



Vacaville Bulldogs hang tough with Pittsburg, but fall 42-31 on Homecoming Night

The Vacaville Bulldogs may have come up just short in a 42-31 loss to Pittsburg (5-0) on Friday night at Tom Zunino Stadium, but head coach Mike Papadopoulos has to be excited about what he saw from his team.

On a night where the 2006 Vacaville team --one of the best in school history-- was honored before the game, the Bulldogs (3-2) played like a playoff caliber team as they went punch for punch with the No. 22 ranked squad in California.

"We grew up a lot tonight," said Papadopoulos, who was also the head coach of the 2006 section title team. "This was a playoff type atmosphere tonight and that's why we schedule the teams that we do. It makes us better in the long run to know we can play with teams like that. I would do that every week if we could."

Gunner Bagos led the ground attack for Vacaville. He ran hard all night for 160 yards and a touchdown on 15 carries (10.7 yards per carry), including a huge 85-yard run in the second quarter that put the Bulldogs on Pittsburg's 5-yard line. Austin Green eventually cashed that run in with a 5-yard scamper for six.

After a festive pre-game ceremony, the Homecoming Game didn't exactly start the way the Bulldogs had hoped. After a quick three and out on offense in the game's first possession, Vacaville punted and A'jae Boyd gave the Bulldogs a taste of Pittsburg's raw athleticism. Boyd danced around and evaded the first wave of oncoming defenders and then showed off his speed as he took it 71-yards to the endzone to give the Pirates an immediate 7-0 lead.

"That was tough, but our guys did a nice job of throwing that play away and moving on to the next play like we always do," Papadopoulos said of the early punt return. "We put ourselves in great shape in the first half. We hurt ourselves in a couple of spots with field position mishaps, but our defense did a lot of things to help us out."

Despite the early setback, Vacaville stood tough and responded on its very next possession with a gritty 70-yard drive after Cassius Reynolds provided a good kick return. The Bulldogs methodically worked their way up the field before punching it in on a 10-yard play-action rollout where quarterback Troy Claunch hit Zach Myers in the flat and the big tight end did the rest as he plowed into the endzone to tie it at 7-7.

Vacaville's defense swarmed to the ball all game, forcing and recovering four Pirate fumbles. Two of those recoveries came in the first quarter on back-to-back Pittsburg drives. The Bulldogs were able to convert 10 points off those first quarter turnovers. Vacaville running back Daniel Wright cashed in on the first fumble with a nice 31-yard touchdown burst after Jacob Abramowicz forced a fumble and Shane Garner recovered the ball near mid-field.

Sophomore kicker Brandon Talton then gave Vacaville a 17-7 first quarter lead with a long 37-yard field goal that split the uprights. The Bulldogs started that drive in good field position after Pittsburg lost its second fumble of the quarter.

In the days leading up to the game, Papadopoulos was weary of Pittsburg's extreme athleticism and it showed again on the following Pirate drive. On the second play of the possession, Pittsburg quarterback Trey Turner hit Boyd wide-open down the middle of the field for a 71-yard touchdown. The quarterback-receiver duo were a nightmare for Vacaville's defense. The two accounted for six touchdowns on the night. Turner threw for 322 yards and three scores, while Boyd caught four balls for 209 yards and two touchdowns to go with his punt return. That particular score made it 17-14.

"They're just a very explosive team," Papadopoulos said. "All across the board, they're athletic. They spread you out and they have such an electric running game inside and then they've got those great receivers outside. It's tough to guard them all. Our guys did a super job just doing they best they could on those guys."

Vacaville's final score of the first half happened in style. After Pittsburg pinned the Bulldogs inside their own 5-yard line, Bagos took a carry around the corner and sprinted up-field 85-yards to put the Bulldogs on the doorstep. Austin Green then finished the run on the next play with a 5-yard carry.

"Gunner had a big night," Papadopoulos said with a smile. "He's had a wonderful five games and he's really grown in this preseason. I think we've definitely found a couple of guys in the first five games who are really going to help our program."

Bagos's touchdown gave Vacaville a 24-14 lead, but the Pirates refused to go away as they capitalized on a poor punt with a perfect throw from Turner to Donovan Crosse on an 18-yard post pattern. They then took the lead with a touchdown in the final minute as Turner and Pittsburg running back Montaz Thompson each gashed Vacaville's defense for big run gains. Thompson capped the drive with a 5-yard touchdown run with 19 seconds left in the first half to give the Pirates a 28-24 advantage.

From there the two teams had a harder time scoring in the second half. Vacaville's lone score came on a 21-yard Bagos touchdown dash in the third quarter. That score came following a 78-yard Pittsburg touchdown throw from Turner to Boyd.

With a 35-31 lead, the Pirates looked like they may extend their lead, but they lost their fourth fumble of the game on a quarterback sneak on Vacaville's 2-yard line. The score remained that way for much of the second half until the Pirates put together a clutch five play touchdown drive late in the fourth quarter to make it 42-31 and put the game away. A big third and long completion for 25 yards kept that drive alive.

"We're going to be fine," said Papadopoulos. "I'm really happy with where we're at right now. It didn't turn out how we wanted on the scoreboard, but it was a great and exciting game and a pleasure to be apart of."

Vacaville is on a well-deserved bye next week as many players will look to heal after getting dinged up in five weeks of non-league competition. The Bulldogs will begin their league schedule at Armijo on October 7.