



Vacaville dominates second half vs. Elk Grove in playoff clash between storied programs

By Joe Davidson | Sac Bee Preps | November 4, 2023

The last time these teams played, the fog crept in, engulfing Tom Zunino Field in Solano County in the second half of a playoff game. Athletes zipped up and down the field, lost in the elements of a game that featured 100 combined points and a lifetime of memories.

On Friday night, in the fourth CIF Sac-Joaquin Section playoff meeting between these storied programs in the last six seasons, there was no fog. Just ideal, windless conditions with mosquitoes in the air before kickoff for a Division II opening showdown. The Vacaville Bulldogs pounced on four second-half turnovers and issued a number of crushing hits to deliver a 31-19 knockout of the host Elk Grove Thundering Herd.

It's the first signature victory of the season for Vacaville, and it's never too late for one of those. The Bulldogs (7-4) suffered nonleague setbacks to powerhouse programs in Cardinal Newman of Santa Rosa, Granite Bay and El Cerrito, but they have put it together down the stretch with a 5-1 showing. The scheduling was by design — find out how good you are and build from it.

The Bulldogs didn't win the Monticello Empire League for the first time since 2016, but they now have a chance to really rock the D-II bracket. Vacaville next plays at top-seeded St. Mary's (9-1) of Stockton in a quarterfinal. "It's taken us a while to find our

identity, and that's not the best we can play," Vacaville coach Mike Papadopoulos said. "I have to hand it to our defense. They bailed us out time and time again."

Morgan De Lago had scoring runs of 2 and 9 yards, Cristian Diosado had a 1-yard score and quarterback Brody Fortunati had a 1-yard touchdown plunge to make it 31-13 with 1:21 left to play to power the Bulldogs. De Lago rushed 12 times for 89 yards and Diosado went for 42 yards on 11 carries. Defensive end Noa Siaosi led the defensive charge.

Thomas Koi rushed 11 times for 111 yards and had a 21-yard touchdown for Elk Grove. He gave his team its final points of the season with a 65-yard kickoff return to account for the final tally. Elk Grove (6-5) was undone by four second-half turnovers and did not have any first downs in the fourth quarter.

Elk Grove coach John Heffernan said before the game he stressed to his young team that the urgency is now, that "there is no tomorrow, so don't save anything." He added that the Thundering Herd was about to face "a really good football team," adding: "Vacaville is loaded."

He was not wrong about that.

COACH POP AND COACH Z

Vacaville means a great deal to Papadopoulos, beyond this being his 18th year as the Bulldogs head coach with two section championships to his credit. He is a beloved teacher, coach and leader on campus. He has won a ton as a longtime track coach and he has been honored by the CIF for his athletic director and leadership duties.

His father-in-law is the late/great Tom Zunino, otherwise known as Coach Z, a 215-game winner with the Bulldogs who died at 71 in 2008, spending his final years as an assistant to Papadopoulos.

Vacaville this season celebrated the 1973 Bulldogs team that won the Capital City Championship, before the section playoffs became a fixture. The team of 50 years ago

was Coach Z's finest, and members of that group have dotted the bleacher seats in recent seasons, including this one.

Fred Jones is in his 50th year with Vacaville football and the school, a fixture of class and personality and a link to yesteryear. "A lot of those (alumni) are still wearing their lettermen's jackets," Papadopoulos said with a laugh, reminding that his current players should order such garb extra-large so they can fit in them decades from now. "We want to continue the tradition here. I'm proud to be a part of it."