

Warriors edge Bulldogs in tourney thriller, 29-28

BY BILL PARKER
STAFF WRITER

With tears of joy welling up in his eyes, Walled Lake Western split end John Bolger grabbed Eric Sage in a headlock and gave his teammate a huge congratulatory hug.

The hug was certainly deserved, considering Sage's fourth-quarter touchdown rallied the defending Class AA state champion Warriors to a thrilling 29-28 victory Friday at Brighton in the Region 3 playoff opener.

Forced to play football for the first time in a game after starting and leading runner Dave Johnson went down with an injury, Sage came up big and scored the winning TD late in the fourth quarter on an improvised play.

FOOTBALL

He finished with 104 yards on 26 carries after running the ball just 36 times throughout the entire nine-game regular season. Western (9-1) travels to the winner of Saturday's Bellefontaine Area Huron game in the regional final next weekend.

"When Dave went down, they moved me to fullback, and coach (Chuck Appa) told me he believed in me," Sage said. "I just kind of figured sooner or later something would happen." Unfortunately, the win didn't come without a price. Johnson received a concussion on his ankle late in the first quarter after starting the game with 104 yards on eight carries, including

a 72-yard TD run to open the scoring.

Johnson was unable to return and was scheduled to have the ankle x-rayed before left guard Adam Bobola was injured late in the fourth quarter, also, and taken to the hospital for precautionary measures.

It was Bobola's encouragement, however, that gave Sage some added inspiration. "Adam's last words were '36 more yards,' so we had to do it for him," Sage said.

Bobola was injured with 4:08 remaining in the game. The Warriors were trailing 28-23 and senior quarterback Frank Stanford (106 yards on 22 carries) had just given Western a first down at the Brighton 36.

Western covered the final 36 yards in three plays. Sage capped the drive when he broke free on the right side and sprinted 32 yards to the end zone. The two-point conversion attempt failed, but the Warriors were now ahead, 29-28.

"The play is designed to go to the left, but I saw an opening to the right," Sage said. "I cut back and it was there."

The Warriors were fortunate to escape with the win. Brighton senior quarterback Drew Henson finished his high school career in style and almost single-handedly defeated the Warriors.

Henson completed 22 of 44 passes for 347 yards and one TD, a 49-yard pass to senior wide

receiver Steve Schaft in the first quarter to tie the game, 7-7. Henson also rushed for 65 yards and scored second-half TDs on runs of 11, 12 and 2 yards.

Henson marched the Bulldogs to midfield following Sage's fourth-quarter touchdown. But a sack on Henson by Dan Thompson and Ryan Oren left the Bulldogs facing fourth-and-22 from the Western 47. A fourth-down pass was dropped at the 5.

The Bulldogs also fumbled away their chances early in the game. Western capitalized on two of three second-quarter turnovers to take a 17-7 lead into the break.

Sage recovered a fumbled punt return at the Brighton 2 and

scored on first down. Luciano Gonzalez' extra-point kick gave the Warriors a 14-7 lead.

When Western was stopped on its next possession, the Bulldogs fumbled another punt. Doug Neubeck recovered for Western at the Bulldog 31, leading to a 37-yard field goal by Gonzalez with 48 seconds left in the half.

Brighton scored on both of its third-quarter possessions, to take a 21-17 lead.

Stanford sprinted around left end for a 3-yard TD run with 7:24 left in the game to put Western on top, 23-21.

But Henson and the Bulldogs marched 80 yards in six plays on their next possession and took a 28-23 lead on Henson's 2-yard

O'Leary from page E1

game, which North won 16-10 over Howell.

"I told them they ought to walk around and be proud of themselves, of what they did. They brought Raider Pride back to the program," he said.

O'Leary admitted to being "a little emotional" for his last two games.

Before the final home game Oct. 25, the school paid tribute to O'Leary for his contributions over four decades during a pregame ceremony.

"I honestly thought they were talking about Knute Rockne," said O'Leary, 55, who had a 76-61 career record after taking over as varsity coach from Ron Holland in 1963.

The Raiders won or shared the Northwest Suburban League championship in 1983 and '84. After joining the Western Lakes Activities Association in 1985, North tied for the Lakes Division title in 1986 and '87 and won it outright in 1991.

Before the last game at Howell, O'Leary read a poem to his players that he had written.

"It wasn't one of those 'Win one for the Gipper' kind of things," he said. "It didn't apply as much to me as it, because we all finished it up together."

"My thinking all year long was that it's a journey, and this was

another trip. I just wanted to enjoy every moment of it and I did."

When the Raiders stopped Howell's offense one last time and it became apparent North was going to win the game, O'Leary said he burst into tears.

"There's no way anybody expected us to beat Howell except us," he said. "The kids just wanted it to happen."

He added: "It was weird getting on the bus and knowing it was the last time."

O'Leary, who plans to continue teaching biology at North, was an assistant JV coach from 1965-69, the JV head coach from 1970-74 (with a 39-6 record) and a varsity assistant from 1975-82.

When he graduated from Wisconsin-Platteville in the summer of 1965, O'Leary said it was hard to find a job in his home state, because teachers received their contracts in April.

Algonac and Warren wanted a chemistry teacher, but O'Leary wanted to teach biology. North Farmington needed someone to teach that subject.

"I took a left at Chicago; that was all I knew," he said. "I drove all the way up Grand River, and I had no clue where Farmington was. I drove up and they hired me on the spot."

O'Leary, who will coach in the

annual high school all-star game in August, has two daughters and a son who live in Wisconsin.

He plans to visit them more in the summer — something he couldn't do because of the summer passing league and conditioning program — and enjoy the outdoors.

"Sometime you have to step down and enjoy the other fruits of your life," he said.

"Until this year, I wasn't having fun. I thought I could deal with losing, but it really bothers you when you're not having success. It was time to let somebody else come in and see what they could do."

O'Leary's memories include an undefeated varsity season in 1965, North winning the Class A title in 1970, the Raiders upsetting No. 1-ranked Brother Rice in the 1978 semifinals, a 9-6 win over heavily-favored John Glenn in 1988 and an overtime loss to No. 1-ranked Harrison in the 1995 Western Lakes championship game.

"This year was special, too," he said. "They were the greatest bunch of kids; they were phenomenal. I never had to yell at anybody for not hustling."

"This year, even though it was fun to have the season we did, it wouldn't have mattered."

ALL-WESTERN LAKES FOOTBALL

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1997 ALL-LEAGUE FOOTBALL TEAMS

ALL-CONFERENCE OFFENSE

Center: Brian Lewis, 6-1, 250, senior, Farmington Harrison.
Interior Linebacker: Mike Fisher, 6-3, 260, senior, Farmington Harrison; Matt Lawson, 6-6, 290, senior, Livonia Franklin; Dave Cardinale, 6-7, 310, senior, Walled Lake Central; Noah Swartz, 6-5, 285, senior, Westland John Glenn.

Linebacker: Mike Hoad, 6-1, 200, junior, Farmington Harrison.

Wide receiver: Ricky Bryant, 6-1, 155, junior, Farmington Harrison; Eric Jones, 5-11, 183, sophomore, Westland John Glenn.
Quarterback: Frank Stanford, 5-10, 170, senior, Walled Lake Western.
Running back: Dave Johnson, 5-9, 200, junior, Walled Lake Western; Reggie Spearman, 5-9, 175, junior, Westland John Glenn; Kirk Housh, 6-2, 205, senior, North Farmington.

ALL-CONFERENCE DEFENSE

Down lineman: Bryan Grider, 5-10, 195, senior, Northville; Dan Thompson, 6-0, 185, senior, Walled Lake Western; Bryan McBee, 6-3, 235, junior, Farmington Harrison.
End/OLB: Brett Foster, 6-1, 205, junior, Farmington Harrison; Ryan Dren, 6-0, 220, senior, Walled Lake Western.

Linebacker: Sean Clark, 5-11, 215, senior, North Farmington; Sean Heard, 5-10, 225, senior, Westland John Glenn; Joe Higgins, 6-2, 230, junior, Walled Lake Central.

Backs: Zack Corwell, 5-10, 180, senior, Farmington Harrison; Jeff McClain, 6-4, 185, senior, Plymouth Salem; Jeff Matheson, 6-2, 195, senior, Walled Lake Central.
Specialist: Adam Tibble, 5-0, 165, senior, Northville.

ALL-WESTERN DIVISION OFFENSE

Center: Rick Slayes, 6-0, 230, senior, West-
Interior Linebacker: Chris Godwin, 6-0, 240, senior, Harrison; Kevin Kroschke, 6-1, 240, senior, Plymouth Canton; John Fumanski, 6-1, 265, junior, Franklin; Ted Boweratz, 6-4,

ALL-LAKE DIVISION DEFENSE

270, junior, Northville.
Tight end: Nick Celize, 6-0, 170, junior, Western.
Wide receiver: Ryan Regner, 5-7, 130, senior, Franklin; Jeff Hoad, 5-9, 165, senior, Northville.
Quarterback: Jared Hopkins, 6-3, 200, senior, Harrison.

Interior Linebacker: Keith Anthony Grech, 5-9, 185, senior, Franklin; Chris Ghanam, 5-7, 175, senior, Harrison; Chris Worthington, 6-0, 220, senior, Northville.

ALL-WESTERN DIVISION DEFENSE

Tight end: Mike Hoad, 6-1, 200, junior, Farmington Harrison.
Wide receiver: Ricky Bryant, 6-1, 155, junior, Farmington Harrison; Eric Jones, 5-11, 183, sophomore, Westland John Glenn.
Quarterback: Frank Stanford, 5-10, 170, senior, Walled Lake Western.

Running back: Dave Johnson, 5-9, 200, junior, Walled Lake Western; Reggie Spearman, 5-9, 175, junior, Westland John Glenn; Kirk Housh, 6-2, 205, senior, North Farmington.

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End/OLB: Brett Foster, 6-1, 205, junior, Farmington Harrison; Ryan Dren, 6-0, 220, senior, Walled Lake Western.

Linebacker: Sean Clark, 5-11, 215, senior, North Farmington; Sean Heard, 5-10, 225, senior, Westland John Glenn; Joe Higgins, 6-2, 230, junior, Walled Lake Central.

Backs: Zack Corwell, 5-10, 180, senior, Farmington Harrison; Jeff McClain, 6-4, 185, senior, Plymouth Salem; Jeff Matheson, 6-2, 195, senior, Walled Lake Central.
Specialist: Adam Tibble, 5-0, 165, senior, Northville.

ALL-LAKES DIVISION OFFENSE

Center: Louis Krause, 6-0, 228, senior, John Glenn.
Interior Linebacker: Matt St. Charles, 5-10, 195, senior, Walled Lake Western; Ben Yowell, 6-2, 223, senior, Farmington; Ryan Franks, 6-1, 235, senior, John Glenn; Chad Eerie, 6-3, 270, senior, Central.

Tight end: Dave Shaw, 6-0, 200, senior, Central.
Wide receiver: Ross Matheson, 6-3, 170, senior, Central; Matt Biddinger, 5-9, 167, senior, John Glenn.
Quarterback: Jerry Hattisch, 6-3, 170, junior, Central; Justin Berens, 6-0, 200, senior, John Glenn.

Running back: Nathan Dixon, 6-1, 195, junior, Central; Christie Schmidt, 5-9, 175, senior, Salem.

ALL-LAKE DIVISION DEFENSE

Down lineman: Don Lipinski, 6-2, 230, senior, Central; Amar Cuthfield, 5-8, 185, senior, Salem; Eric Costello, 5-10, 174, senior, John Glenn.
End/OLB: James Fowler, 6-0, 195, senior, Central; Tereno Wilson, 6-4, 205, senior, Salem.

Linebacker: Brett Burleson, 6-0, 190, senior, Salem; Pat Grogan, 6-3, 220, senior, Central; Jake Tharp, 6-2, 210, sophomore, John Glenn.
Backs: Jason Rogge, 6-0, 175, senior, Central; Chris Gotts, 5-8, 135, senior, Livonia Stevenson; Chel Reese, 5-10, 159, senior, John Glenn.
Specialist: David Vinea, 5-11, 183, senior, Farmington.

WESTERN HONORABLE MENTION

Harrison: Jason Sharp, Tom Sallee, Zach Burton; W.L. Western: Cody Cargil, Tim Guntviller, Dorian Kilgore, Chris Payton, Brandon Pichler, Eric Sage, Ryan Wasawasky; Northville: Rob Abbott, Steve Jameson, Ben Kattie, Mike Livanos, Ryan McCracken, Rob Reiter, Jeff Scott, Tim Velzy; Franklin: Chris Howell, Gary Kulkoski, Nick Hongse, Adam Sexton, Clint Walker; Canton: Nick Allen, Pat Holland, Brian Muscare, Mark Popczyk; Chelsea: Corey Cook, David Detrick, Nick DePiero, Mark Giska, Ryan Kastray, Dale Smith, John Pokrzywacki.

LAKES HONORABLE MENTION

W.L. Central: Chris Cogwell, Mark Delisle, Nick Hall, Todd Hawke, Matt Jenkins, Josh Kittle, Kris Kilian, Cliff Laford, Lance LaPratt, Bryan Lindstrom, Nick LaTara, Steve Smith; John Glenn: Jason Crofton, Bobby Mackenzie, Marlan McClendon, R. Farmington: Nathan Baji, Carter Campbell, Seth Grossman, Sam Long, Sean Maluszak, Pat Meach, Kent Taylor, Arnan Downell, Tom Moran; Salem: David Clement, Andy Koculinski, Jason Lusk, Eric Peterson, Bill Samczyk, Joe Tabbon, Rob Welch, Matt Fair, Tony Bernhardt; Farmington: Nick Colton, Steve Economy, Mark Grzech, Todd Richardson; Blytheview: Chris Dattolo, Dan Shay, Jason Sogno, Ryan Tobin, Dave Turci, John Vanduren.

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