

CC stops Dakota for semifinal win, 17-10

BY BRAD MONASTIERE
STAFF WRITER

The sun broke through the cold November clouds at the same time the Redford-Detroit Catholic Central football team had officially clinched another trip to the Pontiac Silverdome.

Despite committing four turnovers, the Shamrocks came up with big plays at key times on both sides of the ball to defeat Macomb Dakota, 17-10, Saturday at Birmingham Groves.

Although the Shamrocks (12-

1) didn't dominate the Cougars as they had their previous two opponents, they made defensive stops in the second half and overcame their turnovers with big plays at crunch time.

"I think they really outplayed us in the second half," CC coach Tom Mach said. "They have a real good football team, and they handled us real well up front."

"They really stymied a lot of things we were trying to do. But I'm proud of our boys and the way they hung in there. They defended us real well, but

I think our defense played pretty good, too."

The CC defense came tough with sacks and turnovers of its own at crucial points in the contest.

Dakota (11-2) had the ball with 1:39 left on its own 27-yard line, down just one score. On the first play of the drive, Drew Ambler cut off a Jeremy Thoele pass aimed for a receiver running along the sidelines and made the game-ending interception.

CC's offense was quiet much of the game, except for two

touchdowns within an 88-second span late in the first half.

Junior Derek Brooks was held to just 61 yards on the ground on 20 carries. Sophomore Eric Vojtkofsky led the team with 75 yards on 11 rushes, including CC's first touchdown.

Dakota coach Mike Giannone said his team played well enough to win but couldn't finish the opportunities it had.

"We've had some breaks go our way this season, and we didn't get some of those breaks today," he said.

CC

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Kentwood has won 13 games by doing one thing well - run. OK, two things - the Falcons have scored 641 points this year, a 49.3 points-per-game average. CC's scoring average of 28.8 seems puny by comparison.

"We don't do an awful lot of different things on offense, but what we do do well," Shillito said. "It's all about our execution, our energy and an athletic offensive line. With the way both of us rely on the run, it might be a very short game."

That's an understatement at best. In seven of its 13 games, East Kentwood has scored more than 50 points and has never scored less than 34 - including a 52-14 semifinal win over Holt. Needless to say, the Falcons have become the masters of their tight-T formation.

"They're playing some pretty wild games," Mach said.

They're a high-scoring team. If they're winning every game 50-0, there would be more to worry about."

CC's defense has enough to worry about. Fullback Noel Aleman has rushed for 2,610 yards on 238 carries, including 254 yards against Holt.

Halfback Kyle Hinton has gained 936 yards and Eric Foster has 757 more with quarterback Cory Sanders rushing for 585 for good measure.

"We've only thrown the ball 20 times this year, but we've completed seven of them - six for touchdowns," Shillito said. "Cory can make the plays if he needs to, but he hasn't needed to."

This hasn't gone unnoticed by Mach.

"It's a concern," he said. "You don't want to keep coming up to stop the run and have them hit the tight end running behind everyone."

"Even though you know they're going to run, it's tough to stop. They're very efficient in what they do. As far as we know, their only offensive formation is run, and they must be good at doing it."

"They go for it a lot on fourth down instead of punting if it's close. They'll go for two points instead of kicking the extra point. It puts you in a bind."

The CC defense is just as tough as the Falcons' offense, giving up just 104 points on the year for an eight-point average.

"They're a tremendous defensive team," Shillito said. "They make it very hard to run the ball."

East Kentwood's defense isn't as stingy as CC's, giving up 22.8 points a game, but with the offense's ability to put points on the board it hasn't had to be stingy.

"I think our defense gets overlooked, because we've put so many points on the board," Shillito said. "But, as the season has gone on, we've gotten better and better and played with more confidence."

And the Falcons also haven't seen an offense like the Shamrocks'.

"Teams have thrown against us 327 times this year," Shillito said. "We've seen so many different packages, so much of a spread offense."

But CC's offense is overlooked. They don't make many mistakes and, more than anything, they move the chains. They keep the ball and are very patient. And they have some big playmakers."

There is a bit of history on CC's side. The last time the Shamrocks had a chance to win two straight titles was 1997-98, defeating another Grand Rapids-area school, Rockford, for the second title.

"It's a lot harder going through it the second year because of the expectations and anticipation," Mach said. "I think what is helping us is our opponents were very difficult and we never had a break."

"We've seen a wide range of offenses in these games, but the one that helped the most was Canton's because they also ran the tight-T. They played a great game, and I think we gained a lot of experience trying to defend it."

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SWIMMING

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sixth in 1997, first in 1998, second in 1999 and fourth in 2000.

"We did way better than we thought we would do as far as the points we had," Downs said. "The performances were just outstanding."

"We went just beyond ourselves with this state meet. The parents and kids were just delighted."

Merely was led by seniors Caitlin Kelly and Elizabeth Garlow and junior Katie Naglick, all of whom scored in four events each.

Downs opted to have Kelly, who was fifth in the 100-yard freestyle (52.08), swim one individual event and three relays. Kelly anchored third-place finishes in every relay.

Her prelim time of 51.7 is a varsity record for the 100 freestyle, bettering the mark of 52.2 by former Merely standout Elizabeth Posvar.

"Kelly would have scored in the 50, but then we would've been slower and probably seventh in the 400 (freestyle

relay); so it worked out," Downs said. "That was the best way to do it."

Junior Carrie Roble, freshman Caryn Switaj, Garlow and Kelly set a Merely vasily record in the 200 freestyle relay (1:37.72).

Senior Eloise Page, Garlow and Naglick preceded Kelly in the medley relay (1:48.66), and Switaj, freshman Mara Loniewski and Naglick swam the first three of the 400 freestyle relay (3:33.24).

Garlow, who was seventh in the individual medley (2:09.91), had another strong finish in the breaststroke. She was seeded in the low teens entering the meet, and she jumped all the way to third in the finals (1:06.20). Both times were career bests.

"She does the same thing every year," Downs said. "Since her freshman year, it's been the same story. She goes crazy in the state meet."

"It doesn't matter where she's seeded; she's going to make the top whatever."

Garlow was sixth in the state in the breaststroke as a freshman, fourth as a sophomore and sixth again last year.

"Every time she's been seeded

out of the picture," Downs added. "She always goes in around nine high, and she pops a 1:06 all the time."

Naglick was the highest of three Merely players in the 200 freestyle and the butterfly, finishing fourth (1:55.35) and ninth (58.15), respectively.

"Last year she swam the back and fly," Downs said. "This year we put her in the 200, because she showed so much power in that event and she didn't disappoint us. She went out and got after it."

"She had a relatively blah prelim (in the fly) and then a great final. She probably would have been sixth if she did that time on Friday."

Loniewski was seventh (1:57.00) and freshman Kara Small 11th (1:57.41) in the 200 freestyle; senior Jackie Smith was 12th in the IM (2:13.62), senior Annette Merchant was 16th in the butterfly (1:01.00), Switaj was 13th in the 100 freestyle (54.02) and Loniewski was 12th in the 500 freestyle (5:11.78).

The reason Merely did so well was due to some of those swimmers finishing so much better than they were seeded.

Loniewski was seeded 19th and Small 16th in the 200. Both were pleasant surprises, according to Downs. Smith was the 24th seed in the IM; she qualified 15th and ended up 12th. "She really had a great day," Downs said of Smith. "That was a lot of extra points we hadn't counted on from her."

"There was a lot of chipping

away going on for us Saturday."

Merchant was tied for 16th after the butterfly prelims, and she had to win an extra swim-off race at the end of the meet Friday to earn the last qualifying berth for the finals.

Switaj moved up from 18th in the 100 freestyle, and Loniewski dropped her times in the 500 from 5:18 going in to 5:14 Friday and then 5:11 in the final.

"Our goal in the beginning was to be one of the top four teams," Downs said. "You could tell, in the last few days, (the Merely girls) didn't want to settle for fourth."

"They took a look at the times and said, 'Hey, we have a chance; we can do this.' They went after it and got it done."

OTHER STATE RESULTS

North Farmington's Valencia Smith was 12th in the butterfly (59.44). The Raiders also were 13th in the medley relay (1:54.44) and 11th in the 400 freestyle relay (3:40.81). North was 24th in the team standings with 24 points.

Sophomore Katie Steff scored all five points for 38th-place Farmington Harrison in the Division II state meet at the University of Michigan.

Steff was 15th in the IM (2:18.68) and 14th in the 500 freestyle (5:23.47). In the prelims Friday, she was nearly two seconds faster in the IM (2:16.69).

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