



Quick start propels Vacaville High School football team over Vanden

By Mark Mazzaferro | Vacaville Reporter | October 16, 2021

Sometimes it's easy to tell how important a high school football game might be just by who shows up to watch.

Friday night's Monticello Empire League first-place showdown between the visiting Vanden Vikings and host Vacaville Bulldogs featured a packed house — coverage from TV station Fox40 and other media outlets; and a visit by former Bulldog standout and current Atlanta Falcons second year inside linebacker Mykal Walker, who served as honorary coin tosser during pregame ceremonies.

With that as a backdrop, the Bulldogs got out to a quick start and came away with a 35-17 win — their 23rd consecutive MEL victory — to take sole possession of first place. Vacaville is now 3-0 in league play, 6-2 overall, while Vanden falls to 2-1 in the MEL, 6-2 overall.

"I'm proud of what the kids did tonight," said Bulldog head coach Mike Papadopoulos. "We had to make adjustments in all facets of the game. We challenged them all week, they accepted the challenge, and they were fundamentally solid."

Walker didn't bring much luck to Vacaville during the coin toss, as Vanden won but chose to defer to the second half. In hindsight, which may have been a bad call, as following the kickoff the Bulldogs only needed two plays and 27 seconds to score their first points of the night.

Bulldog running back Darian Leon-Guerrero got the party started with a nifty 25-yard run to the Vanden 33. On the next play, following a false start penalty, Vacaville quarterback Ryan Vaughn found a gaping hole on the right side of the line and scampered 38 yards into the end zone.

Vaughan was 9-for-17 for 210 yards passing with three touchdowns and added 92 yards on the ground with another score for the contest.

Vanden's first drive of the night was stifled by a tough Bulldog defense led by defensive lineman Dylan Cho, leading to a three and out and thoughts of a rout. But Vanden recovered a muffed punt and was back on offense at the Vacaville 21.

Vanden got to the Bulldog seven, but three false start penalties, a sack by Eric Gladney and a dropped pass led to a 16-yard field goal by kicker Diego Nuñez-Smith, cutting the lead to 7-3.

The teams exchanged punts before Vacaville would go on a quick two-play drive that ended with a 63-yard catch and run from Vaughn to Timothy Plowman for another Bulldog score and a 14-3 lead.

Vanden quarterback Tre Dimes was not to be outdone. On Vanden's next possession, the junior QB hooked up with Jamai East on a 41-yard pass play to the Bulldog 11; two plays later they connected again on a nine-yard scoring strike to make it 14-10.

Vacaville bounced back with another two-play drive, this one featuring a 59-yard Vaughn-to-Leon-Guerrero hookup for his first of three TDs to make it 21-10.

"We played as a unit," Leon-Guerrero said of his team's success throughout the game. "We had a plan, and we executed it."

Leon-Guerrero had 95 rushing yards and 94 receiving yards in the contest.

Vanden had a plan as well, which included a 21-yard TD run by Sean Davis to close the gap again at 21-17. Vacaville answered with a 13-play drive that was capped by a three-yard run by the sneaky, spinning, twisting Leon-Guerrero for a 28-17 halftime lead.

The second half got under way with the Vikings getting poor field position following a penalty on the kickoff that pinned them back at their own seven yard line. After getting out to their own 18, another penalty sent them back to the eight, before Dimes was almost sacked in the end zone by Luke Levensgood. Vanden punted, giving the Bulldogs excellent field position at the Vanden 35.

That's when Vaughn and his quick-strike offense struck again, tossing a perfect pass on first down to Leon-Guerrero. The Vanden defender on Leon-Guerrero was completely turned around before falling to the ground, allowing Leon-Guerrero to run into the end zone for a 35-yard touchdown – his third score of the night and the final score by either team.

“We were excited to play them,” Vaughn said after the game. “We kept doing our thing. They’re a good team. The win felt good.”

And while the Bulldogs offense was impressive, the defense was even more so. Dimes was harassed all night by the defensive line and linebackers, while the defensive backs managed to keep the speedy Vanden receivers from doing too much damage once they caught the ball.

For his efforts, Cho, a 5-11, 238-pound senior lineman, was named Defensive Player of the Game by the Bulldog coaching staff.

“It felt nice to be recognized,” Cho said of the honor. “I’ve been working my butt off in practice. You have to be dedicated, show you love the game, and the coaches will notice that.”

Asked what he saw while watching film of Vanden during the week that helped him and the rest of his defensive teammates succeed, Cho said it was basic stuff.

“Their center is a skilled, talented guy,” Cho said. “He was fast off the line. I just had to play smashmouth football. That’s all I have to say.”