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No shame in 2nd place

Flyers too athletic for Vikings By KEVIN DRULEY
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CHAMPAIGN – Michael Santacaterina had known Kraig Appleton for all of three hours Saturday when he went out of his way to embrace him.

Never mind that Appleton had been running routes at Santacaterina and Geneva for most of that time, trying to win the IHSA Class 7A football state championship for East St. Louis.

The Flyers succeeded in that regard at the University of Illinois' Memorial Stadium, pulling away 33-14 to spoil the Vikings' unbeaten season. Santacaterina, however, found it tough to be bitter.

"They were classy on the field," the junior defensive back/running back said. "They were athletes and they played a great game. They really played a great game."

For the final quarter especially, East St. Louis (13-1) discovered its high-flying, high-speed offensive rhythm. Despite an uncharacteristically sluggish showing on offense, Geneva (13-1) had hung in to that point, leading 7-6 at halftime and trailing only 12-7 after the third quarter.

But speed often kills, and the Flyers eventually brought the Vikings down. Their athleticism and quickness was a focus leading up to the game and a threat before East St. Louis finally broke through.

That each of the Flyers' three fourth-quarter scoring drives started at no worse than their own 40-yard line only helped them.

And hurt Geneva.

"It's going to be hard to stop a good offense when you have that good of field position all game," Vikings junior defensive tackle Frank Boenzi said.

East St. Louis did most of its damage through the air, as junior quarterback Detchauz Wray threw for four touchdowns to four different receivers.

Two of the scores – to Terry Hawthorne and Keante Minor – covered 10 yards, but the others were longer and more acrobatic.

Appleton's touchdown went for 42 yards as the 6-foot-3 senior came back for an underthrown pass to outleap Geneva's Phil Birschbach in the end zone.

"We just couldn't move the ball on offense and couldn't get our defense off the field," Santacaterina said. "They moved the ball, they milked the clock, they made some unbelievable plays I've never seen before."

"It's just heartbreaking, it really is. You get this far, we really want to finish business and we didn't. There was a lot to be proud of, but we really wanted that trophy."

He meant the one awarded for first place, because Geneva still received a trophy for taking second, just as it did in the school's only other state final appearance in 1975.

"The guys really took it to another level," said Vikings coach Rob Wicinski, who has led the team to five consecutive playoff appearances after zero his first five years. "I'm really proud of all these guys, all the young men. It was a great experience."

East St. Louis outgained Geneva 356-189 despite a horrendous night of penalties (19 for 166 yards) that set a state championship record.

The game featured only one turnover, but it proved costly. Viking Brandon Beitzel's fourth-quarter interception led to Appleton's touchdown and a 19-7 lead.

Beitzel threw for two scores of his own – 15 yards to Santacaterina in the second quarter and 21 yards to senior Michael Ratay in the game's final minute. The touchdown was the 47th of the year for Ratay, who finished with an IHSA single-season record-tying 44 on the ground.

Ratay, too, marveled at the Flyers' speed despite rushing 16 times for 91 yards while catching six passes for 58 yards.

"Getting to the second level, they're coming around our lead blockers and going right to the ankles," he said. "Not a lot of teams can do that."

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