



Archuleta, Burnett and Davis power Elk Grove past Vacaville in playoff quarterfinal

By Joe Davidson | Sacramento Bee | November 13, 2021

This one was so good, there should be a rematch.

They could play in the parking lot, under warm, sunny skies. Soon. That cannot happen, of course, a shame since Friday night's CIF Sac-Joaquin Section Division II contest in Solano County was an instant classic. Elk Grove High School rallied to beat Vacaville 52-48, not because it had the ball last but because the Thundering Herd made a stop on a night when defense was largely an optional exercise.

No. 6-seeded Elk Grove (8-3) held the No. 3 Bulldogs on downs, took over at its own 22-yard line and ran a victory formation to run out the final 22 seconds, much to the delight of the sideline players and coaches the offense could barely see amid the grayish soup that engulfed a good many prep games Friday. Players could not see those in the stands but they could hear their chants and cheers.

"Crazy game!" Elk Grove quarterback Ethan Archuleta said. "It was definitely interesting and fun."

Fun for the surging Thundering Herd was the triple-option ground attack working behind a brutish and big offensive line known as the "Hammerheads" under position coach Moe Loller.

Archuleta rushed for 242 yards and three touchdowns, including scoring sprints of 55 yards on his team's first play, and 70 yards late when he all but vanished into the foggy end zone. He otherwise handed off to Zeke Burnett 14 times and he powered

and bolted for 115 yards, including the winning score — a 24-yard touchdown with 1:24 to go.

Julian Davis carried five times for 127 yards and two scores, including a 66-yarder on the final play of the half. Elk Grove rushed for 559 yards on 48 carries for an average of 11.6 yards per carry.

Burnett set up that score with a 48-yard kickoff return after Vacaville inched ahead 48-45 on Darian Leon-Guerrero's 1-yard touchdown 2:25 to go in a meeting of storied programs who have set the standard of football excellence for decades. These are programs in towns that bear their school names.

Elk Grove opened in 1893 and Vacaville in 1898. The schools first played each other in football in 1961. Elk Grove has beaten Vacaville five times in the playoffs, most of them thrillers, and all of them since 2004. This was the first playoff game at newly and spectacularly refurbished Tom Zunino Stadium, named after the late famed coach who won more than 200 football games at Vacaville. He was best known as "Coach Z" or Z."

"We left them with too much time," said Vacaville's coach Mike Papadopoulos, son-in-law to Zunino. "They're so difficult to stop. We have so much respect between the programs."

Burnett, the Sacramento State-bound runner, had an early 57-yard touchdown, and Julian Davis had bursts of 66 and 56 yards for Elk Grove, which has a bevy of backs to grind teams away with.

Elk Grove withstood the gritty efforts of Vacaville senior skill-player stars Ryan Vaughan, Darian Leon-Guerrero and Timothy Plowman. They combined for seven touchdowns, including two Plowman touchdown receptions, to keep the Bulldogs in it, and then ahead of it as they took fourth-quarter leads.

Any game in Vacaville is a show, fog or otherwise, with the school drum line, the band, the cheer team, the stands with students, families, faculty and generations of Bulldogs graduates — and the glow of flame throwers.

"Oh, it's a show here," assistant Vacaville athletic director Stu Clary.

Elk Grove coach John Heffernan praised his team's grit and resolve while addressing them after the game, everyone wearing the expression of pride and relief. The coach urged sore-limbed players to rest this weekend, to eat right, to ice day and night.

The Thundering Herd will host Monterey Trail next after the Mustangs upset No. 2-seeded Granite Bay, 35-24.

“Next Friday night, it’s going down in The Town,” he said to his group. “Dial in. Enjoy this one. All we ask is for one more game. One more.”