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Geneva fights until the bitter end

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 Comments (No comments posted.)

EAST ST. LOUIS – Geneva’s football team will not be playing for a state title – that is certain after the Vikings fell to East St. Louis, 34-26, in the IHSA Class 7A state quarterfinals Saturday in front of a massive crowd, including hundreds making the trip from Geneva.

But the Vikings did display what coach Rob Wicinski termed “championship character” in erasing a 20-point halftime deficit and temporarily tying the game in the fourth quarter.

“I hope that says a little something about the program and the character of the kids,” Wicinski said. “We had nothing to lose. We came out and fought hard.”

Geneva tied the game at 26-all on the first play of the fourth quarter when junior tailback Michael Ratay completed his first pass of the season, a 15-yard touchdown on a halfback option to senior tight end Colin McCaffrey.



Geneva High School's Michael Faught (10) can't hang on to a pass as East Saint Louis' Javaughn Tabbs defends in the first half of Saturday's Class 7A quarterfinal game in East St. Louis. (Bill Boyce/For The Chronicle)

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The touchdown capped a 20-point rally for the Vikings (11-1), as they erased a 26-6 Flyers lead at the break.

But East St. Louis (11-1) answered on the next drive. Flyers sophomore quarterback Detchauz Wray hit junior Terry Hawthorne for a 23-yard touchdown play on a fourth-and-8 that wound up being the game-winner with 8:29 seconds left in the game.

“My hat’s off to East St. Louis,” Wicinski said. “What a great job of stopping momentum. They were done, and they stopped the momentum and turned it around.

“Great play on fourth-and-8. If you can execute that, you deserve to win.”

Geneva started in style on the game’s first offensive play, when senior Matt Caliendo forced the Flyers’ Courtney Molton to cough the ball up. Jake Conforti recovered to set up Ratay’s 5-yard touchdown run four plays later.

East St. Louis scored the next four touchdowns, however, to break the game open. Two touchdown runs by Molton, one by freshman Vincent Arterbridge and a 79-yard interception return for a score from junior Kraig Appleton put the Vikings down, 26-6, at the break.

“We tried to stay as positive as we could at halftime,” Geneva senior Jordan Boser said. “Coach Wicinski told us that it’s a four-quarter game and that we’re a fourth-quarter team. We couldn’t roll over. It’s the last game of the year. How could you roll over?”

The interception return proved even more costly than breaking the tie. Geneva senior quarterback Mike Mayszak was taken down on the play and he broke his right collarbone, forcing senior backup Steve Diemand into action.

The first gadget play that worked for the Vikings came on their first possession of the second half, when wide receiver Michael Faught hit Ratay for a 49-yard touchdown after receiving a lateral from Diemand. Three plays later, Molton lost another fumble, and Ratay scored from 29 yards out on the next play, suddenly making it 26-19 in less than a minute.

Ratay ran for 146 yards on 28 carries and wound up accounting for 34 touchdowns on the season, 29 rushing.

"He's a heck of an athlete," Wicinski said of Ratay. "Whenever we can get the ball in his hands, we try to do it. And the thing is, he was able to execute. He did a great job."

After the Flyers took the lead for good in the fourth, the Vikings' final two possessions ended with a Diemand interception, his third of the game, and a sack of Diemand as time expired. He completed 7 of 19 passes for 47 yards in his only extended playing time of his career.

"Steve was great," Ratay said. "Coming in unexpected like that is always tough. He fought. He had some tough plays, but it's not his fault. He came in and did great."

Ratay was more distraught after the game than most juniors would be, but it was understandable. He had been playing up in age since he was in grade school, so these seniors were his teammates most of his career.

"We've got a lot of heart on this team," Ratay said. "I'll never forget these guys. They're my best friends."

COMMENTS

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