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Hubs halt Vikings' 24-game winning streak

GENEVA – From the moment the Geneva football team took the field in the second half, the Vikings' sideline was a cauldron of emotions.

Trailing upstart Rochelle by a couple scores, the Vikings implored the home crowd to stay with them, to keep the faith, to stand behind them until they could make things right.

Geneva flirted with providing the Burgess Field faithful with a heck of a comeback but, in the end, the Vikings couldn't pull themselves out of their unforeseen predicament, losing a shocker to Rochelle on Friday, 21-14.

Those emotions were working overtime after the loss, Geneva's first regular-season defeat since falling to Batavia in the 2006 regular-season finale. A 24-game regular-season winning streak is over.

"A little bewilderment, a little painful," Geneva senior linebacker Matthew Schuman said. "Don't like it."

Geneva's defense, determined to make amends after a rough first half, provided the offense a pair of late chances but the Vikings couldn't come up with the game-tying score they desperately craved.

With Geneva out of timeouts, Vikings quarterback Brandon Beitzel was intercepted by Rochelle safety Evan Tracy at the Hubs' 20-yard line with 1:11 to go. A fourth-and-5 deep pass intended for Connor Quinn was a little more ambitious of a throw than the Vikings might have needed.

"You'd love to have timeouts and be able to talk to them and hug them and all those kinds of things but we just didn't have that luxury," Geneva coach Rob Wicinski said.

The outcome was bizarre for a couple reasons. For one, Rochelle is one of the schools that was determined to bust up the Western Sun Conference based on an inability to compete with programs such as Geneva and Batavia. And Rochelle was coming off a woeful 26-0 loss to Sycamore the week before.

"Last week was probably one of the few times in my career where I've been just genuinely angry at them for not playing harder," Rochelle coach Kevin Crandall said. "Like we tell them, that's nine months of work down the tubes if you don't play your butt off on Friday nights."

Geneva's season is hardly flushed away but the loss means the Vikings (6-1, 4-1 WSC) might have to settle for a share of the conference title even if they win road games at Kaneland and Batavia to close the regular season.

Playing on a muddy field, it was nearly impossible to identify Rochelle's players, whose jersey numbers were obscured in the second half. That might be fitting for a program that prides itself on workmanlike, smashmouth football.

"They hit hard. They pounded the ball," Schuman said. "We should have pounded right back at them but they came out on top."

While Rochelle controlled the clock in the first half, it was the Hubs' only two passes of the half that paid huge dividends – a pair of 27-yard TD strikes. The second one, from quarterback C.J. Navarro to Chris Williams on the last play of the half, dealt the Vikings a giant blow, providing Rochelle (5-2, 3-2 WSC) a 21-6 lead at the break.

"We're kind of conditioned that every once in a while with the defense that we play that we might give up the big ball," Wicinski said. "That doesn't excuse it. We're not happy about it. Giving up that big play like that, it definitely cut into our sails but our defense took some pride and knew they had to get the ball back in the second half, and they did."

Some inspired running by senior back Michael Santacaterina (22 carries, 133 yards) extended Geneva's hopes.

Santacaterina's 5-yard touchdown run, his fourth straight carry of the drive, provided Geneva its second touchdown, and a two-point conversion pass from Beitzel to Jack Delabar made it 21-14 with 6:28 left in the game.

But a Geneva offense that struggled with footing and ball security much of the night couldn't come up with one more score, even after taking over at Rochelle's 29 with 2:31 left after a botched Hubs punt.

"The victory is sweeter because they have such a great program," Crandall said. "I have so much respect for Rob and his kids, and I'm not saying that because we beat them.

"I've told him this every year. They do things the right way, they're first class, their kids play hard. I'm going to miss playing them – not with the wins and losses."

As for the Vikings, Wicinski is hopeful his team channels its bruised ego constructively.

"This is growth time," Wicinski said. "This is good growth for these guys. We should be OK."

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