

 Daily Herald

Carmel cannot contain Ratay

By Patricia Babcock McGraw | Daily Herald Columnist

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The football coaches at Ball State will be getting an urgent phone call today.

A proud alum has a hot tip for them.

"I'm going to say, 'There's this kid - and you need to take a long look at him,'" said Carmel coach Andy Bitto, who was a football letterman at Ball State in 1984.

That kid is Geneva senior running back Michael Ratay, who torched Bitto's Corsairs for 190 rushing yards (on 31 carries) and 3 touchdowns on Saturday afternoon.

He was the difference-maker as host Geneva turned back Carmel 35-21 in a Class 7A IHSA state quarterfinal. The fourth-seeded Corsairs end their season with a 10-2 record while No. 1 Geneva keeps chugging along at 12-0.

"We did what we could," Carmel defensive back Jake Sinkovec said of Ratay, who accounted for 84 percent of Geneva's rushing yards. "He's a really good athlete, a really good running back. He's quick and a really strong kid and he's good at breaking tackles. We respect what he did a lot."

Ratay and the Vikings will now host Crystal Lake South in the semifinals next weekend.

Another game gives Ratay another chance to impress. And that's exactly what he needs.

Despite mind-blowing numbers that include 2,604 yards and 43 touchdowns - in just this season alone - Ratay says the recruiting front has been fairly quiet.

"I don't know where I'm going to go," said Ratay, insinuating that there aren't many options at the moment. "I've been sending my tapes out. Hopefully, I'll get a scholarship somewhere. If not, I'll probably try just walking on somewhere."

That's what former Carmel star fullback Jimmy Potempa had to do. He's at Michigan now and has done so well that he actually travels with the team.

But as a high school senior, he got no bites from big-time schools. Bitto says Ratay reminds him a lot of Potempa.

Both are excellent runners, with speed, vision, strength and good balance. But both have one glaring deficiency in the eyes of college recruiters: size.

Ratay is listed at 5-foot-10. Potempa is 5-foot-9 - on a good day.

"It just shows you that you really can't judge a book by its cover," Bitto said. "I think Ratay is worth taking a chance on, for sure. He's the best we've faced this year.

"He's got great balance. And he's a real strong, real built kid, who can run over people. I bet if he were a wrestler, he'd be great. He's one of those kids where you think he's going to get 2 yards, and he gets 5. We had him stopped twice on a play today and it should have been a 2-yard loss. And he got 14 yards. He just

accelerates through tackles, he breaks tackles - and against way bigger people."

A humble Ratay, who says he has never been a wrestler but used to play basketball, gives a ton of credit to his offensive line. But when pressed by reporters about what else makes him successful, he admitted that he's worked diligently in the weight room under the close supervision of a pro.

"My stepdad Tommy Kersting used to be a body builder," Ratay said. "He got me in the gym, on a routine. I've also worked with a speed trainer who used to be on the Cleveland Browns. Just working out hard like that has helped a lot."

Being a student of the game has also helped Ratay. He says he loves to watch videos of Walter Payton for tips and inspiration.

"I've always been a fan of his," said Ratay, who was Walter Payton-like in rushing for his 18th consecutive 100-plus-yard game - a streak that dates back to last season. "Just the way (Payton) ran - he had amazing balance, never ran out of bounds, never quit."

Ratay doesn't seem to have an off switch either. And if he does, the Corsairs sure couldn't find it.

"I could tell that (the Carmel defense was) getting frustrated," Ratay said. "But they were really great. They helped me up after every play. They weren't dirty at all. They were real good - real good sports."

In the wake of a tough loss, Bitto managed a smile when he heard that.

"Our kids respected him very much," Bitto said of Ratay. "But our kids would do that with anyone. When we win, we try to win classy, when we lose we try to lose classy."

"We've just got to keep thinking of the bigger picture. Winning 10 games in a season is a hard thing to do, and we did that. It's something to be proud of, and I told the kids that. I'm really proud of them. We just faced a guy who is better than us."

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