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Ratay steps up at crunch time for Vikings

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By **MIKE KNAPP** staff writer

OSWEGO -- Shaun Ratay doesn't do well with mediocrity, so he decided to do something about it.

The Geneva quarterback openly admitted that he hadn't played well for most of the Vikings' Class 6A state quarterfinal game against Oswego, so when he got the ball back with 3:07 to go in the fourth quarter, he knew what to do.

The 6-foot-7 senior marched the Vikings 69 yards in just 95 seconds, and Chris Modjeski put the exclamation point on the drive with a 1-yard plunge with 1:32 to play as Geneva moved on with a 17-14 win.

"I hadn't been playing the way I knew I should be playing," Ratay said. "Everybody else was playing good, I just needed to step up."

That final drive ended a game of seesaw scoring where each team took turns putting points on the board. Oswego owned a 7-3 lead at the break when Sean Dietz (16 carries, 46 yards) scampered in from 4 yards out with just over a minute to play, then Modjeski (17 carries, 108 yards) scored his first touchdown of the game with 7:37 to go in the third to give the lead back to Geneva at 10-7.

But Oswego jumped back in the lead late in the fourth when it went 68 yards in seven plays, with fullback Matt Casula (8 carries, 69 yards) rumbling up the middle almost untouched from 35 yards out with 3:12 to play to put the Panthers in front at 14-10.

Panic time for the Vikings? Not yet.

"We had plenty of time, we practice two-minute drills all of the time," said Geneva coach Rob Wicinski. "We thought if we just played pitch and catch like we did all summer long, we would be fine."

Up until that point, Ratay had misfired on 10 of his 19 passes and had just 83 yards on the night. He only completed two passes on the final drive, but both of them were of the big-play variety, with the second one saving the season.

Faced with a fourth-and-six at the Oswego 35, Ratay found Aaron O'Connell in a seam in the middle of the Panther defense, and hit his 6-foot-6 wide receiver on the numbers, with O'Connell hauling it in and taking it to the Oswego 13 with 1:57 to go.

"We've been doing that all year," said O'Connell, who caught four balls for 56 yards. "He just put it right there and I got it."

Ratay then scrambled 12 yards to the goal line to set up Modjeski's second score of the day. In all, Ratay passed for 43 yards and ran for another 12 in the drive.

"It all starts with Shaun," Wicinski said. "He is our leader."

"We had our shots to put them away, but they came up with two plays," said Oswego coach Karl Hoinkes. "They got the fourth down and then the quarterback sneaks out, and he doesn't do that if we don't give him the fourth down."

"But there are other plays in the game. You look at the ones at the end, and as you look back at it you can find mistakes that cost you early, too."

Oswego had one more shot but Geneva sacked Oswego quarterback Chris Schulz twice, including on fourth down when Josh Brennan wrapped him up to virtually wrap it up for the Vikings.

Schulz, who had been brilliant in both of Oswego's playoff wins (519 total yards) and had rushed for 197 yards and five scores in a win over Prairie Ridge last week, was mostly bottled up by the Geneva defense. The senior managed just 29 yards in 16 carries while completing nine passes for 81 yards.

"You look at him and he's not that big but he's a hard fighter," said Wicinski. "He's like a (Boone) Thorgesen, just an unbelievable competitor. You like to have guys like that on your team, guys that will just compete."

Geneva, now 11-1 on the season, will make its second trip to the state semifinals in three years. The Vikings will host Batavia next week with a trip to the championship game in Champaign on the line.

Batavia took round one of the battle with a 24-6 win in week nine, but the Vikings will get another shot at them in what will be the biggest game in the history of the rivalry between the neighboring schools.

"Being that it's a semifinal game with the opportunity to go to Champaign, I think will be all (the motivation) that we will need," Wicinski said. "I never thought we would go back home, but we are going back home, and let's hope it's nice to us."

Oswego ends its season at 10-2, and Hoinkes, who will retire at the end of the school year, walked off the field as head coach for the final time, ending a 26-year Hall of Fame coaching career that included 190 wins and two state championships.

"Heaven knows you'd like to continue, but I'm happy," Hoinkes said. "The quarterfinals are tough in Illinois, you don't make it every year. The kids did a great job, and we were one step away from making a little bit bigger of an impact, but that's OK." **Copyright 2006 Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten, or redistributed.**