

Herrera Vikings' horse

By BRETT SMITH

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They tried as hard as they could, but Montini's football team just could not bring down Geneva running back Nick Herrera on first contact Friday.

Herrera, a 5-foot-10, 180-pound senior, found every hole, shed Montini's big men like they were heavy winter coats and constantly fought for an extra few yards.

"That's kind of his strength," Geneva coach Rob Wicinski said. "He's a battler. He's a gamer. He just really does a nice job. ... We were determined to give the ball to him and see if Montini could stop him or not."

The end result was a 143-yard effort and a 21-16 Vikings win over a team that won an IHSA Class 4A state championship in 2004.

"It feels so great again to get back on the winning side," said Herrera, a three-year starter. "It was a huge boost that we needed and now we get rolling again."

Herrera scored the first two touchdowns of the game – a 1-yard run to cap a 40-yard drive that featured him in every play and a 22-yard pass from quarterback Shaun Ratay.

What else do you expect from a player who ran for 1,318 yards and scored eight touchdowns last season for a team that tied a school record in victories (11), won the Suburban Prairie North for the first time since 1985 and advanced to the Class 6A state quarterfinals?

"He's my guy," Wicinski said. "(Alex) Pokorny was last year, Herrera is this year. If teams stop Herrera, good for them. They can walk away with the win."

The Vikings (1-1 overall), sans 2004 *Chronicle* Player of the Year Pokorny, will rely on Herrera's talents much more this season.

Geneva also needs his leadership, as the team returns only four starters from last season.

"He's been real patient with the offensive line," Wicinski said. "He could have imploded a couple of times in practice - they're trying to learn and get things done. He's just been a real positive influence on them and with the young quarterback (Ratay) he holds the huddle together. I can't say enough about him."

Herrera has been patient with his linemen, a.k.a. the "Pigs," and they rewarded him Friday by pushing Montini's defense all over the field.

"The line matured so much between this week and last week," Herrera said. "We worked a lot on it during practice and they came along beautifully (Friday). They blocked their butts off and they did awesome."

In Week 1's 41-19 loss to Morris, the Class 6A runner-up in 2004, Herrera only carried the ball 12 times. But he still managed to gain 89 yards against a team that allowed an average of only 5.43 points per game last year.

"I was embarrassed that Herrera only got 12 carries last week," Wicinski said. "I said that wasn't going to happen again."

Don't expect it to happen in Week 3 against Oswego, either.