke the school record with 332 rushing yards.

“I had a really big run at the end. I think that kind of sealed it up a little bit and got us down the field more. So I think that really helped us out and helped the momentum keep going,” Fenner said.

This strong performance brought the Chieftains to the quarterfinals, where they would get a chance for a rematch with the second seed, Bishop Neumann, who beat them during the regular season. While the team was short of a victory with a score of 26-30, they still recognized the positives of the loss.

“We played Neumann week two, and we just got destroyed, and then we came back for round two and almost beat them in our final game. I thought that showed a lot of growth throughout the season,” Wentworth said.

The team had several strong plays on kick returns and punt returns that they were able to score touchdowns on, which gave them a chance at winning and kept it to a one-possession game.

“The three returns we had on special teams were our best plays that kept us in the game, like Fenner’s kick return in the first 30 seconds of the game, Boom’s (junior Carson Hollst’s) punt return and my kick return. I know at one point I had a sack that really got things going, or just any of our tackles for loss of yards,” Henkel said.

Despite the standout plays, the team missed some opportunities that kept Neumann ahead.

“I think if we had executed a few more times, it would have gone a lot differently, obviously, some calls, but you can’t change that. And I think we were prepared, but I don’t think we realized we were gonna have to play really good, like we did the week before,” Sutter said.

Despite the tough loss, the team was still proud of how their season ended.

“Even though we lost in the quarterfinals, I think the boys played very well in both games. We gave great effort and made a huge improvement over our last game with Neumann, so that is encouraging. Also, Yutan has only had 10 teams in school history make it past the first round of playoffs, so it’s important to appreciate it when it happens,” Krajicek said.

After all the positives that came from the postseason, the team is excited for what next year has in store for them.

Junior Nathan Daniell dodges his Bishop Neumann defender. Daniell averaged 33 rushing yards per game this season. (Ginger Eikmeier)

“I think next year we can win a state championship. This loss is going to hurt, but we are going to use it to push us to be better next year. We only had six seniors this year, so we will get a lot of people back, so I’m definitely excited for next year,” Fenner said.