



# Showdown: Amid flame-throwers and sparklers, Vacaville takes down Vanden

By Chris Biderman | Sacramento Bee | October 16, 2021

The atmosphere was worthy of the battle for the top spot in the Moticello Empire League on Friday night at Tom Zunino Stadium.

Vacaville High, which rolled its last three opponents by a combined score of 141-9, continued its streak of hot play, taking down nearby Vanden 35-17. The win came on the back of big plays from the offense and another strong defensive effort. The victory likely earned the Bulldogs the league crown.

It was a matchup of the league's two best teams, who were both 2-0 in league play and ended the night 6-2 overall. The two schools are separated by just over seven miles of road between Vacaville and Fairfield.

And yes, the flame-throwers, sparklers and smoke machines on the home sideline in front of the packed grandstand got plenty of work, adding to one of the better scenes and home-field advantages in Northern California high school football. The school's talented drum line had a mini performance, drawing a big crowd on the way out of the stadium to celebrate the win and the league title.

"What a great atmosphere, all the way around," Vacaville head coach Mike Papadopoulos said. "It's great for our town. Our kids, they know each other, they grew up playing little league (together) and to have an opportunity to do this is an environment like this was a lot of fun."

The fun started on the Bulldogs' second offensive snap, when senior quarterback Ryan Vaughn dashed through the Vanden Vikings' defense on a zone-read run for a long touchdown. Receiver Timothy Plowman added a 63-yard scoring catch and run

later in the first half before running back Darian Leon-Guerrero scored rushing and receiving touchdowns to help the home team pull away.

Defensively, linemen Dylan Choe and Blake Espino added multiple sacks while preventing Vanden from scoring after halftime. The Bulldogs' defense held strong on a goal line stand in the third quarter that ended with a fourth-down fumble recovery after a high snap was mishandled.

Vacaville did well containing Vanden's dangerous offense that features multiple speedy receivers on the outside, including Jamai East, who had a first-half touchdown catch from quarterback Tre Dimes in the right corner of the end zone after a long catch-and-run put the Vikings in scoring range. Running back Sean Davis also scored a touchdown in the first half, but the road team needed more against the Bulldogs' defense.

Vanden was coming off 35-14 and 48-0 wins over Wood and Fairfield, respectively.

"Defensively, the kids we challenged them all week," Papadopoulos said. "Athletically, they do a tremendous job. We've seen it on film too and the kids challenged themselves to be fundamentally sound. To hold them, we were able to get some pressure with some guys up front on both ends of it. Really proud of the way the kids performed."

Perhaps there was an energy boost provided before the game by a returning star. Atlanta Falcons linebacker Mykal Walker, who graduated from Vacaville in 2015, went to Fresno State and was drafted in the fourth round in 2020, was an honorary captain. He was able to travel home during the team's bye after beating the New York Jets 27-20 in London on Oct. 10.

Walker got to watch his former high school team play well in its last home game of the regular season. Next on the docket for Vacaville are two road games against Rodriguez in Fairfield next Friday, followed by crosstown rival Wood High School on Oct. 29.

Vacaville entered the weekend ranked No. 5 on the Bee's rankings of Sacramento-area teams and figure to be a force for the rest of the season given their strong core of seniors.

"We're excited, we're definitely not done," said Papdopoulos. "We get two more games in league that we've got to re-ground ourselves and get ready for our next

one. It wasn't our perfect game, but there are some things we were able to do to get some good spots tonight."