

Bulldogs nip Wildcats in NWC barn-burner

Written by Sean Lafontaine

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DELPHOS — Jefferson hosted Homecoming Friday night and welcomed Columbus Grove to town for a Northwest Conference grid matchup.

After a defensive struggle in the steady downpour of rain, Columbus Grove topped the host Wildcats 7-6.

After Columbus Grove (4-3, 2-3 NWC) took the opening kickoff and was forced to punt deep in their own territory, the Wildcats (5-2, 4-2 NWC) took over with great field position on the Columbus Grove 27. On 3rd-and-5, junior Xavier Buzard broke through the middle for an 8-yard gain and a first down. Four plays later, Buzard punched the ball into the end zone from four yards out to give the Wildcats the lead with 6:53 left to play in the first quarter. Jefferson missed the extra point, leaving the score 6-0.

Both teams struggled to move the ball on offense due to the wet weather and slippery field conditions.

The next score of the game didn't come until early in the second quarter when Columbus Grove started to move the ball. The Bulldogs took over possession on their own 42. After a 7-yard pass from quarterback Collin Grothaus to David Bogart, Joey Warnecke carried the ball for a 3-yard gain and a first down. A facemask penalty on the Wildcats advanced the ball five more yards. Two plays later, Warnecke broke open for a 35-yard run to the Delphos 2. After three stops by the Wildcat defense, Columbus Grove decided to go for it on 4th-and-goal. Grothaus handed the ball off to senior Dakota Vogt, who was lost in the dogpile on the goal line. Once the refs cleared all the players, they determined he broke the plane, tying the game at 6-6. Mason Smith knocked through the extra point to give the Bulldogs a 7-6 lead.

Before the end of the first half, Jefferson looked to put more points up on the board. Starting with the ball on the Bulldog 32, the Wildcats picked up a first down to put themselves in scoring position. On first down, Jefferson went to the air but was called for offensive pass interference, moving them back 15 yards. Just when it looked like the drive stalled, quarterback Austin Jettinghoff found Ross Thompson open for a 38-yard gain, putting the Wildcats on the Grove 2 with three seconds to play in the half. They lined up for one last play but Jettinghoff couldn't handle the snap. By the time the Wildcats recovered the ball, the clock hit zero, ending the first half.

Both teams continued to fight for field position throughout the second half; the defenses stood solid and didn't allow any big plays.

With two minutes left to play in the game, the Wildcats took over on their own 34 for what was likely going to be their last possession. After two straight runs by Jettinghoff for two and six yards respectively, Jettinghoff threw an incomplete pass on third down to force a must-convert 4th-and-short. On the play, Jettinghoff found Tyler Mox near the sideline close to the first-down marker. After the referees brought out the chains for a measurement, the Wildcats made the first down by a matter of inches.

On the very next play, Jefferson took a shot deep downfield and defensive pass interference was called, giving Jefferson 15 yards and a first down on the Columbus Grove 40. It looked like the Wildcats were poised to make one last run for the win but the Bulldog defense sacked Jettinghoff for a 9-yard loss. Jefferson attempted three straight unsuccessful passes and was forced to turn the ball over on downs.

The Bulldogs then took a knee twice to end the game.

"It came down to one thing tonight and that was execution. They did a good job executing and

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we didn't," said Jefferson head coach Bub Lindeman. "My hat goes off to our defense, I thought they played outstanding but offensively, we didn't get it done. We had a number of fumbled snaps and late in the game, we were forced to throw the ball which wasn't what we wanted to do."

Jefferson hits the road for a non-league matchup at Perry 7 p.m. Friday.

"Our defensive coaches put together a great plan tonight," said Columbus Grove coach Andy Schafer. "We were able to contain their sweep that they have run so effectively all year. I'm sure the surface helped but I thought our defense played outstanding. This is by far the best win of the year for us and it feels good to beat such a great program like Jefferson."

Columbus Grove hosts Paulding 7:30 p.m. Friday.