

Thrilling finish lets Hawks keep title

Harrison nips DeWitt with late scoring drive

By Dan O'Meara staff writer

Mill Coleman's last football game for Farmington Hills Harrison was some kind of thrill.

The senior quarterback was certainly "Mill The Thrill" as he guided the Hawks to an exciting, last-minute victory over DeWitt in the Class B championship game Saturday night, 28-27.

Coleman directed a clutch, 67-yard drive that tied the score and enabled Steve Hill to kick the game-winning extra point with 1:34 remaining in the Pontiac Silverdome.

"I couldn't picture losing my last game," Coleman said after leading Harrison to its second consecutive state title. "I don't think there's any better way to end your high school career than to win a championship and come from behind to do it."

The Hawks, who finished 13-0 and extended the state's longest winning streak to 26 games, got a break and much-needed shot in the arm when Matt Sperry blocked Marty Camp's extra point. DeWitt had scored the go-ahead touchdown with 2:20 remaining, but Harrison saw the opportunity for victory in that momentum-turning block.

"Once everybody saw we were only down six points (27-21), that kinda inspired us," Sperry said. "As soon as I blocked it, I looked up at the clock and said 'We're going to win this — just get the ball in Mill's hands.'"

THAT'S WHAT the Hawks did after Scott Ratsos returned the kickoff 26 yards to the Harrison 33. It took Coleman and the offense five plays and 46 seconds to reach the DeWitt end zone, with Coleman running the last 9 yards for his second TD of the game.

"When they scored, I saw there was time on the clock and I knew we had all three timeouts left," said Coleman, who completed 13 of 20 passes for 208 yards. One pass went for a TD on the first series of the game, but two others were intercepted.

"I was thinking of John Elway's 98-yard drive with three minutes to go (against the Cleveland Browns in the playoffs)," Coleman said. "That was going through my mind — the drive, the drive, the drive."

Coleman was the epitome of cool under fire, calmly using hand signals to convey audibles to his receivers and being content with a little yardage at a time.

He completed three straight first-down passes covering 51 yards to Mike Saputo, Steve Hill and Greg Piscopink which put the ball on DeWitt's 16-yard line with 1:50 to play.

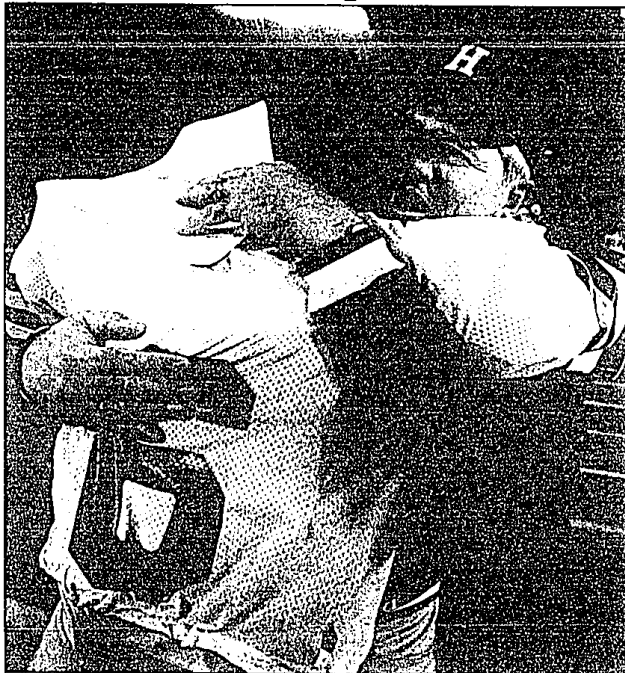
After running 7 yards on a bootleg, Coleman rolled out the other way and ran for the TD, lunging past oncoming defender Chris Berkimer at the 2 and diving into the end zone.

"We work on the two-minute drill every week, so that really helped us," Coleman said. "(The Panthers) were playing soft, and we were taking what they were giving us."

COLEMAN'S RUNS originated as sprintout pass plays, but there was plenty of room for him to run with DeWitt playing a prevent defense. He was Harrison's leading rusher with 89 yards on 14 carries.

"I liked all those pass plays I called that he ran in for touchdowns," Herrington said tongue-in-cheek.

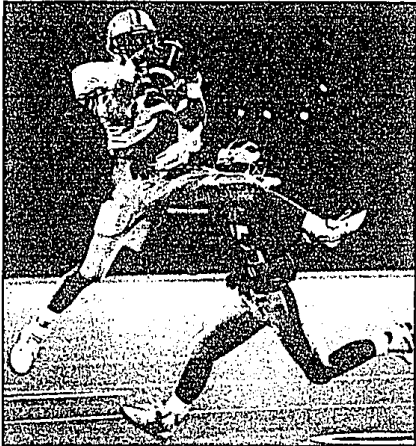
Hill, who injured his kicking leg in



Harrison coach John Herrington embraces quarterback Mill Coleman after the Hawks clinched their back-to-back titles in the Class B final Saturday at the Silverdome. Coleman,

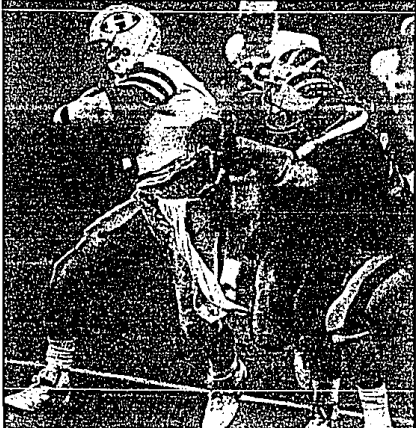
who led a late scoring drive to beat DeWitt 28-27, has been the mainstay of the last three Harrison teams, which posted a 37-2 record.

RANDY BORGST/staff photographer



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Scott Ratsos hauls in a Mill Coleman pass with Mike Cowdrey of DeWitt covering. Ratsos' 35-yard reception gave Harrison a 7-0 lead.



RANDY BORGST/staff photographer

Mill Coleman tries to break free from the grasp of DeWitt's Travis Gribble (foreground) and Mike Cowdrey. Coleman scrambled for two touchdowns on runs of 19 and 9 yards in the state final.

the team's 3-2 victory over East Grand Rapids in the semifinal game, provided the deciding margin for the second week in a row and killed DeWitt's last hope when he intercepted Berkimer with 1:03 on the clock.

The Panthers, 12-1, gave an inspired effort that surprised most of the 16,000 in attendance.

Making its first appearance in the state finals and competing for the first time as a Class B school, DeWitt was awed neither by being in the Dome nor Harrison's tradition and No. 1 ranking.

"We expected to play this well," DeWitt coach Gail Thornton said. "We've played this well all year and, hopefully, people will know what we mean when we say 'We're from DeWitt and we play good football.'"

THE PROBLEM for Harrison was its inability to stop DeWitt running back John Telford, who rushed for 153 yards and two TDs on 16 carries.

Much to everyone's surprise, the Panthers pounded a Harrison defense that had been tough against the run, rolling up 248 yards on the ground.

Furthermore, the Hawks compounded that with three first-half turnovers, each of which the Panthers converted into TDs and a 21-7 lead.

Harrison had geared its defense to

stop 2,000-yard rusher Mike Cowdrey, but his counterpart in the wishbone was just as big a threat.

Telford scored on runs of 2 and 32 yards and threw a halfback pass for a 36-yard TD in the first half.

At the start, Harrison made it look as if the state final was going to be another romp like the 44-9 shellacking it dealt St. Joseph in 1988.

Harrison needed five plays on the game's first series to take a 7-0 lead. Coleman had two good runs and passed 35 yards to Ratsos for the TD before three minutes had elapsed.

But the rest of the first half was a debacle for the heavily favored Hawks.

HARRISON STUFFED the Panthers on their first possession but fumbled away the punt at its 35. Telford's short run capped the four-play drive.

Coleman, who was 7-of-11 for 121 yards in the first half, saw both interceptions lead to DeWitt scores.

Prior to the second one and with the Hawks driving, the chains broke, and a 10-minute delay while another set was located interrupted Harrison's momentum. When play resumed, Cowdrey intercepted and Coleman had to make a TD-saving tackle at the 50.

"We had a nice drive going and had to stand around," Herrington said. "That's one of those things

There's nothing you can do about that."

Telford, having ripped through the Harrison defense a second time to make it 14-7 early in the second quarter, made the Hawks run conscious and vulnerable to the halfback pass, which he completed to a wide-open John Cowan.

Harrison responded with a Matt Conley 1-yard scoring run with 1:09 left before halftime, and Coleman took the Hawks on a 77-yard, game-tying drive (21-21) early in the fourth quarter.

Coleman converted third-and-long plays twice with his scrambling ability — the second run being an urgent 19-yard dash for points as he pushed his lead blocker, Roy Granger, into the end zone ahead of him.

But the Panthers turned around and went 78 yards during a time-consuming drive (7:43 and 15 plays) for what seemed to be the game-winning TD.

DeWitt faced third-and-12 and third-and-17 situations early and late, but a Telford run kept it going and a 24-yard pass to tight end David Biker set up Berkimer's 1-yard sneak with 2:20 remaining.

"There's was over two minutes left, and I knew deep down that was too much time," Thornton said. "I knew we'd have to come up with a big play and we couldn't."

Coleman ponders college future

By Dan O'Meara staff writer

Now that Mill Coleman's outstanding high school football career is over, the question is where the all-state quarterback will play in college.

"I'm looking to (Michigan) State, but I'm not ruling anybody out," Coleman said. "I'll take my time, make my visits and then make a decision."

Coleman avoided the subject during the season, so he could concentrate on helping Farmington Hills Harrison win a second straight Class B title, which the Hawks did Saturday night when they edged DeWitt 28-27.

Coleman has received letters and phone calls from colleges across the country, but his father, Millard Sr., has shielded his son from the recruiting pressures until now.

"We've purposely avoided it," the elder Coleman said. "We wanted him to stay focused on (football) and his grades."

"We're going to look very seriously at (MSU) and Michigan. The state of Michigan has some good educational institutions."

"But most of all we're a close-knit family. I hope he'll select a school as near as possible, so we can support him with the least amount of inconvenience."

During that time, he completed 58 percent of his passes (338 of 582) for 6,129 yards and 62 touchdowns.

Including his freshman year when he started on the Albion varsity, Coleman, the all-time passing leader in state history, has thrown for 7,464 yards, which puts him seventh on the national list for career passing. Ron Cuccia of Los Angeles (1975-77) passed for 8,804 to head the elite group.

Harrison's one-point victory Saturday might not have been possible without Matt Sperry's block of an extra point prior to the winning drive. Sperry raced in from the Harrison right side to snuff Marty Camp's kick and hold the Panthers to a 27-21 lead with 2:20 to play.

"I told Joe (Cowan) the other end I've got a hunch, let me take this side. I've got a hunch he's not going to pick me up."

"I went inside the last person (on the DeWitt line). He blocked the outside guy (Scott Ratsos) and should have gone inside. I had a weird feeling they were not even going to block outside gap."

The block gave the Hawks an emotional lift and, in that regard, might have been the difference in the game.

"I was talking to one of my friends (Sunday), and I asked him what he thought would have happened if I didn't block it," Sperry said. "He said he didn't think we'd have scored again."

Harrison not only dodged a bullet (fired by upset-minded DeWitt), but overcame a pair of possible linexes.

For the second year in a row, the Hawks were the visitors for the Class B final. And, for the second year in a row, the team using that sideline in the first three championship games lost.

Lake Linden-Hubbell, Detroit King and Ontonagon suffered defeat as did Frankfort, Redford Catholic Central and Havenna last year.

It was left for Harrison to snap that unlucky streak each time.

Secondly, the referee for Saturday's game was Herb Willson of East Detroit. The last time he officiated a Harrison game was 1981 — when Livonia Churchill snapped the Hawks' 26-game winning streak.

Ironically, Harrison reached 26 straight with Saturday's victory.

The Hawks have won five state championships since 1981 and more Class B titles (3) than any other school. Dearborn Divine Child, Jackson-Lumen Christi, Muskegon Catholic Central and East Grand Rapids have won two apiece.

"We won our first (regular-season) game of the decade and our last one," Harrison assistant coach Bob Sutter said.



RANDY BORGST/staff photographer

Mike Saputo tries to elude DeWitt defender John Cowan after making one of his four receptions in the state final. Saputo was Harrison's leading receiver with 69 yards.