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Mr. Touchdown

Ratay ties IHSA single-season record for rushing TDs By JAY SCHWAB
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The Geneva football team's offense was a charging cavalry, from opening night in August to the state championship game in late November.

The burly offensive line, the sturdy fullback, the tight ends – all barreling at the defense with a conquering army's confidence.

There in their midst, of course, was Michael Ratay. The Vikings blocked for him, but their resolve strengthened because of him, fueled by the sense of brotherhood Ratay inspired.

Ratay's intangibles as a teammate were at the heart of a senior season in which the two-time Chronicle Player of the Year rushed for 2,855 yards and tied the IHSA single-season record with 45 rushing touchdowns.

They also are why Geneva coach Rob Wicinski has a ready retort whenever he is questioned about how the 5-foot-11, 175-pounder without remarkable speed will hold up at the next level.

"That's what this kid is – he's a locker room presence," Wicinski said. "He's the type of kid people just feed off of and like to be around. When things need to be ratcheted up, he's able to do it. When things need to be quieted down, he's able to do it. He has great instincts in the game of football, and life in the football world."

Despite being the center of attention throughout the Vikings' journey to Champaign, Ratay was the ultimate company man.

He didn't boast about his triumphs; he considered all of his achievements team records. He didn't strut in the end zone; he flipped the ball to the referee. He never distanced himself from the pack; he had the offensive linemen over for weekly steak dinners.

"He's just the kind of guy you never want to stop blocking for," Vikings left tackle John McNeil said.

Ratay said it's simply the way Peggy Kersting, his mother, raised him.

"I get that from my mom," Ratay said. "She always told me don't be selfish, and don't brag like that."

From a braggart's perspective, it's a shame. Some prime material went to waste.

Less than one week removed from the Vikings' title game loss to East St. Louis, Ratay's body of work already takes on a mythical quality.

There was the Glenbard South game, when Ratay scored two fourth-quarter touchdowns to rally the Vikings from the verge of a major upset. The rivalry showdown with Batavia, when Ratay slammed the Bulldogs with six touchdowns and 353 rushing yards. The state quarterfinal win against Carmel, in which Ratay gouged a team hailed for its run defense for 134 second-half yards, followed by the three crucial TDs against Crystal Lake South to cement the Vikings' semifinal victory.

"I think the most impressive thing, really from the time I watched him as a freshman playing basketball, was his intensity level," Batavia coach Mike Gaspari said. "It's always the same, which is really special. It's one of those things you can't coach."

Some would consider Ratay's penchant for being at his best late in games the mark of a warrior. In Ratay's view, it's

the mark of an excellent line.

"A lot of the games you could tell in the second half we'd start to take over the game on the line," Ratay said. "They started making the line of scrimmage two yards down the field. It makes it a lot easier on me."

Even when they didn't, Ratay thrived. If he wasn't caroming off multiple tackles, he was pausing dutifully for his linemen to set up the proper path before bursting through for a big gain.

"I think the patience comes with confidence," Wicinski said. "He's extremely confident in his abilities. He's confident in his teammates. That gives him the ability to sit back and be patient.

"Plus it's in his genes, so to speak. He's kind of a low-key type kid. He doesn't run around with his head cut off. ... He kind of takes his time with just about everything he does."

That holds true with his college selection, although not necessarily by choice. Big schools have been slow to warm to Ratay, despite all those yards after contact, all those touchdowns and all that winning.

He'll wind up somewhere, no doubt, but given the chance to state his case to Division I coaches, Ratay, true to form, declined.

"I would just leave that to them to determine where you play," Ratay said.

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