

 Daily Herald

Flyers pull away from Geneva

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CHAMPAIGN - Overcoming field position hadn't been a problem for the Geneva football team this season.

All season long, the Vikings handed the ball to all-state running back Michael Ratay and let the all-senior offensive line dominate opposing teams. But during Saturday's Class 7A championship at Memorial Stadium in Champaign, the Vikings succumbed to miserable field position in the second half and a feisty East St. Louis defense as the Vikings were defeated by the Flyers 33-14.

It was the seventh championship for East St. Louis and its first since 1991.

"We couldn't get the offense to sustain and that was critical to get the defense off the field," Geneva coach Rob Wicinski said. "Not just because they were tired but (East St. Louis) has so many threats. It goes back to our old mantra of controlling the clock and playing field position and we couldn't do either in the second half."

Leading 7-6 to begin the third quarter, the Vikings received the second-half kickoff just like they had the prior two weeks. But unlike victories over Carmel and Crystal Lake South, in which they scored touchdowns to open the second half, the Vikings failed to convert a first down. Making matters worse was Terry Hawthorne's 40-yard punt return which gave the Flyers the ball at the Geneva 20-yard line.

Defensive tackle Frank Boenzi dropped Vincent Arterbridge for a 5-yard loss and Phil Birschbach defended a third down pass play setting up a fourth-and-goal from the 10-yard line. But the Vikings couldn't come up with another big stop as quarterback Detchauz Wray lobbed a screen pass to Hawthorne, who bumped off a Geneva defender and dove into the end zone to give the lead back to the Flyers for good at 12-7.

"We went into half and really wanted the guys to come out and pin them three and out," East St. Louis coach Darren Sunkett said. "We did that and got a spark and the kids responded really well."

That was mainly because the Vikings' offense found itself buried time and time again. They began their first five drives in the second half from the 13-, 21-, 16-, 19- and 22-yard lines, converted just a single first down during those drives. They were stopped on a fake punt and also committed a turnover which gave the Flyers the ball at the Geneva 5.

East St. Louis (13-1) broke the game wide open early in the fourth quarter. Wray connected with Kraig Appleton for a 42-yard touchdown pass with 10:34 remaining, and after Hawthorne intercepted a Brandon Beitzel pass and returned it to the Geneva 5-yard line, the Flyers needed just two plays before Courtney Molton (14 carries, 79 yards) blasted into the end zone from 2 yards out. In a matter of 58 seconds the Flyers had scored twice and jumped ahead 26-7.

Wray completed 10-of-20 passes for 198 yards and 4 touchdowns, 3 which came in the second half.

"We knew it was going to be an issue and a challenge (to stop him)," Wicinski said. "You give him 3 seconds and you've got problems. You give him 5, 6 or 7 seconds and you've really got some issues. We were trying to get some pressure on the young man but he did a nice job of getting out of the way."

Geneva defensive end Cory Hofstetter said trying to stop so many threats took its toll on the Vikings in the

second half.

"They were very good at block and their running backs ran hard and held onto the ball," he said. "We had a stalemate in the first half and we played just as hard in the second half but they just came out and played a better game."

While the Vikings couldn't stop Wray, the Flyers did something no team has been able to do this season - slow down Ratay (26 carries, 91 yards).

Ratay's streak of 19 consecutive games of rushing for 100 or more yards came to a close. He also didn't score a rushing touchdown in a game for the first time this year.

"We knew their offense was built around Ratay and we just had 22 eyes on him," Sunkett said. "If we were going to lose we were going to let someone else beat us and it really wasn't hard, we use a bear front defense and just had 22 eyes spying him."

The Vikings used Ratay as a decoy to score their first touchdown with 8:59 left in the first half. Running the same play that they used to score a touchdown against Carmel, Beitzel and Ratay rolled to the right and Michael Santacaterina was wide open on the left sideline. Beitzel reached him for a 15-yard touchdown and Sean Grady's PAT gave the Vikings a 7-6 lead. The Flyers had enjoyed a 6-0 lead on Wray's 64-yard touchdown pass to Chris Murphy, a play that ended the first quarter.

It was probably only fitting for Beitzel to connect with Ratay for a 21-yard touchdown pass with 43 seconds remaining in the game. While the game was out of hand, it gave the fans clad in Geneva blue a chance to cheer a Geneva team that was finishing its best season in 33 years.

"I'm very proud our kids and the senior leadership we've had that has taken us to a whole other level this year," Wicinski said. "This has been a great experience and they should all be very proud."