

FB: Pierz wins late

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commit — scored on a 13-yard run late in the third quarter to get the Pioneers within two, but the Huskies stopped the two-point conversion to cling to their lead.

After the Huskies went three-and-out, the Pioneers had a chance for the lead early in the fourth quarter, but Jack Brinkman put an end to the drive with an interception.

Brinkman outjumped Algarin for his ninth career interception, which puts him tied for the most in school history.

From there, the Huskies tried desperately to milk the last nine minutes, 55 seconds off the clock.

And they came pretty close.

Buhl carried the ball 10 times on an 11-play drive that took more than six minutes off the clock.

“That Buhl kid — the fullback — he’s a load,” Pierz coach Dan Saehr said.

The senior gained 39 of JCC’s 46 yards on the drive, but the Huskies needed one more.

Buhl was stopped on fourth-and-1, giving the Pioneers hope with three minutes, 52 seconds left in the game.

The Pioneers slowly moved the ball to midfield and the Huskies were in good shape when Sam Dunker tackled Algarin for a 5-yard loss with less than two minutes to play.

But an 8-yard run set up third-and-7 and then the Pioneers scored on a 48-yard touchdown pass to take their first lead of the game.

Saehr credited his team’s state tournament experience during that final drive — which was similar to one the team had last year in the semifinals that didn’t result in a score.

“We really felt coming into this game, one of the biggest things we had — if there was any advantage over Jackson County Central — was our experience, because we knew it was two very evenly-matched teams,” he said.

Voss said he thought the Huskies were one play away from all but sealing up the win before com-

ing up just short on their fourth-down play.

“We got an interception and we went right down the field,” Voss said. “I really thought we were going to put them away there. We came up short on a fourth-and-1 and they just happened to make one more play than us on that next series.”

The Huskies moved the ball to midfield on a last-second drive, but an interception finished off Pierz’s comeback win.

“Pierz is a sensational team,” Buhl said. “Like Rudy said, they made one more play than we did and that will happen in football.”

Huskies take early lead

The game couldn’t have started any better for the Huskies, who entered ranked No. 2 behind only Pierz.

The JCC defense — which was ranked second to Pierz in points-per-game allowed — stopped the Pierz offense — ranked No. 2 behind JCC in points-per-game scored — on three plays to force a punt.

The Huskies picked up a pair of first downs before Voss ran for a 38-yard touchdown.

Voss’ availability was a question all week after he hurt his shoulder late in the state quarterfinal win over Waseca.

But the senior said he wasn’t going to miss the game.

“I had the mindset that I was going to play no matter what,” he said. “I didn’t know how effective I’d be, but I knew I was going to play.”

After Alex Bretzman broke up a pass on second down and the Pioneers threw an incompleting on third down, Pierz had to punt on its second drive.

And JCC’s second drive ended just like the first — with the Huskies in the end zone.

Voss threw a strike to Elijah Meium-Bratrud, who came out of the backfield and got past a linebacker to make the catch. Meium-Bratrud then broke free from a trio of defenders to score a 60-yard touchdown.

Keaton Storm added



PHOTOS BY DAN CONDON

Bradley Buhl breaks a tackle in Saturday’s Class AAA state semifinal game against Pierz at U.S. Bank Stadium.

the extra point after each touchdown to give the Huskies a 14-0 lead with just less than two minutes to play in the opening quarter.

The Huskies had a chance to build on their lead when Noah Carr recovered a fumble, but the Huskies fumbled it back and Pierz scored two drives later to make it 14-6 midway through the second quarter.

“You look at the first quarter and not much went our way,” Saehr said. “It was 14-0 and they had the football. I remember thinking, ‘We’ve got to get a stop right now because the wheels can fall off in a hurry, especially against a really, really stout defense like that.’”

The Huskies again had a chance to score late in the half, but a drive that took up nearly eight minutes of clock ended with a missed field goal just before the half.

Pierz then scored on its second drive of the second half to get within two points and later scored its go-ahead touchdown for the win.

“We gave it our all,” Buhl said. “At the start of the season, we asked each and every single one of us to do our jobs — trust each other

and do our jobs and we did the best we could.”

“I’m hurting now, but I’m really proud of the run that they made getting here,” Schuller said. “We beat some really tough teams to get here and then kind of the kingpin showed up today and that’s why they’re the champs.”

Buhl carries the load

For the second straight week, Buhl carried the ball 33 times from his fullback position. He bruised his way to 109 yards in the semifinals after a 150-yard performance a week earlier against Waseca.

Voss ran for 39 yards and the touchdown and Meium-Bratrud rushed for 36 yards.

Voss completed four passes for 87 yards, with the big one going to Meium-Bratrud for the 60-yard score. Storm caught two passes for 19 yards.

Algarin was limited to just 48 yards rushing and 37 yards receiving, but Schuller knew the Huskies would have to stop more than just him.

“They’re more than just a one-man team,” he said. “They’ve got a lot of great parts. A lot of people think they’re a one-man team — they are certainly not.

They’re a great collection of players and coaching staff. They were just a little bit too much for us to overcome today.”

The Pioneers rushed for 149 yards and threw for 150 to finish with 299 yards to JCC’s 308.

Schuller said holding the Pioneers to a season-low 20 points was a pretty good effort for his defense.

“If you would’ve told me we could hold Pierz to three touchdowns de-

fensively, I wouldn’t have put us out there,” he said. “I would’ve said, ‘Sold; we’ll take that and we’ll take our chances to see if we can win the game.’ They got us on a couple big plays, but when you’ve got guys that run that fast, it is really tough to hold them down. To hold them to 20 points was probably one of the best defensive performances we’ve ever had at JCC, to be honest with you.”



Elijah Meium-Bratrud (left) and Matthew Stubbe celebrate Meium-Bratrud’s 60-yard touchdown catch.

JCC vs. Pierz

PRZ 0 6 6 8 20
JCC 14 0 0 0 14

Scoring

JCC - Voss 38 run (Storm PAT)

JCC - Meium-Bratrud 60 from Voss (Storm PAT)

PRZ - Kowalczyk 60 from Schommer (PAT failed)

PRZ - Algarin 13 run (Two-point failed)

PRZ - Leidenfrost 48 from Schommer (Algarin two-point)

JCC leaders

Rushing - Buhl 33-109

Receiving - Meium-Bratrud 1-60

Passing - Voss 4-7 for 87 yards

Fumble recovery - Carr

Interception - Brinkman



Rudy Voss has blocking from Trace Michelson (from left), Kobe Foster and Keldon Bennett on a touchdown run against Pierz.

Huskies prove they’re winners on and off the field

Losing stinks. Losing in the last few minutes of a game stinks even more.

So it’s no surprise Saturday’s loss to Pierz in the Class AAA state semifinals brought most of the Jackson County Central football players to tears.

Head coach Tom Schul-

ler wouldn’t say it, but I will.

JCC and Pierz were the best two teams in Class AAA. For 46 minutes, it looked like the Huskies were going to win and advance to the championship game against unranked Dassel-Cokato. They were so close.

And it hurt.

But, as the saying goes, adversity doesn’t build character, it reveals it.

Following the game, seniors Bradley Buhl and Rudy Voss sat at a podium in front of a group of media members they didn’t know and showed their true character.

They didn’t pout. They didn’t complain about the two best teams playing in the semifinals instead of on TV in the championship game.

They gave Pierz credit and praised their opponent’s program.

And they combined to give an emotional speech that’s so good it’s been shared on social media all across the state.

They talked about the bond a group of 21 seniors share. About how much they enjoyed spending time with their team and coaches. About having no regrets.

And the character

doesn’t stop there.

Following the game in the tunnel below the stands at U.S. Bank Stadium, senior Jack Brinkman thanked me for the coverage throughout the years.

He didn’t have to, but that’s the kind of person he is.

In an interview Monday night, Schuller said Keaton Storm bought a sweatshirt for a team manager and often gave him a ride after practice.

Not for attention. Not to look cool. Because it was the right thing to do.

In the state quarterfinals, Storm took off his shoulder brace for Voss to wear after Voss injured his shoulder — something anyone else on the team would likely do as well.

Schuller had already received two letters from Pierz on Monday complimenting the Huskies for their sportsmanship during and after Saturday’s

game.

This team dealt with pressure all season. Pressure to be perfect.

As Schuller said, the 2001 state championship team I was fortunate enough to be on lost in Week 3 and flew under the radar most of the season.

This team didn’t have that luxury and didn’t hide the fact it wanted to win a state title.

But they never folded, even when trailing Blue Earth Area during the regular season and after falling behind Fairmont and Waseca in the post-season.

Everyone I talked to after the comeback win against Waseca to open the state tournament said the message was simple: stick together.

And they did.

No arguing. No pointing fingers. No blaming.

Just relying on a bond and trust formed from 10

years of playing together.

Schuller said what he’s most proud of with this group of 21 seniors is their character.

“I really have a lot of confidence that these kids are going to graduate from JCC and do great things in all facets of life,” he said. “Be great parents, good bosses and good workers. That’s what we’re trying to do here; they’re the poster kids for us.”

And, more than anything else, that’s what makes them winners.



PHOTO BY DAN CONDON

Keaton Storm (right) not only gives Rudy Voss his shoulder brace, but helps him put it on late in a state quarterfinal win over Waseca.



FROM WAY DOWNTOWN
Dan Condon