

Jeff Gilbert

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Title game loss won't erase way Elks care for each other

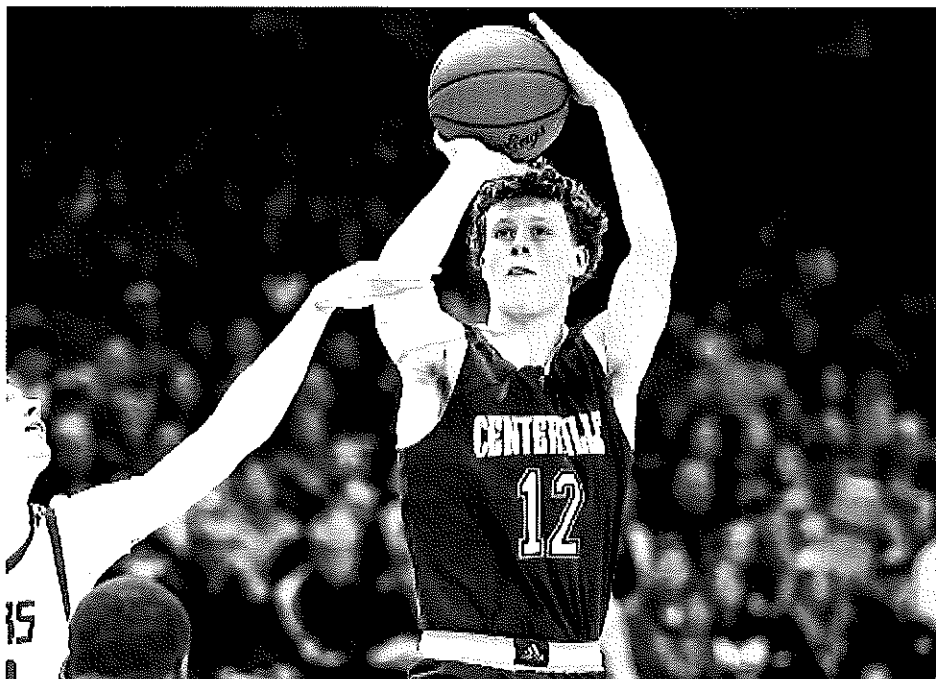
Division I Gummer

HIGH SCHOOL BASKETBALL



Centerville was denied a second straight state championship by Pickerington Central on Sunday night at UD Arena. The Tigers beat the Elks 55-48.

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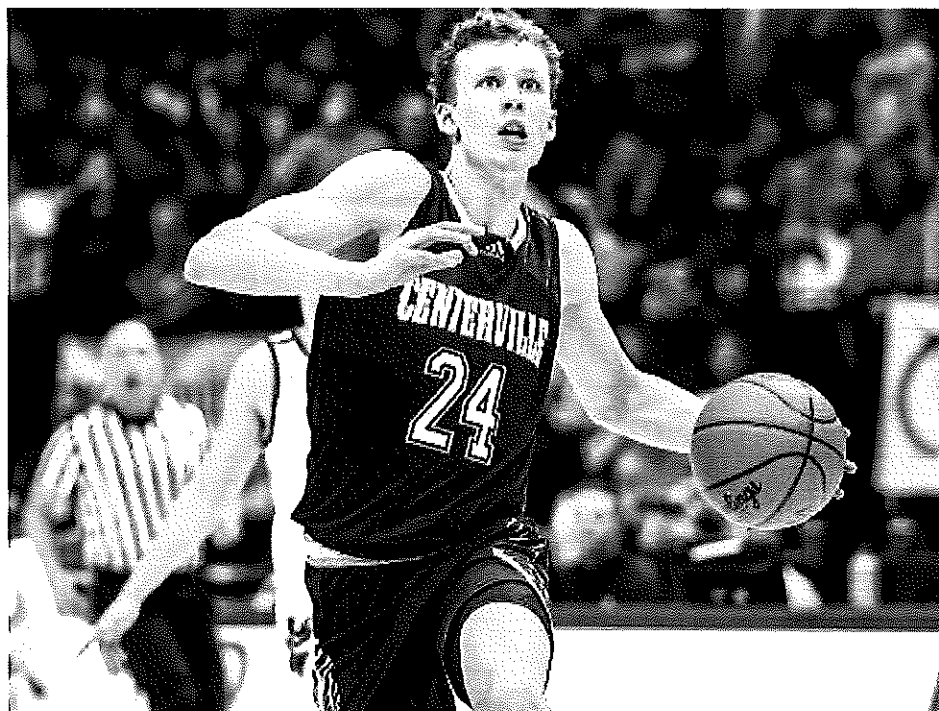


Centerville senior Tom House shoots over Pickerington Central junior Gavin Headings during the Division I state title game Sunday.

PHOTOS CONTRIBUTED BY [REDACTED]

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Centerville's Rich Rolf eyes the basket Sunday night at UD Arena. Rolf and House are among five seniors playing their last game for the Elks.

BY [REDACTED] - CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Tom House stood outside the Centerville locker room 52 minutes after his team lost in the Division I state championship game Sunday night at UD Arena. His eyes were still red. He tried not to cry again.

But the first thing he talked about was how the past two seasons — full of weighty expectations to repeat as state champion and keep a 45-game winning streak going — made him happy. He didn't smile — it was too soon for that — but he obviously felt it on the inside.

"I'm happy I got to do it with the team I had," he said. "I loved who I was around. Everything's easier when you care for who you're around all the time."

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Standing next to House was fellow senior Rich Rolf. The two have been together on the court for years, shared the joy of a state title last year and were there to support each other. Next year House will play at Florida State and Rolf is still deciding what Division I school he will attend.

"I'm glad I've had like-minded people around me," Rolf said.

"This coaching staff set a great example for me and my teammates to follow for the rest of our lives."

Junior point guard Gabe Cupps, the winner of the state coaches' Mr. Basketball award and a candidate for the media's Mr. Basketball award as well as a firstteam all-state, walked out of the locker room next.

"The toughest part is knowing those seniors aren't ever going to get a chance to put the jersey back on again," he said, fighting back tears. "I feel like they deserved to go out with a win. I work with them every day. I feel like I just let them down."

Love for team permeates the program Elks head coach Brook Cupps has built in 10 years since leaving his alma mater at Graham High School. The core values he teaches his team are to be tough, passionate, unified and thankful.

"They've just been selfless," Brook Cupps said.

"They've cared more about the program and the team than themselves. It's not something that's normal for kids to make such sacrifices and be so unselfish to care about everybody else and to buy into what a team is about."

The Elks (29-1) stuck together in their 55-48 loss to Pickerington Central (26-2). They weren't shooting well, which rarely happens, and trailed 30-20 in the third quarter. But over the last 4:54 of the quarter they went on a 14-6 run to enter the fourth down 36-34.

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"I thought It just showed that we were able to come together even when it seemed like a lot of other teams would fold," Gabe Cupps said. "It just says something about this group that we were able to rally back even though we weren't shooting very well. We didn't play our best game. But we all thought we were going to win."

Pick Central responded and kept the lead in the fourth quarter. The Elks cut the Tigers' lead to one twice, and House's 3-pointer made the score 48-46 with 1:20 to play. But that was all the Elks had left. When it ended the tears flowed quickly, and the heads hung low.

"The hardest part is seeing them hurt," Brook Cupps said. "Obviously, I'm not happy about losing. But the reality is we're having this conversation win or lose.

That's our last game together regardless of the outcome."

The finality hit the players harder than it hit the coach.

Cupps remembers many nights as a player when his season ended in a loss. He remembers when the Graham team he coached lost in the state semifinals in 2008.

He said about 20 of his former Graham players were in the arena Sunday.

"The thing that I try to keep in mind is that I know our relationship's not over," he said. "I have that perspective because I've been doing it longer. It feels more like an end to them than it does to me, and I understand that.

We just need to be there for them and help them process it and understand it."

There will be time for the Elks to reflect on what they accomplished in going 55-4 over two seasons, but Rolf and House knew exactly how they felt about their coach.

"He's the greatest coach I've ever been with," Rolf said. "He's amazing."

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Trotwood-Madison's Evans: 'This was deeper than football'

HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL



Issiah Evans moves in to tackle a Tipp ball carrier during Friday's playoff game. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] / STAFF

BY [REDACTED] - CONTRIBUTING WRITER

TIPP CITY — Emotions, too many for anyone to articulate, flooded Issiah Evans. He breathed heavily and fought for words to describe the past five months of his life and, more specifically, the previous two-and-a-half hours.

"This was deeper than football," he began.

Evans and his Trotwood-Madison teammates had just lost their fight with Tippecanoe, 43-14, in the second round of the Division III playoffs. This

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game, the one Evans pushed and disciplined himself to be ready for, was his only game this season. "It meant everything," he said.

"I feel like I made the impossible possible. I came back from an ACL surgery seven months early.

Got cleared at five months. They don't clear people for nine to 12 months. Lost my hand. I'm probably the only person in Ohio. ..."

Then he looked at his right arm where he used to have a hand, and the words stopped.

The memory of the worst night of his life – the night he fought to stay alive, the Fourth of July, the fireworks accident that blew off his hand – made the emotional flood swell. Then he looked up with a resolve to not talk about that night.

But it was hard to fight those thoughts because his arm ached from the beating it took in the game. Instead, he talked about the pain in his heart. And yet it was difficult to not talk about everything at once.

"This loss right here really hurt ... I really don't know what to say," Evans said. "This hurts, and I did everything I could, but it's not about what I did. I could have done better, I could have avoided certain situations, I could have put us in a place where we made the stop."

If Evans didn't make every play he could have made, his coaches and teammates won't hold it against him. His first practice was the Tuesday before the game, and the coaches wanted him out there. He is a 6-foot-1, 205-pound linebacker who college coaches were interested in after his sophomore season.

"This was hard but it was worth it," Evans said. "It wasn't about myself tonight.

This was about trying to get my brothers and my teammates in the right situation.

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I wanted to move forward because I wanted to get a win."

Evans played with a pad at the end of his right arm wrapped in tape. He fought through the pain and played more than 30 defensive snaps.

"It seems like he was the only one moving in daylight speed because everybody else it seemed like they were in water, and you could see No. 9 making plays," Rams head coach Jeff Graham said.

"I'm just so proud for him and his mom and for the docs and everybody that's been supporting him."

By playing, Evans made good on his July 5 promise.

"That night this happened there was no telling that I would wake up ever again," he said. "It was no telling that I would get through that night. So the next day I woke up, my cousin was sitting right next to me, Coach Kerry (Ivy) was sitting right next to me, and I made a promise I'll be back this season."

During the second half, one of Evans' teammates, junior Mickey Styles, was injured, and Evans made another promise.

Styles lay on the field for 20 minutes, not permitted to move because of a possible head or neck injury. Before he was carted off the field, his jersey was cut off. Evans took the No. 22, promising to honor his injured teammate, who is now doing well and out of the hospital.

"Nothing is promised," Evans said with the No. 22 jersey draped over his shoulder.

"He left it out here, so it's only right for me not to leave him. I've got a story to tell, and I'm willing to write my story now, one that has a happy ending."

Evans wants to his teammates to help him write that ending. He wants the team story to be the one everyone follows next fall.

After the traditional postgame talk with coaches, the players bowed their heads for the Lord's Prayer. Evans laid No. 22 on the field in front of the

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team. "The stuff that he does ... I mean, he's just a special kid," Graham said.

Then Evans asked Graham if he could speak privately with the team.

"I told him of course because you're a leader of this team," Graham said.

"I know he gave them a speech about this season, what to expect in the offseason and the things we need to improve on. And that's what a winner does. And that's what a leader has."

The players stood and listened as Evans spoke passionately while holding No. 22. He focused on the only thing he's been focused on since July: the future.

He pleaded with his teammates that the time to start preparing for next season is now. The Rams started only two seniors on Friday.

They expect to be better next season and to make a much deeper playoff run like the ones the Rams made when they won state championships in 2011, 2017 and 2019 and finished second five other times.

"It's just straight work now," he said. "We don't want to be the wasted class.

We don't want to be the forgotten class. We want to be remembered forever. We want to get our guys to school. We want to ... we just want to win. We want to be one of those Trotwood teams that made a run, a Trotwood team that will be remembered forever.

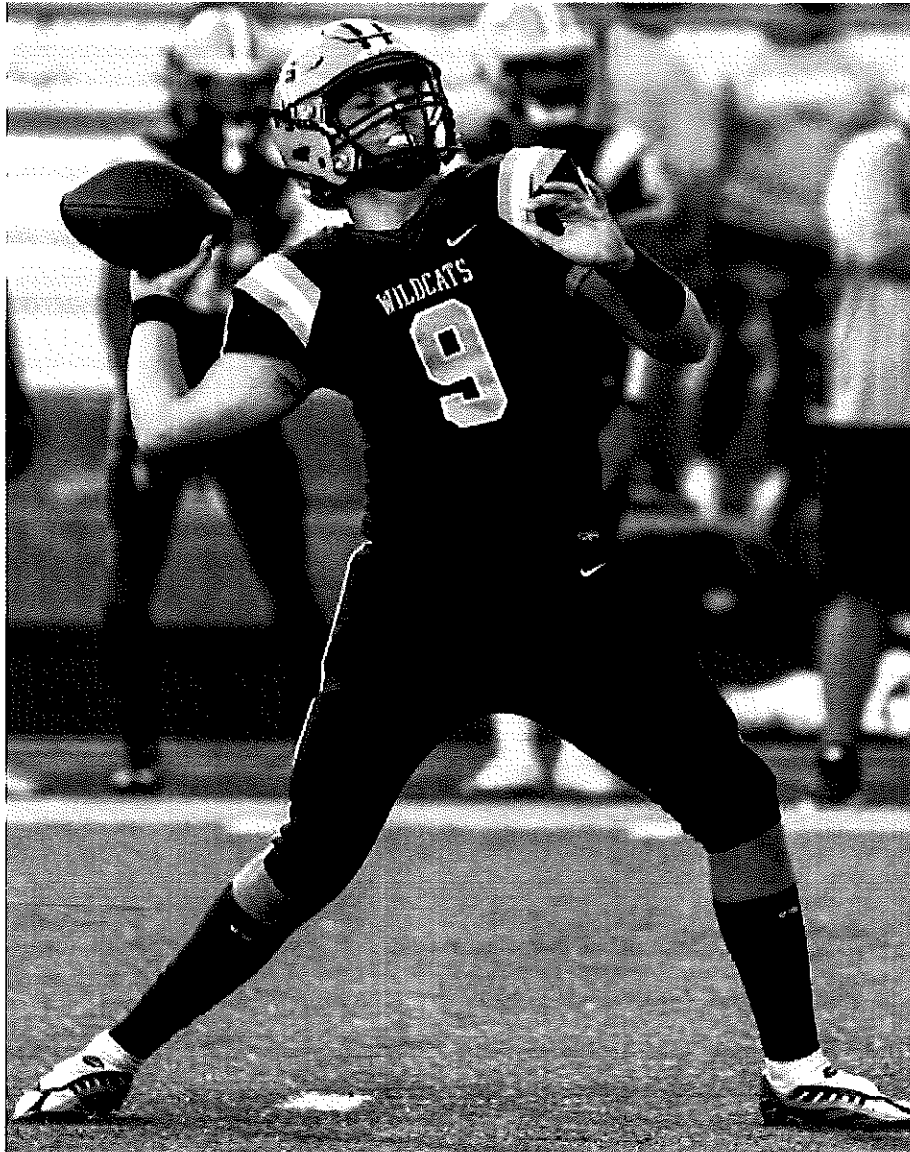
"That's what we're fighting for."

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Springfield bounces back from its first loss to rout Springboro

HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL



Springfield quarterback Bryce Schondelmyer threw for a career-high 492 yards and five TDs in Friday night's win against visiting Springboro.

[REDACTED] / CONTRIBUTED

BY **[REDACTED]** - CONTRIBUTING WRITER

SPRINGFIELD — There's bouncing back from a difficult loss and then there's the here-we-come-GWOC message Springfield sent Friday night.

The Wildcats did whatever they wanted against a hot Springboro team and Bryce Schondelmyer wowed the homecoming crowd with five deep touchdown passes in a 54-14 victory to reassert themselves as the team to beat in the Greater Western Ohio Conference.

Last week the Division I 10th-ranked Wildcats (5-1, 3-1 GWOC) lost 24-21 to Fairmont.

"Oh yeah, we bounced back for sure," said Schondelmyer, who threw for a career-high 492 yards. "In football, you've got to wait a whole week, so we've just been thinking about that loss. And we came out here and played great."

Their thoughts for now, at least until they start preparing for No. 6 Centerville, will be about the night Schondelmyer and his receivers had, the best rushing night of the season and a defense that kept Springboro's offense off the field.

Schondelmyer threw touchdown passes of 60, 37 and 33 yards to star receiver Anthony Brown. He also hit Daylen Bradley for 52 yards and Da'Shawn Martin for 45 yards. The touchdowns represented 227 of the passing yards. The Wildcats also played most of the game without Shawn Thigpen, who left after being injured on a reception.

Brown is the highly recruited receiver in the room, but he was able to get open deep on two post routes and one go route because the safeties couldn't ignore the other receivers.

"It's a blessing really," Brown said of the receiver depth. "In our receiver room we have a lot of competition.

We all hold ourselves to a high standard."

Schondelmyer completed 22 of 30 and now has 22 touchdowns and 1,869

yards in six games. His previous career high in yards in a game was 425 as a sophomore at Arcanum.

The Wildcats also had their first 100-yard rushing night with 123 for a total offensive output of 615 yards.

Jayvin Norman was the workhorse and scored on runs of 3 and 4 yards. The young offensive line of one senior, three sophomores and a freshman played a big role, too. Springfield coach Maurice Douglass said that group is starting to play more like an experienced line.

"It gives us more balance where people can just — they can drop eight if they want to, you can drop nine if you want — but Bryce is making good decisions with the ball and we're not so much trying to blow the lid off every play," Douglass said.

Except when Schondelmyer and Brown — or any other receiver — see what they saw on film that tells them they have one-on-one coverage. Then it is time to go deep.

"You got the top receiver in the state, one of the top receivers in the country, you gotta take a shot to him," Schondelmyer said. "Our guys just did a great job and we had a lot of time to throw.

It's a credit to the offensive linemen."

Springboro (5-2, 3-1) was coming off an upset of Centerville and was the only 3-0 team in the GWOC and cracked the state top 10 for the first time at No. 9. Now Springfield, Springboro, Centerville and Wayne are all 3-1.

"The better football team won tonight," Springboro coach Ryan Wilhite said.

"Those guys are really, really good and we saw a lot of those things on film. We were on a high after beating Centerville and wanting to play this game, but we'll regroup and we'll be back. There's still a lot to play for in the league and postseason."

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Springfield's defense set the tone with five threeand-outs in the first half and made dual-threat quarterback Evan Ruzzo grind for every first down. Douglass expected the defense to play well, just as it has in recent games against Springboro.

"Because of that, it put us in positions to go out on offense and make plays," Douglass said.

The loss to Fairmont was unexpected and stands out, but the week before Douglass was unhappy with his team's play in a 49-17 victory over last-place Beavercreek.

"It was a two-week thing," he said. "Sometimes when you've had success, and you have new people in the new positions, they don't know how to handle it. It's about the grind. Every day is a workday. And sometimes you get a little complacent when you have some success, and last week it surfaced all the way because we didn't finish some things that we were supposed to."

The Wildcats played to the finish Friday. With six seconds left, star cornerback Aaron Scott returned an interception for near midfield for a touchdown. Bounce back complete.

Imarianah Russell smiles through traitor chants, leads Reynoldsburg past Dublin Coffman

WESTERVILLE, Ohio — Imarianah Russell fully expected Dublin Coffman's fans to target her when Reynoldsburg squared off against the Shamrocks in a highly anticipated Division I regional final.

After all, the senior guard played varsity basketball at Coffman for two seasons before transferring to Reynoldsburg last season.

Russell was mentally ready when Coffman's student section broke into a deafening chant of "TRAITOR" after she missed a foul shot early in the first quarter.

Russell smiled, calmly sank her second free-throw attempt and went on to score a game-high 21 points to lead the top-seeded Raiders to a 56-47 victory over the second-seeded Shamrocks.

With the victory Friday at Westerville South, Reynoldsburg improved to 24-2 and advanced to the state tournament for the first time since 2016.

The Raiders will play Whitehouse Anthony Wayne or Toledo Start in a state semifinal March 11 at the University of Dayton.

"I knew they were going to call me a traitor, but I just went somewhere where I was wanted," said Russell, who was in the Reynoldsburg City School District as a seventh-grader. "I've been chanted at by fans before, so I just stayed focused, and my sisters on this team let me know they had my back.

"A lot of people came at me... but I didn't say anything. I just let my game do my talking."

Russell made her presence known early, scoring the game's first five points to give the Raiders a lead they would never relinquish.

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The West Virginia recruit demonstrated her versatility throughout the game, driving to the basket for layups, hitting midrange jump shots, crashing the boards for offensive rebounds and playing intense defense.

Russell — who made 8 of 16 field goals and went 5-for-8 from the foul line — scored 13 points in the first 16 minutes to help Reynoldsburg race to a 32-21 halftime lead.

"We talked to (Russell) about blocking all of that stuff (from the fans) out and just playing her game," Reynoldsburg coach Jack Purtell said. "She did a great job of staying focused and making big plays when we needed them."

The Raiders kept the Shamrocks' typically efficient offense off-kilter in the first half by applying stifling full-court pressure.

Coffman missed seven of its nine field-goal attempts and turned the ball over five times while falling behind 15-8 in the first quarter.

"We tried to pressure them because that's just what we do," Purtell said. "We tried to speed them up as much as we could, and we did a better job in the first half of that. We played only six kids, so they will sleep good tonight."

Mya Perry, an Ohio State recruit, scored 17 points, including three 3-pointers in the second quarter.

She also scored six points in the third quarter to help Reynoldsburg stay in front of Coffman, after the Shamrocks rallied to pull within four points twice.

Perry fell to the ground clutching her right leg and crying out in pain with Reynoldsburg ahead 52-44 with 1 minute, 58 seconds remaining in the game, before limping her way to the bench.

But as she celebrated the victory with her teammates afterward, Perry said her leg had merely cramped up and that she will be 100% healthy for the state tournament.

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The victory was especially sweet for the Raiders, who squandered a double-digit first-half lead en route to losing to Coffman 60-57 in a regional semifinal a year ago.

"Last time, we got outhustled by (Coffman) in the semis, (and) we couldn't go out like that this year," Perry said. "A lot of people were doubting us ... but Reynoldsburg is here to stay, and we're going to take home a state title."

Tessa Grady, a Wisconsin recruit, scored a team-high 19 points to pace Coffman.

Grady made a 3-pointer in each of the first three quarters and scored seven points in the third quarter when the Shamrocks outscored the Raiders 18-11 to pull within 43-39 heading into the fourth quarter.

"We emphasized ball movement in the second half, and we definitely got better looks and started making more of our shots," Grady said. "We were super excited for this game, and it could have gone either way. We just needed more of our shots to fall."

Taylor Covington, an Indiana Tech recruit, scored 11 of her 12 points in the second half to help rally the Shamrocks.

Covington made both of her 3-point attempts in the third quarter, and she nailed a long 3-pointer to pull Coffman within 45-42 with 5:37 left in the game, which was the Shamrocks' smallest deficit since the opening minutes.

But Russell answered with back-to-back baskets and Samara Savoy scored six of her 10 points in the fourth quarter, as the Raiders pulled away in the final four minutes of the contest.

"This is a resilient team, and there was no quit in any of our girls," said Coffman coach Adam Banks, whose squad finished 24-2. "I thought if we could just get the lead that there would be no turning back. We got it down to three points late, and we forced a tough shot; but they got a bucket, a steal and then another quick bucket, and we were never able to get within a shot again."

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The Raiders took their time celebrating the victory afterward, posing for pictures together with the championship trophy at midcourt and cutting down a net.

Reynoldsburg also won regional titles in 2010, 2012 and 2016 but is looking to advance to a state final for the first time.

"Our team is like a family, and this is something we've dreamed of since I've been here," said senior point guard Makiya Miller, who scored six points. "It's a relief to finally get over the hump, and I'm so proud of our entire team that we are (regional) champions."

Troy Lane does it all for Pickerington Central in 14-7 win over rival Pickerington North

PICKERINGTON, OH – At one point this past summer, Troy Lane didn't think he would play football again.

That's because the Pickerington Central senior had just captured OHSAA Division I state titles in both the 100- and 200-meter runs, as well as the 400 relay, to become one of the hottest track and field college recruits in the nation, and some coaches were advising him to quit playing football to avoid getting injured.

After taking a few weeks off in the summer, Lane opted to return for one more season of football, and his decision paid major dividends for the Tigers in their 14-7 victory over crosstown rival Pickerington North.

Lane not only scored the game-winning touchdown in that contest, which was held Friday at Tiger Stadium but the 5-foot-10, 160-pound linebacker/defensive back also stripped the ball out of North quarterback Landon O'Connell's hands to force a turnover in the waning seconds of the fourth quarter after the Panthers had driven all the way to Central's 15-yard-line.

"I thought I might not play this year, because I'm pursuing track in college," Lane said. "But I wanted to come back and have fun with my boys one last season, instead of sitting in the stands watching them, and being able to contribute to the team in this way is special."

Lane scored the first touchdown of his varsity career on a jet sweep, where he received the ball from quarterback Terrance Alexander and then outraced defenders to the right sideline before sprinting 68 yards untouched.

That play gave Central (2-2) a 14-7 advantage less than a minute into the second quarter, and Lane's only run of the game ended up holding up as the game-winning score.

"We practiced that play all week," Central head coach Jay Sharrett said.

"Troy's one of the fastest players in the nation, but the hard part is getting him the ball because he comes in so fast that it's hard to get it into his hands.

Once I saw that the ball didn't squirt loose and that he was turning the corner, I was excited because I knew that no one was going to catch him."

On North's final possession of the game, O'Connell scrambled and completed a pass to Preston Bowman to move the ball to Central's 15 late in the fourth quarter.

But on the following play, Lane utilized his blazing speed to chase down O'Connell from behind and he used his right hand to wrench loose the ball, which Central defensive back Zavion Mattox pounced on to end North's final scoring threat with just 15.5 seconds left in the game.

"I was the only linebacker in the middle of the field, so my job was to stalk their quarterback and make sure he didn't run for a big gain," Lane said. "I saw that he didn't have the ball secured very well, so I put my glove on it and pulled it free.

"This feels amazing to beat North, because this is a rivalry game. This feels just as good as winning (state titles) in track."

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It was a frustrating loss for North coach Nate Hillerich, whose squad dropped to 3-1 overall.

The Panthers were limited to 177 yards of total offense, including just 85 yards in the second half. North also was penalized 10 times for 90 yards, as it dropped to 4-15 in its all-time series against Central.

"This wasn't a clean football game for us," Hillerich said. "We made too many mistakes, had too many costly penalties and we didn't finish our drives. Central's a good team and they just made a couple more plays than us. But we still have a lot of season left and we're going to bounce back."

Central kept North's defense guessing by lining up five different players to take snaps at the quarterback position and by having a total of eight different players run the ball.

The Tigers jumped out to a 7-0 lead midway through the first quarter, when starting quarterback Braden Mantooth lobbed the ball 28 yards downfield, before Kasey Middendorf leaped high in the air to snag at the goal line.

Alexander, a junior running back, took over at quarterback on Central's third series, and he ended up rushing for 61 yards on a team-high 16 carries, while Mantooth threw for 41 yards and rushed for 21 yards, and Rasheem Biles had four catches for 29 yards and rushed for 29 yards.

"We have a lot of good athletes and they each have their own individual skill set, so we put in packages where we could utilize all of them," Sharrett said. "Braden threw a long touchdown pass to Kasey, who made a great catch. And Terrance, Rasheem and our freshman, Rocco Williams, each came in and did a good job, too."

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Just three plays after Central scored its first touchdown, North knotted the score at 7-7 when O'Connell zipped a pass to Chris Louis, who was sprinting down the center of the field. Louis shrugged off an arm-tackle attempt and never broke stride en route to a 75-yard scoring reception.

O'Connell was 9-for-19 passing for 133 yards, and Dawaun Green rushed for 70 yards on 19 carries, but the Panthers struggled to run the ball consistently, as they were held to 44 rushing yards on 32 carries as a team.

Defensive lineman Kobi Gorman, a Miami University recruit, led Central's defense by making bone-jarring tackles in the trenches, including two sacks in the second half. Gorman also tackled Green just inches short of the first-down marker on a key fourth-and-1 play at Central's 42-yard line late in the second quarter.

"We played good as a group, with so many people making big plays for us all over the field," Gorman said. "North's our rival, so we were fired up and we played fast and free.

"A lot of people were doubting us, after we lost two of our first three games, so winning this game on our home field in front of such a great crowd means everything to us."

Gahanna Lincoln uses explosive offense and strong defense for 38-24 win over New Albany

WHITEHALL, Ohio – Makai Shahid has pleaded with Gahanna Lincoln's coaches to utilize him more as a wide receiver this season.

Gahanna coach Bruce Ward said he was reluctant to do so in recent weeks because Shahid had been nursing a minor foot injury and he wanted to keep the senior's legs fresh since he plays nearly every down at safety.

However, sensing that his offense might need a spark against New Albany, Ward finally acquiesced to Shahid's request Friday in a key Ohio Capital Conference-Ohio Division showdown played at Whitehall.

And as fate would have it, Ward's gamble paid off, as not only did Shahid continue to play excellent defense, but he also racked up six receptions for 127 yards and two touchdowns, including hauling in the game-winning score, to help lead the Lions to a 38-24 victory over the Eagles.

"I've been begging to get on the offensive side of the ball because I knew I could make a difference there, too," Shahid said. "New Albany was focusing on trying to take (running back Diore Hubbard) out of the game because he's the heart of our offense, so I knew that was going to lead to some opportunities, because they couldn't keep up with our athletes on the outside of the field. I finally got some chances to make some big plays and I took advantage of them."

Shahid scored his first touchdown on a 34-yard pass from quarterback Brennen Ward midway through the third quarter to break a 17-17 halftime tie. That play helped Gahanna take a 25-17 advantage when holder Jake Bushelman tossed the ball to Elijah King for a two-point conversion, after a mishandled snap botched the Lions' point-after kick attempt.

"Makai started off the season as a two-way player, but he had a little foot injury and we wanted to keep him fresh on defense because he's our top

safety," said coach Ward, whose squad improved to 6-1 overall and 2-0 in the OCC-Ohio. "But New Albany (loaded the box) to try to stop the run, so we figured we'd take advantage of Makai's speed because we needed to throw more than usual."

Shahid scored what stood as the game-winning touchdown with just under two minutes into the fourth quarter when he hauled in a 32-yard scoring pass from Ward. On that play, Shahid leaped to catch the ball at the 10-yard line and then shook off a tackler on his way into the end zone.

"I had to come back to the ball, and I was expecting to get tackled right away, but I broke away from their guy and scored," Shahid said. "On my first touchdown, I had a mismatch on the outside and it was a long catch-and-run."

Even though New Albany's defense was able to contain Hubbard for most of the game, including limiting him to three carries for zero yards in the third quarter, the junior managed to bust loose for two long touchdown runs and finished with 132 yards on 18 carries.

With New Albany keying on Hubbard, Ward was 21-of-30 passing for 249 yards and three touchdowns, including an 11-yard scoring strike to Hubbard, which put the Lions ahead 17-7 midway through the second quarter.

"Diore's having a great year," coach Ward said. "New Albany did a good job defensively, but the rest of our guys were able to back him up. My son was poised and made good decisions, and (Hubbard) came through with some big plays."

Indeed, on the rare occasions that Hubbard wasn't swarmed by defenders the moment he touched the ball, he displayed his explosive speed and dazzling shiftness.

On Gahanna's sixth play from scrimmage, Hubbard broke free from a defender, used a spin move to get past another and then raced 59 yards for a touchdown to make it 7-0.

In the fourth quarter, Hubbard also exploded up the middle for a 39-yard touchdown run, pausing only briefly to shake loose from a defender.

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Hubbard's third touchdown put Gahanna ahead 38-24 with 6:55 remaining and effectively iced the game.

"I'm a playmaker and that's just what I do," Hubbard said. "I practice all week so I can make explosive plays like this. That was my first touchdown catch ever in high school, and that was a well-designed, well-executed play.

"New Albany beat us (31-3) last year, so this was my revenge tour and we had to turn the page over. We just have better playmakers than them and we wanted it more."

The Eagles - who dropped to 5-2 overall and 1-1 in the OCC-Ohio - had averaged 37.5 points and 355.5 yards in their first six games, before rushing for only 122 yards and passing for 59 yards against Gahanna.

Led by linebackers Bushelman, Dylan Scott, Jacob Starr and Jaden Yates, linemen Kamari Burns, Jake Grimm, Griffin Flusche, King and Isaac Perkins and backs Shahid, Jason Smith, Ty Staples and Romearo Wells, Gahanna's defense hadn't surrendered more than 59 yards rushing in its first six games.

"New Albany's offense posed a ton of challenges because they run the wing-T so well," Scott said. "The key was getting our assignments down, being physical and making plays. It feels good because we all did our jobs well."

The Eagles racked up only three first downs in the first half, but capitalized on big plays on special teams to stay in the game.

Chidi Mabatah blocked a Gahanna punt and recovered the ball in the end zone to pull New Albany within 10-7 early in the second quarter.

After Tom Bohman recovered a muffed punt at Gahanna's 26, Colin Schuler made a 37-yard field goal to cut Gahanna's lead to 17-10. And then Christian Manville scored on a 1-yard run with just 3.3 seconds remaining in the second quarter to knot the score at 17 heading into halftime.

Dylan Rosser rushed for 70 yards on 18 carries and Manville rushed for 36 yards on 16 attempts and scored two touchdowns to pace the Eagles' offense.

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"We started strong and played good defense, but we had some self-inflicted wounds and New Albany battled back to make it a competitive game," coach Ward said.

New Albany quarterback Luka Garver pulled his team within 25-23 late in the third quarter, when he scrambled to his right and feathered a pass between defenders to Manville for a 36-yard touchdown.

But the Eagles turned the ball over twice in the second half, with Grimm and Wells each recovering fumbles within the final seven minutes.

"Gahanna's one of the best teams in the state," New Albany coach Brian Finn said. "Their defense is as good of a defense as we've seen, and it was hard to run against them. Our kids fought and continued to play hard, but we need to play better."

Poronsky Powers Tipp Past Western Brown, Novak

Bruce Hooley Division I Gamer

Facing down one of the most-prolific passers in Ohio high school history, Tippecanoe rode its own difference-making quarterback to a pulsating comeback victory that moves the Red Devils into the regional finals.

Bellbrook, OH – When a heavyweight championship bout goes back and forth the way Western Brown and Tippecanoe traded punches Friday in the Division III, Region 12 semifinals, it often emerges with a catchy name like the Thrilla in Manilla or the Rumble in the Jungle so no one ever forgets what transpired.



Good luck finding something to rhyme with Poronsky or Novak, though.

Or, for that matter, Red Devils or Broncos.

That's probably just as well, because they won't need any cute phrases or clever marketing to remember everything about second-seeded Tipp's 41-30 comeback triumph over No. 3 Western Brown in Red Devils' athletic lore.

Scoring touchdowns on each of its first five second-half possessions, Tipp found a way to catch, pass and stay in front of Western Brown's foot-to-the-floorboard offense and slow record-setting quarterback Drew Novak just enough to move into the regional finals against defending state runner-up Hamilton Badin.

The 6-6 Novak was everything anticipated, rushing for 132 yards and completing 35 of 62 passes for 394 yards (and three interceptions) in a performance that nudged him over the 13,000-yard mark in career passing, which ranks third in Ohio high school history.

But on this night, Tipp senior Liam Poronsky was the best player on the field, and the transformative reason the Red Devils erased a 14-0 first-half deficit and are moving on.

Poronsky's passing numbers weren't as eye-popping — 13-of-20 for 163 yards and one score — but Tipp's aerial strategy is more surgical than rapid fire, as he would prove time and again on crucial third-down strikes.

It's as a runner...no, more precisely, as a life-preserver when the defensive tide rises, that Poronsky is asked to don his super-hero cape.

His 19 carries worked for 237 yards and three scores in such a successful assault on the enemy as to make any of history's greatest military generals envious.

Poronsky brought his team back from an early two-touchdown deficit by lofting a 36-yard scoring strike to Stanley Clyne near the end of the first half, then scoring from nine yards out to start the third quarter.

That evened things, but doesn't begin to tell what Poronsky contributed amid those drives to get the Devils into a 14-14 deadlock.

When a player goes on zig-zagging, game-clinching touchdown runs of 46 and 56 yards on consecutive series in the fourth quarter — which Poronsky did to put this win away — lesser-yardage plays earlier in the game get eclipsed by their apparent statistical superiors.

But without Poronsky's 17-yard scramble on third-and-17 late in the first half, Tipp would have punted, likely been scoreless at halftime, and quite probably been significantly emotionally damaged at the break.

Instead, it drew within 14-7, and stayed there when a run-ragged defense got a ricochet interception at the Red Devils' 15 to stop the next Western Brown drive and an end-of-half pick in the end zone when the Broncos reached the 12 and had to hurry to beat the clock's pending expiration.

"I really wasn't worried at halftime," said Clyne, whose six catches went for 108 yards and a TD. "I felt like we could get things fixed in the second half and score on them. We have complete confidence in Liam to lead us. He's one of the best around. I'd say he is the best around. He was just amazing tonight."

Western Brown's kicking game gave Tipp great starting field position all night, so the Devils had to drive only 40 yards to start the third quarter and pull even.

Poronsky carried on four of the last five plays, gaining six, 10 and nine yards in succession, then excusing Clyne's TD drop on second down by scurrying across on third-and-six from the nine.

A holding penalty forced a Broncos punt and back came the Devils, driving 66 yards to take the lead.

Clyne made Western Brown pay for covering him man-to-man, streaking free down the left sideline for a 35-yard gain to the 27. Even so, Tipp soon faced third-and-six, and Poronsky appeared hemmed in as he rolled right.

"I was just about to get tackled, but I tried to keep my eyes downfield and our receivers kept playing," he said. "We have a bunch of playmakers all over. A lot of our guys can hurt you."

Clyne surely can, and so can running back Xavier Jones, who found almost no room to run in the first half, but powered in for a pair of second-half scores.

This time, though, it was junior Lucas Merry, who adjusted and found an open space for Poronsky to flip him the ball for first-down yardage.

Jones soon scored from the four to give Tipp its first lead, 21-14, only to have Novak lead his team quickly back in front via an 80-yard drive and subsequent two-point pass for a 22-21 margin.

BK
"He's a hell of a quarterback and they're a great team," Poronsky said. "They score a lot and they score quick. You look up and they're scoring in 90 seconds."

Jones, now gashing Western Brown for worthwhile yardage on virtually every touch, counter-punched the Devils back in front on a 10-yard run with 10:34 left. Jackson Kleather's kick, reliable as it's been all season, pushed the margin to 28-22.

"It was back and forth, back and forth," Burgbacher said. "We knew we had to get a couple stops."

That crucial hold came after Western Brown drove from its 16 to the Tipp 23, where three straight throws fell incomplete.

Poronsky then pounced, first duplicating his earlier third-down magic by finding Andrew Oen for just enough on third-and-seven, preventing Tipp from having to punt.

"That was a very headsy play on Liam's part, and Andrew did a great job," Burgbacher said. "He re-routed and found an open area, then made a great catch."

Poronsky rumbled for 18 yards on a called run to reach the Western Brown 46, then took it the distance on the next play.

"It was a read option," Poronsky said. "We had a great kick-out by our tackle that gave me a lane. I was able to move through it and pull away."

Now down, 35-22, and with only 5:55 left, Novak took just 1:18 to drive his team 72 yards and convert another two-pointer to close within 35-30 at 4:32.

"Our guys just wouldn't quit," Western Brown coach Nick Osborne said. "We played great the whole game. Tipp is a darn good football team, and so are we. We had two good teams going at it. Unfortunately, one of them had to lose."

Poronsky wouldn't wait long to solve the mystery of which would emerge victorious.

Standing behind center for 20 seconds, waiting for precious time to elapse off the play clock and reduce Novak's wiggle room should Tipp not score, Poronsky finally took the snap and rolled right.

A path opened outside right tackle, offering an avenue toward the sideline.

"I stayed tight to the block and then ran it to the outside," Poronsky said. "I knew we wanted to run clock, so I was trying to stay in bounds. That's why I cut back, and then there was another lane. So I hit the burners."

BH

DIGDI

Buh-bye.

Fifty-six yards later, Tipp had its fifth consecutive touchdown drive of the half and the clincher in its 41-30 advance.

"Their guy is obviously a great thrower," Burgbacher said. "We knew we were going to bend tonight, but we never broke. We had a choice to make, and our kids made the right choice. They kept battling. They kept fighting. I wouldn't expect anything different, because they've been doing it all year."

Sarver's 20, Suggs' Trey, Defense, Hand Tri-Village Title

Some sage motivation at the right time resonated with Tri-Village's players over the summer and echoed loudly as an explanation for their ability to extend their own state title dreams, while ending Botkins' attempt for a second straight championship.

Kettering, OH – The best coaches don't simply shout instructions and draw diagrams. They elicit complete buy-in by giving what they ask in return.

So as Josh Scantland recounted the message that drove Tri-Village to its 45-36 regional championship victory over Botkins at Trent Arena, the post-game appearance of Patriots' head coach Josh Sagester became particularly noteworthy.

Necktie askew, dress shirt soaked with perspiration, clearly drained by his team's advance to the state semifinals, Sagester personified what he told his team minutes after its only loss last season.

"He told us he didn't think we had enough time in the gym to earn winning that game," Scantland recalled of a regional loss to Cedarville. "So this year, that was the big thing – earn it. He talked a lot about sweat equity and this year we put it in. I think we deserve this win."

There were myriad crucial moments and an array of essential contributions to Tri-Village's conquest of the defending Division IV state champions, but none of them brought the smile to Sagester's face as his senior center's detailed recall of his searing assessment.

"I'm proud he remembers that conversation, said Sagester, whose team rose to 23-3. "Of course, it hurt that we lost to Cedarville. But...in order to win these games, you have to have what I call, sweat equity, you have to put in a lot of time to earn these opportunities and these special moments."

The Patriots will look back on their advance to a 2 p.m. Saturday semifinal at UD Arena against Antwerp (26-1) and cherish Layne Sarver's game-high 20 points and Wilson Suggs' timely three-point field goal that blunted a Botkins' comeback.



But the blue-collar nature of Tri-Village's defensive effort is what made the difference and most pleased those with a hand in its execution.

Botkins (25-3) shot 28% from the field and only half that from three-point range, suffering through a first quarter in which it didn't make a field goal and managed only three free throws.

The Trojans shot 0-for-10 over the first eight minutes, including 0-for-7 on triples, and faced an 11-3 deficit they toiled tirelessly, but ultimately unsuccessfully, to ever erase.

"I would have thought you were crazy," Sarver said of a pre-game suggestion that Botkins wouldn't make even one attempt in the first quarter. "They shoot some crazy shots and a lot of them go in a lot of times. We stuck to the scouting report really well and defended well."

Sarver hit the first and last baskets of the quarter for the Patriots, with Justin Finkbine scoring once in close, Dalton Delong making a three and Suggs hitting a 17-footer.

That's always the question with Tri-Village – can Sarver get enough help from his supporting cast – so it helped settle the Patriots that its three role-playing starters all contributed early.

Conversely, nothing went right for Botkins, but its misses weren't wide-open, in-rhythm looks, either.

"We knew the team that would win would be the one that made the most shots." Botkins coach Phil Groves said. "Hats off to them, they shot the ball well. Offensively, tonight was not our night. Part of that has to give credit to their defense. They did a great job defensively."

Still, Tri-Village led only 16-10 at halftime, and Carter Pleiman led a Botkins' burst that fed off his jumper, three-point play and a put-back from his brother, Jacob, that closed the deficit to 18-17.

Sarver beat back that charge with consecutive baskets and Botkins went cold again, getting only one field goal the last four minutes of the third quarter.

Defending state champions don't give up easily, though, so the Trojans mounted another charge early in the fourth that reduced a 29-19 deficit to 29-26 with four minutes left.

That's when Suggs struck from the right corner, a much-needed triple from an unlikely source.

"I don't know if we lost somebody defensively or what the situation was, but when he hit that basket to put them up six, that was a huge basket," Groves said. "That was kind of a dagger."

BH

Suggs took advantage of the Trojans' understandable attention on Sarver to get free.

"I was in the corner with Layne and he started to drive," Suggs said. "My guy switched off on Layne and I was open. I've been waiting for that shot all season. It felt amazing. I felt like that put a hurtin' on 'em."

It did, because Sarver followed it with a transition layup, then he and Finkbine each hit two free throws to create a 38-26 margin 90 seconds shy of the finish.

"Layne is special," Sagester said. "Layne is big and long and athletic and can get his shots off. Sometimes, that's half the battle when you're playing good teams because he can elevate and go over the top.

"But to win some of these games you also have to have unsung heroes. Wilson's shot for us was enormous to kind of give us some more breathing room."

Sarver, the guy who's accustomed to shouldering all the burden of making the consequential shots for Tri-Village, happily ceded that role to Suggs for a night.

"That was really big," Sarver said. "They started making a little run there. That kind of silenced them and got our crowd back into it and our bench. It brought the energy back to us."

Botkins drew its energy from Jacob Pleiman's 15 points, Meyer's 11 and Carter Pleiman's seven points and 12 rebounds, yet fell short of a return trip to UD.

"We struggled tonight," Groves said. "It just wasn't our night...But when kids are open and they're good shooters, you have to have confidence in their ability to knock down open shots. When you're open, I'm fine with them shooting those open shots. They just didn't fall tonight."

Spent and sweat-soaked, Sagester revelled not only that his team advanced, but how it moved on.

"I'm happy; I'm excited; I'm elated right now," he said. "Our kids played really, really hard and really gutty. We weren't perfect in every facet, but I thought we were tough in every facet. To win these games, you have to be tough, because everything is not going to go right on both ends of the court."

Homan's 4 TDs Trigger New Bremen Rout Of JFK

New Bremen took a lot of teams by surprise when it rolled to the 2020 Division VII state championship, but if anyone thought that was a fluke, the Cardinals proved otherwise Saturday with yet another running-clock domination and another title triumph.

Canton, OH – Chris Schmidt stood in front of his locker, quivering in coaching gear still damp from the Gatorade shower he'd taken maybe 30 minutes before as the final seconds ticked off his New Bremen Cardinals' 38-6 domination of Warren JFK in the Division VII state championship game.

Or, maybe it wasn't the vestiges of the ice bath that caused Schmidt to shiver.

Maybe it was something else...perhaps the heady notion that this was the second state title for his team in just three years, both by running clock domination of JFK.

Or, if not that, what might have caused Schmidt to shake – his head in amazement, if not his body in the frigid clothing still affixed to him – could have been the images of quarterback David Homan doing Herculean things as the trigger man for the Cardinals' offense.

"He's a special player and he showed it again today," Schmidt said of the senior who scored four touchdowns in the rout. "I think he's the best all-around player in Division VII, maybe in a lot of divisions."

It's been that way all throughout the season — the last two seasons, really — but particularly this post-season, when Homan produced exactly what New Bremen needed under the ever-looming duress of elimination.

Remember, New Bremen was "just" the fifth seed in its region.

It pushed aside No. 4 Riverside, No. 2 Fort Loramie and No. 1 Ansonia to get to the state semifinals, where it overcame a 14-0 deficit to defeat Lima Central Catholic and get the chance to play JFK, which ended the season ranked No. 1 in the final Associated Press poll.

Amid all those daunting challenges, New Bremen had something better than a favorable seed or a fearsome ranking.

The Cardinals had David Homan and a band of seniors who believed in both him and themselves.

"I can't really explain how I do it," Homan said of his 234 rushing yards, which included 67- and 41-yard breakaways in the first half that staked New Bremen to a 24-0 halftime lead. "I just try to go out and play for my teammates, because I know they're playing for me."

They sure do, and many of them play on both sides of the ball.

BH
Defensively, the
Cardinals are

nimble, fast and tough, as evidenced by the leaping fourth-quarter interception of defensive end Carter Elking, who rose with arms up to block a pass and had the dexterity to come down with it in his grasp.

On offense, it's not just Homan that New Bremen can count on. There's an athletic line that plays as one, dangerous tailback Hunter Schaefer and capable receivers Ben Sailer, Aaron Thieman, Grant Dicke or Aaron Poeppelman.

Wait...Aaron Poeppelman?

Yes, the Cardinals senior backup tight end, who stood on the sidelines when Homan faced third-and-17 on the game's first series.

Suddenly, Sailer – who caught consequential pass after consequential pass in the last-minute upset of Ansonia in the regional semifinals – ran off the field with an equipment issue.

Poeppelman ran on and ran the route called in the huddle...only with Homan's improvisational skills, it's always best to, well, adapt.

Sure enough, Homan scrambled away from pressure toward the right sideline with no apparent options, then did what a quarterback should never do – throw late over the middle.

To Poeppelman, for 22 yards and a first down.

It was early, only the game's third play, but if you want a microcosm of the outcome, that was it – Homan orchestrating, his teammates following and New Bremen delivering under pressure to frustrate an opponent and fracture its confidence.

Homan would convert the next down-and-distance predicament with called runs on third and fourth down, then make nine yards on a third-and-eight from the JFK 25.

Schaefer scored on the next play, at 6:05 of the first quarter, and the escalation was in process.

"He plays with a lot of grit," JFK coach Domenic Prologo said of Homan. "He kinda wills his team to victory. He's tough to get on the ground. You have to get to his legs to do that. He's a heck of an athlete."

Homan didn't do everything right, of course. He fumbled a punt right after Schaefer scored, giving JFK a possession at the New Bremen 22.

But the Cardinals held, took the ball at their own 13 and Homan was off on his 67-yard TD sprint soon afterward.

Later in the half, Evan Eyink's interception blunted a JFK drive across midfield and two plays later, Homan was gone for his 41-yard score.

But the Cardinals weren't quite done.

They took over at their 25 with two minutes left, and Homan capably spread the wealth to Thieman, Sailer and Schaefer to reach the Kennedy 18 with six seconds left.

Schaefer drilled a 35-yard field goal into the wind as the half ended for a 24-0 lead, leaving the only mystery whether New Bremen would eventually exceed the 30-point lead barrier and inflict a running clock on JFK for the second time in three seasons.

They did that when Homan scored twice more, just 17 seconds apart, late in the third quarter.

Homan's seven-yard run that boosted the lead to 31-6 at 1:57 was the first punch in that one-two combination. The Cardinals inflicted the second blow by forcing a fumble on the ensuing kickoff, which linebacker Dylan Bambauer recovered. That gave Homan and the offense another opportunity, which they immediately redeemed with his 27-yard touchdown run on the first snap following the turnover.

That put the clock in fast motion and left Schmidt a fourth quarter to reflect, while still stewarding the final 12 minutes on New Bremen's second state title this fall sports season – joining the Cardinals' title in girls volleyball – and the Midwest Athletic Conference's second title of the day.

The first came Saturday morning, with Marion Local's 14-6 victory over Kirtland in the Division VI championship game, giving the MAC at least one football title in 13 of the past 14 seasons.

When New Bremen book-ended the Flyers' triumph with another crown a few hours later, it raised the MAC's collective record in state championship football games to 21-8 over the last 14 years.

Do the math...that's an average of more than two state championship game appearances a season for nearly the last decade and a half.

New Bremen now has two of those trophies, of course, which might be another reason Schmidt was shivering in the aftermath of the Gatorade shower and post-game interviews.

"It's one of those things where I almost have to pinch myself," he said. "To be here a second time...I mean, two years ago (amid COVID) was awesome. It was such a great memory.

"But there was a thought that I'd like to get back so everyone in our community could come out and see us play. I didn't want to be greedy or unappreciative. I hope it doesn't come off that way. For it to happen, I just feel tremendously blessed."

Jake Furr

Division I Gamer

DIGIS

He's golden: Fulmer's overtime goal sends Ontario to boys soccer district final

CLYDE — It was quite possibly the most spectacular goal of the season, and Chris McClenathan didn't even see it.

The Ontario coach called for a formation change right before a throw-in during the Warriors' 3-2 overtime victory over Norwalk in a Division II boys soccer district semifinal Monday. As he was walking back toward his bench from calling for the change, he heard the crowd erupt.

What he missed was senior Zain Fulmer drilling the ball out of midair with his right foot and into the back of the net to give the Warriors the golden goal overtime victory and send them back to the district championship game for the third consecutive year and sixth time since 2015.

"To be honest, I missed it," McClenathan said. "I turned back around to see what was happening and saw the ball going in the back of the net. I just couldn't be happier for these boys. They have persevered through so much this season with the extremely tough schedule that helps us get over the hump in games like this. Norwalk came out in the second half and got two goals to tie it up and we responded in overtime."

Ontario (12-7-1) advanced to play Lexington in a district championship match at 6 p.m. Thursday at Clear Fork High School.

The win didn't come without overcoming some adversity. Ontario built a 2-0 lead with 18:05 left in the first half when Brandon Litteral found Gage Weaver for the game-opening goal before Weaver returned the favor by feeding Litteral for the second goal. But Norwalk responded before the half when Cameron Shoop finished off a scrum at the front of the net to make it 2-1 at halftime.

Clinging to its one-goal lead, Ontario dropped back into a defensive formation. But the Truckers had other plans, and Shoop scored the game-tying goal with 1:01 left in the match to send it into overtime.

It was there that Fulmer's heroics took over. Normally a right wing, Fulmer was moved to the left just before scoring his golden goal. It was at the request of assistant coach Dave Lamport, who noticed a bit of a mismatch if Fulmer could play on the left.

"Credit coach Lamport," McClenathan said. "He said we had to switch him because that defender on the right side was playing a great game. We finally got the opportunity to switch and I turn around and the ball is going to the back of the net."

It was all about putting players in the best position to be successful.

"It was coach Lamport's decision to switch me from the right side to the left because when I am on the right it is more of me cutting in to take shots, but on the left I can get my shot off easier," Fulmer said. "I saw the ball in the air, saw no one on me and I just took the rip. It was the craziest goal I have ever scored in my life. I can't feel my legs, though. I am so tired."

The goal was a huge response after Norwalk tied it up with just more than a minute left, giving the Truckers every ounce of momentum heading into the sudden-victory overtime period. But the Warriors responded in their usual calm, cool and collected manner.

Jake Furr

DIG 15

"It is all on the team," Fulmer said. "When we face adversity like that, we don't necessarily care. We still consider the game at 0-0, so we come out with our heads on fire and find a way to win. The coaches put that mindset into us at the very beginning of the season. Even against Lexington in game one of the year, we still didn't put our heads down after losing 3-1. We kept pushing and kept believing."

What the Warriors displayed was the definition of mental toughness, and that is what McClenathan credited for the win.

"Mental toughness," McClenathan said. "That was our challenge before overtime to our players. We challenged them to go out and drown out the noise and just dig deeper. Their bodies were telling them they were done, but we asked them to dig deeper. We have preached mental toughness all season, and tonight was the toughest I have seen them all year and this is the mentally toughest team I have had in nine years."

It was just the latest chapter in dramatic games between Norwalk and Ontario. Two years ago, the Warriors won when Weaver scored with just 17 seconds remaining in the district semifinal match. Earlier this season, Ontario built a 3-0 lead without Weaver in the lineup before Norwalk came back to tie it and, again, the Warriors played heartbreaker by scoring the game-winner late.

The Warriors just have had the Truckers' number.

Now, Ontario will play Lexington, a team that has had its number for the past few years. Since 2004, the Minutemen own a commanding 19-3-2 advantage over the Warriors, including knocking them out of the district championship game in each of the last two years.

The last Ontario win came in 2017 when the Warriors won the district title 2-1 in overtime. They hope for a repeat performance in 2022.

"It will have to happen with a total team effort," Fulmer said. "We have to have our heads in the game, keep the nerves down, and be ready for the toughest battle of the season."

McClenathan knows it is great for the Warriors to check off goals for the season as one of those was to make it to the district championship game and give themselves a chance to win it.

"It is a great feeling, but the job is not done," he said. "One of our goals is always to get to that game, and now it is time to win it. We are not done. We will begin preparing tonight, start recovering and go out Thursday and give it our best shot."

He wouldn't want to face any other team in the title match other than Lexington just out of pure respect for the Minutemen program.

"This will be six of nine years of meeting in the title game," McClenathan said. "It is a special rivalry because of the relationship that we have formed with coach Them and his staff and the players have relationships with each other so it just makes it a little more special. It is our rival and I think this is what both teams want. They want to meet in that game every year, and we are looking forward to it."

JF

DIGIS

Perfection: Shelby girls basketball team completes program's first undefeated season

ONTARIO — Legendary Green Bay Packers coach Vince Lombardi once said, "Perfection is not attainable, but if we chase perfection, we can catch excellence."

Well, the Shelby girls basketball team would beg to differ.

With a 66-28 win Thursday night over Ontario, the Whippets found the perfection they had been chasing all season long and wrapped up a 22-0 regular season for the first perfect season in program history.

They definitely caught excellence and also found perfection along the way.

"I am about speechless," Shelby coach Natalie Lantz said. "I am just proud of these girls for achieving the goals they set for themselves at the beginning of the season. Coach (Scott) Gurney and I were talking and he asked if I thought we could actually do it and I really did.

"But going out and performing every night and the intense conference games on the road plus loading up the schedule, it is an amazing feat. Each game prepared us to achieve this, and I am extremely proud of the girls and happy to be a very small part of it."

Senior Olivia Baker led the Whippets with 18 points while adding seven rebounds and five assists. Audi Albert contributed 12 points, Mallory Gundrum 11 points and Sophie Niese eight points, seven rebounds and five assists.

The Whippets completed another undefeated Mid-Ohio Athletic Conference championship season, their third in the last four years and fourth straight league title.

Baker said going 22-0 is a legacy she is proud to leave for the program.

"It is really cool because no one really knows all of the work we put in over the last four years just for this moment," she said. "It shows how much of a team we are, and it is awesome to be able to do this with this team.

"It is very cool to set the bar that high and know that we are now the standard that other teams will be chasing. It will just make everyone in the program that much better because every team and every player will now set the goal of going undefeated and that will drive them to be the best they can be."

The day started with Baker, Niese and Haylee Baker signing their college letters of intent. Olivia Baker is headed to West Liberty University while Niese is attending Ashland University and Haylee Baker is going to Baldwin-Wallace, with all three planning to continue their basketball careers.

It ended with the Whippets becoming the first team in Shelby history to post 22 regular-season wins.

Lantz credited the leadership of her three seniors for the achievement.

"I couldn't be more proud of them," Lantz said. "Their leadership has been exemplary, and it has gotten better year after year. This year, they brought everyone else along and played for each other and made everyone around them better. This is a pretty darn special team."

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Niese and her fellow senior teammates made an undefeated season a goal before the year even started.

"It is awesome," she said. "It was the goal at the beginning of the year and no one at Shelby had ever reached it, so to be the first is actually really awesome. It all started our freshman year when we played under some great leaders and we just progressed. The players who played before us taught us how to be leaders, and to go out like this is something special."

Niese said the three seniors have discussed what it really means to be the first team to go undefeated and what kind of legacy that leaves behind.

"We thought about it," she said. "Haylee always joked that when we come back to watch games, everyone will say we were a part of the 22-0 team. But, it is just about winning now."

Still, setting the goal before the season and actually achieving it are two different things. Olivia Baker knew it was possible early in the season and, now, the dream has come true.

"Honestly, it was after we beat Margaretta, Bellevue and Buckeye Central by comfortable margins," Baker said. "After that, I thought we had a chance to go undefeated and that this was going to be a special season."

Multiple things have to go right during an undefeated year, and it would be lying to say there wasn't some luck involved. Lantz said the luckiest moment of the season came in a 59-53 win over River Valley on Jan. 29 when the Whippets played one of their worst games of the year and still managed to come away with a W.

"We got lucky at River Valley," she said. "We weren't hitting anything and didn't have great shot selection or get some stops we needed. We almost beat ourselves that night, but luck went our way."

"We went into every game challenging the girls to do the little things, and when they do those the wins follow. When you get those rebounds, play good defense, move the ball and win the 50-50 balls, the rest falls into place."

Shelby's Olivia Baker scored a game-high 18 points and added seven rebounds and five assists in a win over Ontario that netted the Whippets a perfect 22-0 season.

The Whippets scored 63.8 points a game and allowed just 28.3 for a completely dominant season on both ends of the court.

But now they are 0-0 as the tournament season starts at 7 p.m. Wednesday with a game against Tiffin Columbian in a Division II sectional semifinal at Bucyrus.

The next game is the only one that matters, and no one cares if you went 22-0 in the regular season at this point.

"The mental switch goes to, now, every game is a championship game," Lantz said. "We have kind of looked at it like that all season if we wanted to win our fourth straight MOAC title, but now it literally is win or go home. We want to keep doing the little things so the one column is filled and the other stays empty."

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Impossible is nothing: Colonel Crawford erases 16-point fourth-quarter deficit to win district title

NORWALK — Colonel Crawford senior Mason Studer walked out of the huddle and onto the floor to start the fourth quarter Saturday and looked up at the scoreboard.

He saw two very uncharacteristic things. His Eagles, ranked No. 1 in the final Associated Press Division III state poll, were trailing sixth-ranked Western Reserve 40-24 and he had just two points through the first three quarters of the teams' district championship game.

And then, time stood still.

Studer found himself in a flashback to Tuesday night's practice where the Eagles just finished up running homicides, which are double suicides for those traumatized former players. Studer put his hands on his knees to catch his breath and looked up toward the rafters in Mac Morrison Gymnasium at the boys basketball banner.

He saw four numbers on the banner under the district championship section — 2009, 2012, 2013 and 2020.

After an improbable 53-51 win over Western Reserve, Studer and his Eagles teammates will get to add 2022 to the list.

Colonel Crawford (25-0) advanced to play Canal Winchester Harvest Prep at 6 p.m. Wednesday at Bowling Green State University in a regional semifinal. It will be the Eagles' fifth regional appearance in program history, and second in three years, but they are still looking for their first regional victory.

"This one is huge," Studer said. "One of our mottos is, 'What will your mark be on Colonel Crawford basketball?' And I have taken that to heart as a player. To be a part of one my sophomore year was great, but to get back my senior year, with my team, means a lot.

"It gives us a chance to go down as one of the greatest teams in program history, and we don't get that chance if we didn't win this game so it means so much more."

But it wasn't simple. As Studer snapped back into the moment, he and his Eagles had an improbable amount of ground to make up. Down 16 with eight minutes to go, the Eagles got to work with a mindset they have taken into every game this season.

"Every single scouting report we had this year, it always said, 'One possession at a time our way,' and when we are down 10 at halftime, we were all thinking about that," Studer said. "We just needed to relax. We were all on the same page and knew we couldn't make a basket worth 10 points, so we thought about stringing stops and scoring. It just happened."

So, the Eagles got to work chipping away. First, Carter Valentine scored his first bucket of the night with 7:28 to play to get things rolling. Studer and Braxton Baker hit back-to-back 3-pointers before Baker splashed another to make it 44-35.

Nolan McKibben made two free throws and Studer hit possibly the biggest shot of the night when his 3-pointer cut it to 44-40 before Carson Feichtner's layup made it 46-42 with 3:25 left in the game.

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Western Reserve responded with a 6-0 run to make it 51-42 with 2:05 remaining, but that was the last time the Roughriders scored.

Valentine and Studer combined for the next eight points to make it 51-50 with under a minute remaining in the game. The Eagles forced a big turnover and converted to get to that point before they again came up with a huge defensive stop, forcing a five-second call on the ensuing inbounds.

Earlier in the game, Western Reserve's Matt Jarrett went down with a knee injury, which he tried to play through the rest of the night. Then, with 1:27 to play, Jude Muenz, who scored a game-high 19 points, suffered a knee injury that kept him out for a possession, which was costly.

"I thought we kicked their butts all night," Western Reserve coach Chris Sheldon said. "I thought we dominated the game for 25 minutes, and even with 1:50 to go and we are up eight. Jude gets hurt, they bury a 3, we turn it over and they score again, and just like that, it went from an eight-point lead to a one-possession ballgame.

"We didn't finish. We missed free throws, turned it over a couple of times, and when you play for a district title, you cannot have live-ball turnovers that lead to scores late in the game. That was ultimately our demise.

"Two of our best guys went down with knee injuries, and it just felt like it just wasn't in the cards. The injuries killed us."

With possession, the Eagles set up and executed a play to perfection as Studer got in the paint and found Feichtner under the basket for the go-ahead layup with 16.4 seconds left.

Western had a chance to come down and tie or win it, but the Eagles forced a turnover and Braxton Baker was fouled with 3.4 seconds remaining and made one of two. The Roughriders had a last-ditch heave at the buzzer that hit the backboard, but the comeback of the century was complete and the Eagles netted their fifth district championship and second in the last three years.

"I told the guys they couldn't get 16 back in one possession," Colonel Crawford coach David Sheldon said. "You just have to keep going and run through a wall. Monday and Tuesday this week after practice, my guys ran homicides, which are double suicides. They told me they only played three quarters against Edison and they wanted to stay in shape. I didn't even time them because they ran them after practice on their own. This is a player-led team."

At the front of that team is Studer, who scored 11 points with nine coming in the fourth quarter. He knocked down two huge 3-pointers and went 3 of 4 from the free-throw line to ignite a comeback. Baker, who led the team with 12 points, scored seven in the fourth while Valentine had all seven of his points in the fourth.

David Sheldon said his players loosened up a bit even in a tense situation when they started knocking down shots.

"It makes a difference once we see one go down," he said. "I thought we were pressing a little bit early on and we knew Western takes a lot of charges. We had eight turnovers in the first half, and we normally average eight a game and it was because of the defense. We made some shots in the fourth."

The Eagles connected on 10 3-pointers, including five while scoring 29 points in the fourth quarter.

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Studer didn't exactly know what happened with his fourth-quarter switch, but he is happy he found that gear.

"It just kind of happened, to be honest," Studer said. "I never completely counted myself out. There were a few times where I thought this may be it, but then I just got an overwhelming feeling where I just didn't want to go down like this.

"Then, we get two huge defensive stops and take the lead, and even with three seconds left the percentage of them making the shot was low, but I still wasn't sure if we were truly going to be able to do this. It hit the back of the glass, and just wow. I am still taking it in."

David Sheldon saw his senior leader, who has won 91 games in four years, step up when his team needed him the most.

"He rose to the occasion when the game was on the line," he said. "We talked about not panicking and taking one possession at a time our way and kept chipping. We are just fortunate to get out of here with a win."

He also credited the role players who stepped up big. Nolan McKibben finished with eight points and two huge 3-pointers in the third quarter to keep things from getting too far out of hand. Derek Horsley added seven points and Feichtner eight.

"Nolan McKibben and Derek Horsley played well and Carson Feichtner put up another good performance," David Sheldon said. "We knew they were going to focus on taking away Valentine and Studer. For them, Jude Munez was incredible. He put them on his back and I love that kid. He and Mason Studer are the two best point guards around."

For three quarters, Chris Sheldon's bunch did a heck of a job defensively. The Roughriders held Studer and Valentine to two combined points before the fourth quarter.

"We guard," Chris Sheldon said. "I thought our defensive effort was outstanding and, unfortunately, we broke down on our last defensive possession and it cost us. There were multiple plays to be had two minutes before that possession and it spiraled and backfired.

"But make no mistake, Crawford is a great team and their role players hit some big shots for them. All I could ask is going into tonight you tell me it is a one-possession game and we had a chance to tie or take the lead two possessions in a row with under a minute to go, that is all I could ask for."

Western Reserve (22-2) said goodbye to seven seniors — Camden Hankins, Aiden Edwards, Jacob Jarrett, Jude Muenz, Matt Jarrett, Carter Sapienza and Carson Roe.

"I just feel awful for our kids," Chris Sheldon said. "They laid their hearts out there and were not rewarded for it. That is what is great about basketball. You want kids to grow up and give their heart and soul to their wives, their kids and their profession, and sometimes it is going to break your heart but you have to get up the next day and go invest again with the same amount of discipline, effort and enthusiasm that our kids showed tonight.

"No one expected us to win 20 in a row, play for a district title and have the No. 1 team in the state beat, and we would run it back again tomorrow if we could."