

Polce, Penzak make Rice defense tougher

By Jim Toth
staff writer

Birmingham Brother Rice senior Dean Polce may have been a loss for words, but certainly not emotion, after the Warriors Class A championship Friday at the Pontiac Silverdome.

Moments after the Warriors captured their fourth state title with a 24-10 win over Midland, the 6-0, 195-pound defensive back danced and pranced his way around the field holding the championship plaque joyously above his head.

"I can't even put it in words," said Polce, fighting back tears. "Nobody expected us to do anything this year and we never talked about anything like this, but we just hung in there and took it one game at a time. We're not a great team and we don't have a lot of stars, we just play every game as hard as we can."

The victory was especially sweet for Polce and teammate Jason Penzak who were two of several Warriors hit by injuries this season. Polce was forced to miss the first two playoff games after suffering a knee injury in the Catholic League playoffs against Redford Bishop Borgess while Penzak was sidelined for the first 11 games with a broken fibula.

WITH POLCE and Penzak back in the lineup, the defensive unit brought back memories of past squads that would rock, sock and drop opponents before they could ever get started. The Warriors, who allowed 139 points in the 12 previous games, held the once-beaten Chemicks to only 61 yards rushing.

"They (Polce and Penzak) are both great kids and they both provide great leadership," declared veteran defensive coach Ron Kalczyński, who has been a part of all four championships. "They provide the intangibles."

"With them back in the lineup, it allows us to do more," added Kalczyński, who said this title was especially pleasing, considering his son Kevin was a member of the defensive unit. "Each kid on the team had a role and each kid to the best of his ability performed that role. We had a motto this year — Count On Me — and you could count on each kid to support each other."

Penzak used his speed to record five solo tackles and assisted on four others. He sacked Midland quarterback Brad Blaszyk two times for a loss of 28 yards. One of those was a sack of Blaszyk that thwarted a potential scoring drive.

"This is the highest high I have ever experienced," Penzak said. "I played every play like it was my last."

"I HAD dreams of playing in a state championship game for a long time," Penzak went on. "When I was five years old, I would come down here and watch Rice play. They would always win and I liked that and wanted to be a part of it."

Despite missing the majority of his final season, Penzak said he always held hopes of playing again.

"As long as the team kept winning, I knew I would be playing again," Penzak said. "That was the only thing that kept me going."

Polce's contributions included four assisted tackles and a fourth-quarter interception that sealed the Chemicks fate. With his teammates leading 17-10, Polce snared a tipped pass at the Midland 23, setting up halfback Jon Burtraw's second touchdown run.

"I was praying it would go through his (Midland receiver) hands," Polce remembered. "It was tipped and I was right there."

"I told everybody if I could walk I was going to play," Polce added. "I couldn't sit and watch anymore."

Warriors capture 4th state title

By Marty Budner
staff writer

It may not have been a perfect season, but it sure was a perfect ending.

For the first time in its storied history, Brother Rice's football team won a state championship with a couple black marks dotting its final record (11-2).

But those two losses won't mean a thing when the current band of Warriors sit back a few years from now and reminisce about their 1990 state-championship performance. They'll be talking about the same title which the undefeated teams from 1977, 1980 and 1983 brought back to Brother Rice.

Yes, the Warriors captured their fourth Class A state championship Friday afternoon at the Pontiac Silverdome with a highly emotional 24-10 victory over Midland. While Fracassia doesn't like to compare state-championship teams, he did admit this title-winning group was a little different than the others.

"There was a lot of togetherness on this team," said Fracassia. "You know, when you lose two games sometimes the kids fold. But this team did not fold."

"It's unique because in the other championships we never lost a game. This team lost a couple of games and that's what's so unique about it. They gathered together and it was a total coaching staff and total team effort which allowed us to do this."

"I'm going to enjoy this year and think very highly of this team the rest of my life," he said. "It was wonderful."

IT WASN'T SO wonderful when Brother Rice suffered its second loss of the year in the sixth week of the season — a 32-0 shellacking from arch rival Redford Catholic Central. The Warriors regrouped, and since then, reeled off seven straight victories, including four consecutive playoff wins to claim the crown.

According to senior captain Jon Burtraw, the workhorse of Rice's spirited rushing attack who carried

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— Al Fracassia
Rice football coach

the ball 60 times in his last two games, it wasn't an easy chore. But it certainly was a great feeling.

"When time was running down in the fourth quarter and we had about a minute to go we pretty much knew we had it locked up. It's just an incredible feeling," said Burtraw, who scored two touchdowns, including the game winner with 4:44 left in the fourth quarter.

"But I thought there was a lot of pressure on us . . . from alumni. There's a lot of great tradition at Rice and fans don't like to come out and see us lose, especially in a title game. But we worked hard all week, and we thought we could do it."

"Our leaders emerged after we lost to Catholic Central. A lot of them counted on me," he said. "We stuck together and it all turned out all right."

Rice's defense, which allowed just 35 points in its four playoff games, took command of Midland right away.

ON MIDLAND'S first possession, Rice defenders Jason Randall and Mike Moran sacked quarterback Brad Blaszyk in the end zone for a safety. The Chemicks rebounded to take its only lead of the game, 3-2, early in the second quarter after Blaszyk booted a 25-yard field goal.

Rice's special teams got the ball back midway through the second quarter when Blaszyk, back to punt, fumbled the snap with Rice's Moran recovering at the Midland 11-yard

line. Four plays later, junior quarterback Steve Merchant went in from one-yard out. Merchant then threw to Andy Halslip for the two-point conversion and Rice took a 10-2 lead into the halftime break.

But the Chemicks came out smacking in the third quarter.

Midland ran off 22 plays in the third quarter — compared to just four for Rice — but could only muster seven points. The Chemicks scored on a 3-yard run by Frank Accetta at the 7:59 mark to tie the score a 10-10.

On its next possession, Midland drove 26 yards to the Rice 22-yard line and was threatening to take the lead. The Rice defense held, however, and the Chemicks were forced to attempt a 38-yard field goal on the first play of the fourth quarter. But, for the second straight game, Moran broke through the middle of the line and blocked the kick.

It turned out to be the game's key play, shifting the momentum back into Rice's favor.

"That blocked field goal was not luck," said Fracassia. "(Defensive) Coach (Ron) Kalczyński worked on that thing every single day. It really came in handy today, just like it did against Northville (in the state semi-

final game). That field goal was probably the biggest one we blocked in all my years at Brother Rice."

BROTHER RICE took over at its own 26-yard line, and, thanks to a 43-yard pass from Merchant to Daniel Elue, soon found itself at the Midland 16-yard line. But Burtraw fumbled after an 11-yard gain and the Chemicks took over at their own 4-yard line.

The Chemicks, however, were forced to punt and Rice gained excellent field position, taking over at the Midland 41-yard line. Burtraw, atoning for that fumble, scored six plays later on a 12-yard counter play. Kevin Cook booted the extra point for a 17-10 lead with 6:06 remaining in the game.

Dean Polce intercepted a Blasing pass on the very next Midland possession, and, moments later, Burtraw raced in from 23 yards out to ice the game at the 4:43 mark.

Rice's 14-point outburst in less than two minutes was all the Warriors needed to start celebrating. As the game ended, the Rice coaching staff hugged at midfield, and Polce proudly pranced around the Silverdome turf with the state championship trophy held high above his shoulders.

Burtraw finished with 87 yards rushing, and Merchant completed six of 11 passes for 91 yards. Rice gained 175 total yards and netted 10 first downs.

The Warriors defense allowed 189 total yards, but was credited with seven sacks for 58 yards in losses. Jason Penzak and Damon McClendon combined for four sacks and 18 tackles.

All in all, the statistics show it was a championship effort just like the other three.

"I don't compare football teams. I'm just as proud of this one as I am of the other championships we've had," said Fracassia.

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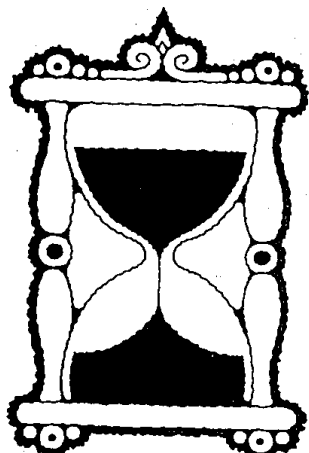
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