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Champaign calling

Geneva a win away from school's 2nd state title berth By JAY SCHWAB
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GENEVA – A win tonight, and the Geneva football team would make history with its first trip to the IHSA state championship game since 1975, and second ever.

Michael Ratay, meanwhile, is making history every week.

The Vikings' senior running back carries 2,608 rushing yards on the season into tonight's Class 7A state semifinal against Crystal Lake South. He has rocketed to 14th on the all-time, IHSA single-season list, passing such luminaries as current Chicago Bear Garrett Wolfe, former Illini running back Pierre Thomas and recent Wheaton Warrenville South sensation Dan Dierking.

Better yet, Ratay, who has 42 rushing touchdowns on the season, is only three scores from tying the state's all-time record for TD runs in a season (Highland's Billy Greenwald, 45, 1989).

He also could pass the 3,000-yard milestone if he hits his average of 217 rushing yards a game – provided the Vikings (12-0) win tonight and advance to next weekend's state championship game in Champaign.

That outcome, naturally, is Ratay's focus, although he acknowledges some goosebumps at being listed in such heady company, noting he followed Wolfe's college career closely at Northern Illinois.

"Him being a smaller back like me gave me some motivation," Ratay said.

Geneva coach Rob Wicinski said he was unsure Ratay could trump a superb junior season, in which Ratay rushed for 1,743 yards in 12 games, considering what a focal point he has become for defenses. That challenge was especially pronounced early in the season, as the Vikings' passing game did little to persuade defensive backs to steer clear of the box.

Still, Ratay has barreled through pursuers, routinely breaking two, three, four tackles a run.

"I think this kid is a coach's dream, a one-time-a-career-type player for a coach," Wicinski said.

A feverish offseason of preparation – Ratay worked out with the trainer used by Geneva grad Pat Schiller, now a linebacker at NIU – turned an already powerful back into a dynamo that no team this season has been able to withstand.

"You've got to have the perfect tackle and the perfect positioning on him every play," Crystal Lake South coach Jim Stuglis said. "Otherwise it's not going to happen."

Unfortunately for the Gators' defense, Ratay isn't its only problem tonight. Stuglis expressed reservations about matching up with a beefy, all-senior Vikings offensive line that includes 305-pound right tackle Anthony Miller and 275-pound center Anthony Strauss.

"We don't match up very well against them," Stuglis said. "They're bigger and stronger on every position on the offensive line. There's not much we can do about it. We can't change that fact. We're going to have to stay low, create some piles and hopefully our linebackers can find some seams to get to the ball carrier."

Geneva's defense, meanwhile, faces its third straight offense that runs a variation of the Wing-T, although Wicinski said the Gators (10-2) employ more of a power-oriented attack than Rockton Hononegah or Carmel.

"They get off the ball nice and they've got decent size," Wicinski said. "[Stuglis] is very stubborn. He plays field position – third-and-8, he'll run it and punt it and let his defense go out there. They don't make mistakes, very tight to the vest offensively, and the same goes for his defense, too. They just wait you out, wait for you to make mistakes and fall apart."

The forecast for tonight will send fans scurrying for scarves and mittens, with temperatures likely to be in the 20s for the primetime kickoff. That makes for a lousy night to be driven to the ground, but Vikings fullback Drew Fagot doesn't seem to mind, saying "that's what football's all about, playing in the elements."

"You have to make sure you hit him harder than he hits you," Fagot said. "Otherwise it's going to really sting."

Not as much, though, as if the Vikings allow a berth in the state championship game to pass them by.

Ratay is relishing the opportunity his historic season has made possible.

"It's pretty unbelievable," Ratay said.

Crystal Lake South (10-2) at Geneva (12-0)

7 p.m. today

Crystal Lake South

Offense

While Gators coach Jim Stuglis still considers his offense a Wing-T, Geneva coach Rob Wicinski said the Gators are "kind of faking it a little bit" with their formations, and their plays actually remind him of the the power-oriented Vikings, who run out of an I-formation. "They're about the closest to our offense as we've seen this year," Wicinski said. Junior halfback Colin Masterson (177 carries for 1,014 yards) and senior fullback Derek Mortensen (178 carries for 666 yards) are Crystal Lake South's featured backs, and they owe much of their success to 6-foot-4 tight end Vince Benedetto, "probably the best blocker we've had in quite a long time," Stuglis said. The Gators have a sophomore quarterback in Drew Ormseth, who is the younger brother of Ian Ormseth, South's quarterback the previous two years. Ormseth isn't asked to throw much, but he was 8-for-14 for 182 passing yards two weeks ago against Rockford Boylan, the first of two then-unbeaten teams the Gators have knocked out this postseason.

Defense

This is the first season Crystal Lake South has switched from a 4-3 to a 3-3-5 package, and the move seems to be agreeing just fine with the Gators. "I think the advantage for us is traditionally we can't find those big, huge defensive linemen," Stuglis said. "We've always had more the smaller, quicker guys, so that kind of fits the situation we have right now." The defense has been the catalyst as the Gators have fashioned consecutive upsets against Rockford Boylan (28-0) and Cary-Grove (14-7, overtime). Some of the Gators' premier defensive players are safety Mike Frericks, defensive end Ryan Kuhn and outside linebacker Max Bush. Wicinski considers the Gators' defense a difficult assignment. "That 3-3 stack is a tough matchup for me," Wicinski said. "It's a patience deal. They send linebackers left, right so it makes things a little bit difficult. They have guys flying all over the place. They're going to catch us at times, but I'm hoping I can catch them, too." Crystal Lake South tied a program record with four shutouts on the season.

What they need to do to win

A shortage of confidence is unlikely to be a factor after huge wins against Boylan and the Gators' archrival, Cary-Grove. "The intimidation factor of playing an undefeated team might not be there because of playing previously two undefeated teams, but the fact of the matter is it's a very good football team that we're playing," said Stuglis, who called Geneva the team's toughest foe. If the Gators can exploit some vulnerabilities in Geneva's defense Carmel exposed in the first half last week, they might be able to score enough on a cold night to topple another unbeaten.

Geneva

Offense

Vikings running back Michael Ratay is averaging 10 yards a carry on the season, and has rushed for a staggering 2,608 yards on 262 carries. If Ratay (42 rushing touchdowns) rushes for four more scores tonight, he'll become the state's all-time single season record-holder. He has been assisted by an all-senior offensive line that Ratay praises at every turn. "If the offensive line wasn't there, no one would be getting any touchdowns," Ratay said. Fullback Drew Fagot also has an impressive yards per carry average (7.2 on 77 carries for 552 yards). Stuglis is determined not to let the Vikings' prodigious ground game lull them to sleep against the pass, as Geneva quarterback Brandon Beitzel has proven dangerous in recent weeks off play action. Beitzel is 51-for-101 passing for 710 yards on the year, and has limited his mistakes in recent weeks. Brandon Lee and Jason Holmes have been the Vikings' top receivers. Athletic safety Sean Grady, a part-time running back last year, saw substantial action at receiver against Carmel after playing minimal offense throughout the season.

Defense

Geneva's defense knuckled down against Carmel in the second half last week after allowing the Corsairs to take the lead with a pair of first-half touchdowns. The Vikings' size and strength on the defensive line is one of their calling cards, even with defensive tackle Frank Boenzi sidelined (mono) so far this postseason. Even if Boenzi returns today, his strength and conditioning might be a concern as he rebounds from the illness. Linebackers Brennan Quinn, Trevor Hyslop and Bret Shannon are capable of cleaning up whatever sneaks past the front four. In the secondary, safety Sean Grady is the leader, but Geneva has also received strong contributions from Michael Santacaterina, Alex Olenek and Jake Landau. The Vikings have excelled against run-dominant offenses all season, making up for occasional quickness deficits with excellent strength, effective angles of pursuit and sound tackling technique. Grady leads the team with 27 solo tackles, while Quinn is tops with 71 total solo and assist takedowns.

What they need to do to win

Geneva's formula has worked 12 straight times, and there shouldn't be much of a need to deviate tonight. Pound the ball to Ratay and Fagot, employ the play-action on occasion and let a glut of defensive playmakers flow to the ball and blast away. If the Vikings do those things, and hold on to the ball on a frigid night, the mood at Burgess Field tonight will be much different than in semifinal losses to Bloomington (2004) and Batavia (2006).

Jay Schwab's pick: Geneva 27, Crystal Lake South 14

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