

# Geneva linebackers respond

## Coaches challenge them to stop Hughes, and unit delivers

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The formula for success was simple — to write down on paper. Stop one of the nation's top running backs, Hubbard's Robert Hughes, and you have a good chance of beating the Greyhounds and advancing to the Class 6A quarterfinals.

A major portion of the burden of carrying out that game plan Saturday afternoon for Geneva would fall on a quartet of talented linebackers who were up to the challenge.

Hughes ran for 110 yards on 23 carries, powered in for a 5-yard touchdown and tossed a 25-yard halfback option scoring pass to Darius Purcell in the first half.

But when it mattered the most in the second half, the Geneva defense and its linebacking crew were the ones coming up with the big plays in the Vikings' 21-13 victory at a wind-swept and chilly Burgess Field.

Throughout this season, the development of quarterback Shaun Ratay and the effort turned in by running back Chris Modjeski filling in for injured players who figured to be starters, have been key elements of the Vikings' success. Ratay's second-half effort against Hubbard, in passing for one score and scrambling in for another to erase a 13-7 halftime deficit, again showed how far he has come.

But the Geneva defense hasn't received the notoriety it deserves, except from the Viking coaches who have come out and stated that their linebackers, as a group, may be the best in the state.

Seniors Pat Schiller, Josh Brennan and Alex Springhorn and sophomore Brennan Quinn have been the backbone of a Geneva defense that has generally made life miserable for most opponents this season.

Schiller opened Saturday's game by stuffing Hughes at the line of scrimmage, sending a message that Hubbard was about to see some agile and strong defenders at work.

"That first hit set the tone for the game," Schiller said. "But I have to tell you that tackling that guy was like hitting a truck. He was a great kid, he's going to go a long way."

Springhorn, who put on a Superman impersonation by flying all over the field on a series of run blitzes, expressed the confidence the linebackers have embraced.

"We worked on our game plan all week, so I was not worried about it one bit," Springhorn said when asked if he thought his team could get burned by the constant rushing into gaps. "Hughes might be the best running back I've ever faced, but we were quicker than their linemen."

"I think we have one of the best linebacking groups in the state right now," Springhorn said. "We're playing together well and we hang out together, having that bond that you need to play football."

Brennan, who came into the game with a team-leading 95 tackles, and defensive tackle Colin Potts may have been the heroes of the day when they stopped Hughes for no gain on a fourth-and-3 at the Greyhounds' own 15-yard with six minutes left and the Vikings clinging to a 14-13 lead. It was a big gamble for Hubbard, and one that ultimately ended its season when Geneva scored less than a minute later.

"I saw him coming and tried to fill that hole as fast as I could, just like we practice all of the time," Brennan said. "I'm not going to lie, he (Hughes) hits you hard."

"We had a good night and the coach was calling good plays for us."

The coach calling those plays, Geneva defensive coordinator Frank Martin, knows what he's looking for directly behind his defensive linemen.

"You look for the best athletes to be linebackers," Martin said. "You go with those with the combination of speed and strength, and not being afraid to stick your nose in there and confront big linemen."

The Vikings have had that formula with its group of linebackers, who have been effective in either a traditional 4-3 defensive set, a 3-4, or a 4-4, which was utilized often Saturday to neutralize Hughes.

"Early in the season, we needed Schiller more offensively, and we were using a 4-3 a little more often," Martin said. "But we wanted to get all four of them on the field at the same time, but it really depended on the team we were playing."

Martin pointed to the victory against Kaneland as a night when all four linebackers being on the field at the same time paid dividends.

"We really took away Kaneland's short passing game, and we did things to Kaneland that no one else has been able to do all year," Martin said.

Wicinski, an outstanding linebacker in his collegiate days at Northern Illinois University, said his foursome has worked hard this year to be under control when blitzing.

"It's not as big of a gamble as you would think, because we have talked about our proper angles all season," Wicinski said. "We think we have four linebackers that can match just about anybody in the state."

"And we challenged them in this game," Wicinski said.

"We told them that we've been touting them as probably the best four linebackers in the state, and now it is time to show it against some Division I kids, and they took the challenge to heart and really came up big."

The work of the linebacking crew wasn't the lone factor in holding a powerful Hubbard offense to 238 total yards, as down linemen Potts, Karl Sandman, Matt Caliendo, Cory Hofstetter and Max Purcell faced an offensive line with a weight and height advantage.

But Martin knows what it has taken for him to put together what was one of the stingier defenses in the Western Sun Conference, which now has three teams in quarterfinal play.

“It all has to work together,” Martin said. “Our defensive ends and tackles came into camp really ready to go, and our secondary has really worked hard to improve each week, and all of that has allowed our linebackers to be able to do what they do.”

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