

SPORTS

STATE FOOTBALL TOURNAMENT



With the game 21-21 with just more than 19 seconds left, Esko coach Scott Arntson took a timeout on third down and the team decided to take one shot at the endzone. Quarterback Ty Christensen and receiver Carter Zezulka connected on a fade pass and Esko won the Class AAA quarterfinal game in Brainerd, 28-21 against New London-Spicer. Up next is U.S. Bank Stadium in Minneapolis Saturday against Dassel-Cokato. Esko won a state football championship in 1975. It has reached the tournament 11 times since then, the last time in 2019, but the Eskomos haven't been able to return to the championship game. Now they are one game away. *Photos by Amy Arntson / Pine Knot News*

Eskomomo fade into semifinal glory

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The clock showed 19.7 seconds left in the fourth quarter. Esko had battled, back and forth, with New London-Spicer in the Class AAA state quarterfinal in Brainerd Saturday afternoon. The score was tied, and now the Eskomos had the advantage, the ball on the 11-yard line. It was third down, and Esko coach Scott Arntson was ready to call another run to center the ball for reliable field kicker Wyatt Stankiewicz.

"You want to take a shot?" That's what Arntson recalls hearing from Stankiewicz during that timeout.

Arntson likes to say he coaches mathematics and teaches football. He liked the odds and decided the team should take Stankiewicz's suggestion.

That the team was in this high-percentage situation for

what became a 28-21 win was the result of a lot of resiliency on a snow-spattered day at Brainerd High School.

Carter Zezulka had been having quite a football game. After a frustrating first half that saw Esko trailing in a game for the first time all season. It was 7-0 at halftime and the offense had been stymied.

"They are a big, strong team that blitzed a lot and we struggled with that in the first half," Arntson said. "We struggled with our option game so we spread things out, started running some isolation plays and we felt we had a couple of matchups we could take advantage of."

Zezulka got the lead for his team with an interception return for a touchdown in the middle of the third quarter. With a touchdown run from Koi Perich just a minute earlier, the Eskomos now led 14-7.



Sophomore runningback Makoi Perich rushed for a total of 48 yards during Saturday's game with a touchdown.

"Here we go," Arntson remembers thinking as the game started to heat up. "Our guys fought back and found a way to respond."

But the Wildcats stormed back, scoring late in the third with a 32-yard pass. The game was tied at 14.

Arntson was still kicking himself this week for a decision he made next that gave New London-Spicer a short field and eventually a 21-14 lead.

"It's a cliché, I know," Arntson said, "but we tell players that it's always about the next play. Any-

thing can happen."

Arntson called for a fake punt. It didn't work and the Wildcats marched into the endzone with nine minutes left and a touchdown advantage.

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Strong air attack grounds Rebels in tourney opener

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The Rebels' undefeated football season came to an end at the hands of West Central Area/Ashby in the Class AA quarterfinals Saturday. The Moose Lake/Willow River team fell behind and fought back — only to come up short in the 14-6 loss in snowy weather at Brainerd High School.

"Every team that qualifies for the state playoffs is a great team full of strong,

quick athletes," said Rebels coach Dave Louzek. "WCA was able to hit on the long passes in situations where they needed yards for first downs and touchdowns, and that was enough to get them the win."

Both teams played strong defense in the first quarter, but the Knights were eventually able to gain the lead on a Matson Hoff 3-yard touchdown run. The Rebels were able to snuff out the extra point attempt and that kept the lead at 6-0 after the first half.

"Their offensive line did a great job blocking," said coach Louzek. "That blocking gave their quarterback time to complete passes."

One of the timely and long passes came in the third quarter when they scored on a 25-yard pass to inch the lead up to 14-0 after a 2-point conversion.

The Rebels — known for piling up tons of yardage on the ground as well as scoring on long runs — struggled to find footing.

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Moose Lake/Willow River players gang tackle a West Central Area runningback Saturday in a quarterfinal matchup in the state Class AA football tournament. After a quick start by WCA, the game bogged down into a dogfight, with the Rebels unable to make up ground in a 14-6 loss. *Shanna Watrin / Pine Knot News*