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Title game a sniff away

GENEVA – Sure, the Geneva football team smells it.

By now, it's impossible not to. The Class 7A football state championship game is only one win away after the Vikings surged past Carmel, 35-21, in Saturday's quarterfinal at Burgess Field.

But this didn't sneak up on the Vikings. They've been smelling it for a long time now.

Smelling it since coach Rob Wicinski began turning this program from punching bag to powerhouse, resulting in two previous state semifinal appearances in the last five years.

Since last year's then-undefeated Vikings were bounced from the playoffs by East St. Louis in the quarterfinals.

Certainly since this year's team assembled for two-a-days in LaFox, and the Vikings looked around the practice field and saw Michael Ratay flanked by a pack of linemen that look more like a prize fighter's entourage than a group of high school kids.

And when Geneva dismantled Batavia to end the regular season at 9-0, drawing a No. 1 seed on its side of the 7A draw, it was only natural to start smelling Champaign.

Now the confirmation has arrived. The state championship game is no longer wild ambition; it's right there for the Vikings to take.

Here's betting the Vikes do just that. Geneva should beat Crystal Lake South in the semifinals next week and spend Thanksgiving weekend fighting for a state championship.

"We're definitely smelling it, I can tell you that, but it's one game at a time," said Geneva offensive lineman Bryce Biel, who returned to the game despite what appeared to be a significant elbow injury during Saturday's game. "We can't look ahead and disappoint the town and all the fans that support us."

While the Vikings must take that sober-minded approach, Geneva fans might want to start scoping out central Illinois hotel rates. Geneva probably survived its toughest pre-Champaign test in disposing of a quality Carmel team that grabbed a pair of first-half leads before succumbing to the Vikings' sensational power running game in the second half. Crystal Lake South is a hot team, but the Gators (10-2) - who upset Cary-Grove in overtime on Saturday after losing to the Trojans during the regular season - are no juggernaut, earning narrow wins in recent weeks against four-loss teams Woodstock and St. Charles North.

In other words, they're no Geneva. And Geneva, by the way, is looking better all the time.

Perhaps the most impressive chapter in an amazing season came when the Vikings seized command in the second half Saturday after a tense, 14-all first half.

Geneva looked every bit a state title contender in jamming the ball down the Corsairs' throat when the season was on the line, capitalizing on an offensive line that often is at its best as defenses begin to tire in the second half.

And, as Wicinski noted, even when the offensive line misfired, it's still a dicey proposition for those looking to bring down No. 21.

"I saw [Ratay] get blown up a couple times, and he kept moving," Wicinski said.

It would take a meteorologist popping anti-depressants by the handful to find a black cloud anywhere near this team right now.

After a somewhat shaky playoff opener against Rolling Meadows, the Vikings have roared to impressive victories against Rockton Hononegah and Carmel, showcasing a much-improved passing game and a defense that has withstood the loss of one of its top players - defensive tackle Frank Boenzi, still recovering from mono - in splendid fashion.

If the Vikings' running game was going to meet its match, you figured it would likely come Saturday, against a Corsairs defense that has devoured opponents' running backs all season.

Instead, the Vikings plowed their way to 224 rushing yards in a performance worthy of setting a new program record with 12 wins in a season.

"If we play the game we play, there's no way of stopping us, but we still haven't played our best game of the year," Biel said. "That's what coach says every practice and every game."

They might not need that best game next week; a sharp one, a workmanlike Vikings effort, should be enough to advance Geneva to Champaign.

That would be a merry development for Wicinski, whose superb work with the Vikings comes with only one "but" - no trip to state, yet.

"I've been on my home field twice in the semis and I couldn't get the job done," Wicinski said. "Hopefully the third time's the charm."

Hope? Let Crystal Lake South hope.

With Ratay and Co. in top form, the Vikings can smell it.

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