

FOOTBALL

# Knights finish on final drive

WCA-Ashby secures spot in Class AA state playoffs

By Tom Larson  
The Forum

FARGO — Before the biggest snap of his life, West Central Area-Ashby quarterback Evan Paulson may have felt figuratively that he had the weight of the Knights' communities on his back. Seconds later, Paulson may have felt that literally.

The stout Paulson took the snap, lowered his head and, with the help of about 1,000 pounds of offensive linemen, road-graded the pile of bodies over the goal line for the winning points in the Knights' 19-14 win over Osakis in the Section 6AA championship game Friday in the Fargodome.

"I just kept moving," Paulson said, "and our linemen had a great push in there. Just pushed my way in."

The 9-1 Knights play the Class AA quarterfinals against Section 7AA champion Moose Lake/Willow River (8-0) at 7 p.m. Thursday, Nov. 11, in Brainerd, Minn. MLWR has five shutouts and have outscored their opponents by an average of 50-7.

The Knights' game against Osakis (8-2) wasn't going to look anything like that. Osakis put the lone blemish on West Central's record with a tough 22-20 win at Osakis on Oct. 15.

West Central led 7-6 at the half. Osakis quarterback Kyle Mages hit Carter Watnaas for a 29-yard touchdown and the Knights answered



West Central-Ashby's Torin Olson celebrates a touchdown against Osakis during their Minnesota Section 6AA football championship game on Friday in the Fargodome.

with Paulson's 69-yard scoring strike to Torin Olson.

The Knights' Anthony Sykora scored on a five yard run to make it 13-6, but Mages drove the Silverstreaks to the go-ahead score, calling his own number from 14 yards out. Tyson Hagedon worked his way across the goal line for the 2-point conversion that gave Osakis the lead at 14-13.

West Central Area-Ashby wasted little time trying to get the lead back. Paulson hit Cole Anderson for a 38-yard gain that put the Knights on the Osakis 15 with 5:13 to play. But one play later, Paulson's throw into the end zone was intercepted for a touchback.

"We knew we still had to keep making plays," Paulson said. "We never quit the whole game, even after we hit some tough spots. That interception was tough. So we had to go do it again.

But we never gave up, we kept working."

Osakis wanted to gain yards and burn clock, but those plans were thrown off by a holding call on first down.

"It made it 1st-and-20 instead of 1st-and-10 when we're trying to run clock," said Osakis head coach Bill Infanger. "We wanted to pound it in there and eat up those four minutes. (The penalty) put us in a tough spot."

With Osakis forced to punt with 2:49 to play, the Knights' Olson fielded it at about midfield and returned it to the Silverstreaks' 32. They moved to the 15 but faced a 3rd-and-10. A shifty run by Sykora netted nine and, on maybe an even more important QB sneak, on fourth down, Paulson drove ahead for the first down.

With 54 seconds left, Paulson scored the go-ahead TD a play later and linebacker Mattson

Hoff intercepted Mages at midfield and returned it 14 yards before sliding to the turf with 47 seconds left.

"As far as two-minute drills, that's about the best set up as you can be," said West Central head coach Nate Wood. "With plenty of time, we could run whatever we wanted and know we'd still be able to get another play in."

Despite the tense moments and pressure situations, the Knights thrive, Sykora said.

"It really came down to the wire in the fourth quarter but we kept working," Sykora said. "It's a team effort and we worked hard. That's all we do, get the tough wins."

Osakis 0 6 0 8 — 14  
WCA 0 7 6 6 — 19  
O: Carter Watnaas 29 pass from Kyle Mages (conv. failed)  
W: Torin Olson 69 pass from Evan Paulson (Paulson kick)  
W: Anthony Sykora 5 run (conv. failed)  
O: Mages 14 run (Tyson Hagedon run)  
W: Paulson 3 run (conv. failed)

# Brault, Runge set a fast pace

By Eric Morken  
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The Alexandria boys cross country team sent two runners to the Class AA state meet as senior Joel Brault and sophomore Landon Runge took in the experience at St. Olaf on Saturday.

Brault finished 33rd out of 160 total finishers as he came in with a time of 17:05.53. Runge also finished in the top half of the field in 58th place (17:34.82). Alden Keller, a junior from Breck School, won the state title in 15:53.27.

"Landon, just getting to see that course for how young he is, he's going to be a threat," Alexandria head coach Travis Hochhalter said. "He did a great job. He went out a little quick, but he settled in and ran not far off of a personal best.

"Joel ran a phenom-

CLASS A STATE MEET

Read about the Class A state cross country meet in the Nov. 12 print issue of the Echo Press.

enal race. The second mile, he decided to dig in. He was so close to having a huge PR, but he kind of ran out of gas at the end. But at 17:05, I can't be more proud of what Joel has done as our lone senior."

Brault showed a work ethic that led him to a big senior season and set a solid example for this group that will return with a lot of optimism in 2022.

"This group has a lot to look forward to," Hochhalter said. "Fergus Falls, and there's some other great teams in our section, but it's a wide open door for these guys."



Photos by Joe Brown / West Central Tribune  
Top: Alexandria senior Joel Brault, middle, runs to a 33rd-place individual finish with a 5K time of 17:05.53 at the Class AA state meet on Nov. 6. Above: Alexandria sophomore Landon Runge runs to a 58th-place finish out of 160 total finishers at the Class AA state meet on Nov. 6. Runge ran a time of 17:34.82.

RUNNING

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"Jaelyn Miller ran lights out," Hochhalter said. "She was awesome out there. She was smiling and just having fun. Brynn Koters kept pushing when we asked her to, and Giselle did the same thing. Can't be more proud. Awesome day."

It's a group that lived up to expectations this season after Alexandria finished the shortened 2020 season with a perfect record. That culminated with a section

championship a year ago, and the girls back from that team set the tone for big things this fall.

"As a cross country runner, it's hard to have those high expectations and continue to just stay focused on the weekly goals," Hochhalter said. "Stay focused on that these girls are going to be their friends for life... What a great experience it was sitting and having a discussion with this team (Friday) night. The words of wisdom they have and the bond they have is really, really special."

The Cardinals will try

to keep the momentum going into the off-season now as this proud program of 25 state-meet experiences tries to reload again. Aleah Miller and Ecker are two talented runners to replace, but it's another strong nucleus expected to return in 2022 to compete in what should be a very good Section 8AA field again.

"Aleah and Emma are not replaceable, but your seniors never are," Hochhalter said. "That's the cool part is that somebody else gets to step into those shoes and take more leader-

ship roles on this team. Somebody will do it. We will have a really tough time getting out of the section next year, but I don't put it past these girls to do some summer mileage and have the fire underneath them to do what we did again.

"We lose two seniors. I think Rocori only loses one, and Willmar loses one. You look at our section and our old section, they had an unbelievable showing down there. It will be tough, but we'll do it. That's what Alexandria does.

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FOOTBALL

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"Our guys just stuck with it," Empting said. "These guys are gritty, resilient, gutsy. They have my respect."

Alexandria showed all of that by rallying with less than three minutes left and down by two touchdowns. Senior quarterback Carter Steffensmeier had a long run down to the Bemidji 1-yard line, but he took a hard hit that took him out of the game for one play.

Senior receiver Kristen Hoskins took a direct snap on the next play and ran in a touchdown that made it a 7-point deficit after the Myles Sansted extra point with 2:48 left. The Cardinals went to the outside kick next. Freshman Daniel Jackson faked the kick to the right before Sansted hit a perfectly-placed ball to the left that took a high bounce. Alexandria jarred the ball loose as players collided, and junior Kelly Johnson jumped on it to give his team

the football back.

"It was going to the edge there, and it just came down in my hands," Johnson said. "We definitely needed it. Everyone on the sideline was telling us on that crew, 'Go get that outside kick.' It just ended up being me. We felt confident. We just got rolling right away, and we felt like it was our game. We took off from there."

Steffensmeier was back in on the offensive possession, and he hit Johnson on a 24-yard pass down to the 3-yard line. Will Heydt scored from 3-yards out, and Hoskins ran in the 2-point conversion to give Alexandria a 36-35 lead with 2:28 left.

Both teams put up more than 400 yards of total offense. The Cardinals' defense stepped up when Bemidji was forced to pass as Pfeffer intercepted Jack Larson on the 13-yard line. Hoskins added his fourth touchdown as Alexandria scored 22 unanswered points in the final three minutes to secure their 11th trip to the state tournament in program history. It's

the program's first since 2016.

"We just keep faith," Pfeffer said. "We trust that the ball will drop our way at some point. We trust our coaches, trust in God and just know that in the end it's going to come out how we want it. It's so much fun. We're always in those games, so we just have to keep faith."

Bemidji looked like a different team than the one that lost 38-20 to the Cardinals on Sept. 10. Ellis went 53 yards for a rushing touchdown on their very first offensive play of the game. The senior back finished with three touchdowns and almost 290 yards rushing on 23 carries.

Alexandria needed somebody to counter that star power, and Hoskins was there to do it. The future University of Minnesota receiver had two receiving touchdowns, two rushing touchdowns and almost 230 total yards. His interception on defense sealed the win on Bemidji's final offensive possession with the Lumberjacks still within 8.

"We needed a guy who could come back," Empting said of having someone to match Ellis' big night. "Kristen was our guy. He was dynamic and made some amazing plays, but you look at it down the stretch and Carter, the way he threw the ball and found different receivers. Then we had Kristen out there on defense and got an interception when they tried to throw that way. He's a dynamic player, but it's a team game and a lot of things had to happen."

Steffensmeier had almost 250 yards passing. Pfeffer had a big punt return that set up an Alexandria touchdown that gave the Cardinals their first lead.

Sansted was perfect on extra points. The defense created four turnovers as Bryr Homelvig forced a fumble early, and Mason Teaser jumped on a fumbled Bemidji punt. The offensive line continued its season-long improvement, and Heydt ran for two scores and almost 70 yards.

The list goes on and on for an Alexandria team that showed no

quit this fall after a 1-4 start.

"We have a tough section," Empting said. "You make it through this section, it says something about this football team. We have a tough district that we play in too. I feel proud to be the team coming out of this section. I feel like our program should be fighting to be in this game every year. It just feels good to get over the hump here this year and give these guys who have worked so hard a chance. They earned it, and I feel good for them."

Alexandria will now play the champion out of Section 5, Robbinsdale Cooper (8-2), at 1 p.m. in Osseo on Nov. 13. The winner of that game advances to the semifinals at U.S. Bank Stadium on Nov. 19 at 2 p.m.

"Go win it and play the way we know we can play," Johnson said of what they want to take from this state experience. "We can beat any team when we play the way we have the ability to."

Robbinsdale Cooper beat Robbinsdale

Armstrong in a 14-13 game on Friday night to win its section title. The Hawks are ranked 7th through the QRF on Minnesota-scores.net. They hold teams to 18.6 point-per game while scoring 35.5, but this is a confident Alexandria team with players who have proven they aren't going to back down from big moments.

"I don't think we've had a game where we put all phases together," Pfeffer said. "Once we play that way, I don't think there's a team in the state that can beat us, but it's getting to that point."

ALEXANDRIA 43, BEMIDJI 35  
SCORING - FIRST QUARTER - Bemidji - Gemini Ellis 53-yard run; Tavin Peterson PAT (7-0 Bemidji); Alexandria - Carter Steffensmeier 12-yard pass to Kristen Hoskins; Myles Sansted PAT (7-7); Bemidji - Ethan Biehn 21-yard run; Tavin Peterson PAT (14-7 Bemidji)  
SECOND QUARTER - Alexandria - Carter Steffensmeier 37-yard pass to Kristen Hoskins; Myles Sansted PAT (14-14); Alexandria - Will Heydt 2-yard run; Myles Sansted PAT (21-14 Alexandria); Bemidji - Jack Larson 13-yard pass to Gavin Luksik; PAT no good (21-20 Alexandria)  
THIRD QUARTER - Bemidji - Gemini Ellis 62-yard run; Jacob Kelly 2-point conversion run (28-21 Bemidji)  
FOURTH QUARTER - Bemidji - Gemini Ellis 2-yard run; Tavin Peterson PAT (35-21 Bemidji); Alexandria - Kristen Hoskins 1-yard run; Myles Sansted PAT (35-28 Bemidji); Alexandria - Will Heydt 3-yard run; Kristen Hoskins 2-point conversion run (36-35 Alexandria); Alexandria - Kristen Hoskins 6-yard run; Myles Sansted PAT (43-35 Alexandria)

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