



Vanden High football raids Vacaville

By Nick McConnell | Times Herald | October 7, 2023

VACAVILLE - With five minutes left in the fourth quarter of Friday night's Monticello Empire League matchup with visiting Vanden, Vacaville High School appeared poised to finish off the kind of comeback that can change a season.

The Vikings, their lead down to eight points, were on their own 17-yard line, facing a critical third-and-four situation that had them one play away from a three and out.

Vacaville's defense bore down on Vanden quarterback Kalani McLeod, who calmly stepped up to hit wide open receiver Marcellus Chandler behind the safeties. Chandler zipped off to the end zone, taking the Bulldogs' chance at an outright Monticello Empire League title with him.

The Vikings held on comfortably from there to win 24-9, handing the Bulldogs their first league loss since 2016, and only the school's seventh league loss since head coach Mike Papadopulous took over in 2005.

The last league loss for Vacaville was on Oct. 21 against Napa in the old version of the MEL. The winning streak for the Bulldogs ends at 31 games.

With the win, Vanden is in the drivers seat to win the MEL, although there is still three games to be played. The Vikings are a game up on every team with a 2-0 record, but more importantly own the tiebreaker with Vacaville.

There was little scoring the first half as the two teams were deadlocked at 3-all.

The first drive of the second half found the Bulldogs moving down the field smoothly until a personal foul left them in a 4th and 14 situation, again forcing them to settle for just 3 points on a 37-yard field goal. The Vikings took only four plays to respond, as McLeod found Brayden Chavez from the 47-yard line for the first touchdown of the night by either team with 6:00 left in the third, bringing Vanden ahead 10-6.

A flag and Jai'den Johnson sack found the Bulldogs forced to punt on the next drive, which saw the Vikings take the ball to the opposing 35 and the end of the third quarter before being forced to punt again.

But another Vacaville three-and-out opened the fourth quarter on the back of two more incompletions, and, having been given great field position, McLeod quickly capped off a nice Vanden possession with six points on a QB sneak.

Yet another four-down possession by the Bulldogs, finished by an ill-fated fake punt, gave the Vikings a chance to comfortably put the game away, but a holding penalty called back a Vanden touchdown from the 28, and Vacaville's Evan Blaetter came up with a huge interception.

The Bulldogs made it all the way to the Vanden four-yard line, but a holding penalty brought them back to the 13, from which they kicked their third field goal to bring them within eight.

Two good downs on defense were not enough to stop the Vikings, however, as the aforementioned 83-yard catch taken to the house by Chandler put the Vikings' fifth win of the season on ice.

Vanden Head Coach Sean Murphy was complimentary of Vacaville after the win, and said the entire league is strong this year. The team overcame numerous mistakes, he said, particularly in the first half.

"We just get way too hyped for this game," he said, "so we do some uncharacteristic stuff."

Persistence, however, made the difference late, he said, as Vanden's grit and resilience shown through. The team will get back to work tomorrow to prepare for their game next week against Will C. Wood.

"I think every game in this season now is going to be a war," he said.

Chavez (163 receiving yards, 1 TD) said the team treated this game like any other, unlike previous years where they hyped this matchup up.

"We're not here to win league championships," he said. "We're winning section championships out here. NorCal championships, state championships."

McLeod said second-half offensive adjustments were critical, particularly getting the ball off to his receivers faster. He hopes people know this team has multiple weapons on offense.

"A lot of people doubt us because we're a young team, but our young guys have stepped up," he said.

Papadopoulos said his team had plenty of pivotal opportunities to put the game away and failed to do so, although his defense had a phenomenal game.

"They're going to get some big plays," he said of this Vanden team. "They're a big-play offense."

The game was championship level football, the coach said, and his team will pick up and make adjustments.

"Our kids started to get some things going and we just couldn't finish our drives," he said.