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Vikings' rally falls short as Tigers hold on for win

WHEATON – At halftime of Friday night's second-round Class 7A playoff game at Red Grange Field, host Wheaton Warrenville South had a comfortable 23-0 lead over Geneva.

But the visiting Vikings made things decidedly uncomfortable for the favored Tigers in the second half before finally bowing, 30-16.

Geneva scored the first 16 points of the second half. Twice in the fourth quarter, the Vikings had the ball with a chance to at least tie the score, but turnovers ended both threats. Geneva gave the ball to the heavily-favored Tigers four times in the contest.

"You can't make that many turnovers against anyone in the playoffs," Geneva coach Rob Wicinski said.

Wheaton Warrenville South (10-1) rolled up more than 200 yards of offense in the first half. Quarterback Riley O'Toole hit on eight of 12 passes in the half for 113 yards and a pair of touchdowns. Matt Rogers, who rushed for 83 yards on 21 carries, added a 21-yard TD run and Nicholas Immekus booted a 25-yard field goal.

The Geneva defense solidified in the second half, holding Rogers to 21 yards on the ground and allowing O'Toole to hit just one of eight passes.

"In the first half, we shot ourselves in the foot," senior safety and running back Michael Santacaterina said. "We made dumb mistakes in the first half. At halftime, we all came together. Coach Wicinski had a motivational speech and we all came out fired up in the second half."

"Everyone picked it up," agreed senior linebacker Bret Shannon. "We all knew what we had to do. We all knew we had to pick it up. We didn't want to go out like that. This team has too much heart not to go down swinging."

The Geneva defense forced the Tigers into two straight three-and-outs to start the third quarter. The Vikings (9-2) took advantage offensively, switching to a power running formation to finally produce some yardage, something that might not occur to many coaches down by 23 points.

"We watched a lot of tape and it just seemed like every team that got down by two or three scores against them started doing things that they don't normally do," Wicinski said. "I'm not a spread guy. I don't pass the ball; I pound."

With Santacaterina doing most of the pounding, the Vikings drove 52 yards to a touchdown on their opening drive of the half. Santacaterina had 62 of his 84 yards rushing after halftime.

"Our offense fed off our defensive stops," he said. "That's where we got our energy from and we just kept pounding it."

Charlie James kicked a 29-yard-field goal on Geneva's next possession to cut the deficit to 23-9.

The Vikings crept closer early in the fourth quarter, thanks in part to a 19-yard pass completion on a fake punt from Jack Delabar to Jake Landau. Delabar then grabbed a 9-yard scoring strike from Brandon Beitzel in the back of the end zone to bring Geneva within a touchdown of tying the score.

Beitzel, however, lost a fumble near midfield and then was picked off by Joseph Krob, leading to a 2-yard touchdown run by Rogers that sealed Geneva's fate with just more than two minutes to play.

The ending was not what they would have liked, but it was still another successful campaign for the Vikings.

"I just couldn't be more proud of my team and my teammates," Santacaterina said. "I love them all."

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