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# Geneva's O-line graduates from pigs to hogs

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When your team hasn't advanced to the state championship football game in 33 years, the hunger to achieve such a feat is larger than ever.

For the Geneva Vikings, satisfying that hunger will require 2 more victories - 3 and their fans will celebrate the first state football title in school history.

But first things first, as the unbeaten Vikings (11-0) prepare for Saturday afternoon's Class 7A state quarterfinal clash with Carmel (10-1) at Burgess Field.

If Geneva's quarterfinal opponent sounds a little familiar, it is.

Four years ago, the Vikings scored a 35-21 second-round victory over the then-defending state champion Corsairs at Burgess Field.

As for the hunger element, several Geneva players whetted their appetites Monday night at the home of Vikings all-everything tailback Michael Ratay.

After all, when the running back you block for has rushed for 2,414 yards and 38 touchdowns, it only seems appropriate that the offensive line be treated to dinner on the house.

"I owe them a steak dinner," Ratay said just before Monday's post-practice feast. "My stepdad and I talked about it before last week's game (against Rockton Hononegah) - that if the line blocked well, we'd have them all over at the house."

How well did the O-line perform last Saturday?

Fullback Drew Fagot tallied the Vikings' first touchdown on a 58-yard run through the middle of the Rockton defense, and Ratay enjoyed his "usual" 206-yard, 3-TD performance (he added a TD reception and also threw for a TD) during Geneva's 46-28 second-round victory.

Monday night's appreciative guests included center Anthony Strauss, left tackle John McNeil, left guard Greg Gregory, right tackle Anthony Miller and right guard Bryce Biel.

"I've been bugging him (Ratay) to have us over for dinner for a long time," said the 6-5, 260-pound McNeil. "Once you start having a couple 300-yard games, you have to give us some credit."

Averaging nearly 265 pounds per person, the Vikings' offensive line has possessed intimidating size, strength and speed throughout the 2008 campaign.

"It's time that people notice our offensive line," said Ratay.

Gregory (6-1, 245) and Biel (6-1, 240) were starters as juniors while Miller (6-2, 305) and McNeil also saw plenty of playing time in the trenches a year ago.

"I think our experience helps tremendously," said Biel. "The last two years I've learned a lot more about the game and adjusted to the speed of it."

There's an added advantage to having a senior-dominated offensive line.

"We're able to run more variations of plays this year," said Biel.

Ratay agrees that the extra year of experience has been a plus.

"I think it helps a lot," said Ratay, who is just 7 TDs shy of the state's single-season record (45 set by Highland's Billy Greenwald in 1989). "We've really bonded on the field and get along well off it, too."

Strauss is the new kid on the block - and literally right in the middle of things at center.

"I didn't get to play at all last year," said the 6-0, 275-pound senior. "But I worked my tail off to get where I'm at."

While the school year is only 3 months old, Geneva's offensive line has already earned a diploma of sorts.

"At the beginning of the season, our nickname was 'The Pigs,'" said Biel. "Now we've graduated to become known as 'The Hogs.'"

Don't think for a minute that "The Hogs" haven't enjoyed opening holes for the ever-elusive Ratay & Co.

"Pride is a tremendous thing for our team and we take a lot of pride blocking for one of the best backs in the state of Illinois," said Biel. "The best thing about Michael is off the field he never talks football and never talks about himself."

"He makes it look easy and makes us look good," said McNeil. "When we're all hitting on all cylinders it really shows. It's pretty easy to see when we're scoring more touchdowns."

There's no better feeling for an offensive lineman than to watch the back of a teammate get farther away off in the distance.

"If you give him (Ratay) a little hole, he'll make some guys miss," said Gregory.

There's one thing these guys certainly won't miss - a free dinner.

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