



Photo by Ben Lonergan/EO Media Group

La Grande wide receiver Blaine Shaw falls into the end zone with a touchdown reception during the second quarter of Saturday's game.

Tigers dethrone defending champion Braves, 21-0

By Ronald Bond
The Observer

HERMISTON — Eli Leavitt was like many La Grande Tigers Saturday night — unable to find the words to express being part of a team that ended a 45-year championship drought.

"I'm so speechless, man," the senior defensive lineman said. "I want to thank the fans, my teammates, the coaches — we came in with a goal and we got it."

La Grande used an elite defensive effort to force the defending Class 4A champion Banks Braves into four turnovers and held them to 167 yards — including just 50 in the second half — as the Tigers blanked the Braves, 21-0, Saturday in front of a raucous pro-La Grande crowd in Hermiston to win their first state football title since 1974.

"It feels unbelievable," said senior quarterback Parker Robinson, who threw two touchdowns in the title game win. "Especially to be with the group of guys that I'm with. They work so hard and put in the time. I'm so thankful to be with (this) group of guys."

La Grande's defense, which has been solid all season and even more so in the playoffs, perhaps saved its best effort for last. The Tigers (12-0 overall) flew around, confounding a Banks team (11-1) that had scored 56 points in the semifinals a week before and shutting down the Braves' lethal passing attack.

"We've taken great pride in our defense all year, and I take great pride in my coaching staff and coach (Matt) Wolcott and the things he's put together for this team," head coach Rich McIlmoil said.

It was a new scheme, in fact, the Tigers drew up for the Braves, pressuring Banks quarterback Tanner Shook from multiple angles and forcing him to throw two second-half interceptions — one Nathan Reed took 27 yards for a touchdown and a 21-0 lead late in the third quarter — while also throwing in a heavy dose of nickel defense with five defensive backs to slow the Banks' pass offense.

"We switched to that three-man (front) just trying to get more pass coverage because they pass a lot," senior lineman Chris Woodworth said. "At first it was a little hard to get them stopped, but eventually we just rolled."

That was especially true in the second half, when Banks had minus-9 rushing yards and only 50 yards total. The 167 yards came a week after the Braves had 444 against Marist.

Both defenses came up with timely plays throughout the first half to keep the game scoreless, with Banks focused on slowing down the Tigers' rushing game. The Tigers were limited to just 73 yards rushing in the opening half.

"It wasn't our best offensive game, but that's what happens when you're playing in the state championship," said Reed, who had just 30 first-half rushing yards but finished with a game-high 87. "They were obviously a really good team. They played great. They had a great scheme defensively."

Robinson, who had 117 yards passing

and 62 rushing, broke the stalemate when he connected with Blaine Shaw for a 4-yard touchdown pass — on fourth and goal — to give the Tigers a 7-0 lead with 3:41 to play in the second quarter, a margin they took into the half.

Robinson said the play was "likely" to be a bubble route to Reed, but saw the matchup Shaw had, made an adjustment and delivered. "I knew Blaine was going to get off that press (defense)," he said. "He did and we scored."

A touchdown in a similar scenario — off an audible by Robinson — doubled the lead to 14-0 on the third play of the third quarter when Robinson found Shaw on a short slant and the receiver ran untouched 65 yards for a score.

"We give Parker the go that when he sees those kind of things he can switch it up and then throw it, and sure enough we had it," McIlmoil said. "They expected us to run and we ran one of those quick slants and got them."

Reed capped the scoring by leaping to grab an interception from Shook and taking it to the end zone with 50 seconds to play in the third.

Reed was in on another major play by the defense to stop a Banks drive just before the half, keeping the lead at 7-0 going into the locker room, when he recovered a Jarred Evans fumble deep in the red zone in the final seconds of the half.

The game, a clash of undefeated teams, featured programs that had high-powered offenses and stout defenses.

La Grande's defense, though, raised its level of play Saturday to shut down the dynamic Banks receiving duo of Jacob Slika and Evans, who between them entered the game with more than 1,900 yards receiving on the season. The Tigers held Slika and Evans to a combined 68 yards on the evening.

The Tigers were also clutch, forcing turnovers at key moments. In addition to Reed's fumble recovery and pick-six, Leavitt recovered a fumble early in the game to stop a Banks first-quarter drive, and Shaw nabbed an interception midway through the fourth quarter to end any hope the Braves had for a comeback. The Tigers also sacked Shook four times, a key one coming early in the second quarter by Leavitt to stop a Banks drive on fourth down.

"This was an all-around team win," Shaw said. "Everyone. This was a great game. Everyone played their hearts out."

The shutout, La Grande's third in a row, was the first in a state championship game since Heppner blanked Kennedy, 48-0, in the 2015 2A title game. It also is the first shutout in a 4A final since 1999, when Beaverton toppled Sprague, 20-0. And it marks the first time the Braves have been scoreless since a 3-0 road loss to Philomath on Sept. 12, 2014.

"I wasn't expecting it," Woodworth said. "I expected them to score maybe once or twice. Shutting them out made winning that championship so much better."



Photo by Ben Lonergan/EO Media Group

La Grande's Gabe Shukle (23) and Josh Zollman (22) signal a change in possession as the Tigers recover a fumble. The Tigers forced four turnovers as they recorded their third straight shutout with a 21-0 win over Banks Saturday in the 4A state championship, becoming the first team since 1986 with three consecutive shutouts in the playoffs.

By Ronald Bond
The Observer

HERMISTON — Special and elite. That's how La Grande schools Superintendent George Mendoza described the defense of the La Grande Tigers football team.

Mendoza was one of the thousands of Tiger fans Saturday in Hermiston for the team's 21-0 win over the Banks Braves in the 4A state championship game.

"For them to hold Gladstone to zero, hold The Dalles to zero, hold Banks to zero, there's not that many defenses that could do that," he said.

For a defense to be that good in the playoffs does indeed make it "special and elite."

But more than that, it's rare.

In shutting out Banks, the Tigers accomplished two feats — one for the first time since the 1980s, and another that hadn't happened since the 1970s.

They're feats that make this La Grande defense — one that got better as the season progressed and was nothing short of dominant in the playoffs — historic.

In blanking Gladstone, The Dalles and Banks in the final three weeks of the postseason — all teams that had scored more than 50 points in their games before playing La Grande — the Tigers became the first team since Class AAA Corvallis in 1986 to record three shutouts in a row in the playoffs.

But that Corvallis team didn't win the state title. Neither did an Enterprise team that held three straight teams off the scoreboard en route to the 1982 Class A final, or a Grants Pass squad that did the same before losing in the Class AAA semifinals in 1979.

La Grande, in fact, became the first team since Regis in 1973 to win a state championship and record three straight shutouts. That year, the Rams played and blanked three teams in a row to win the Class A title.

The Tigers held their playoff opponents to a combined average of four points per game — all of those coming when Estacada scored 16 points in the Tigers' first-round win. La Grande outscored its final three opponents by a combined score of 103-0.

For comparison's sake, the 1974 championship team gave up 13 points in three games in the postseason, a 4.33 point-per-game average.

Only a small handful of teams — Burns in 2014, Knappa in 2008, Enterprise in 1982, Regis in 1973 among them — have allowed fewer points per game in the playoffs, and most didn't put up three straight goose eggs.

Combining regular season and postseason, the Tigers allowed just 7.25 points per game. They shut out five opponents, including four of their final five. Only one team — Baker in a 34-21 midseason contest — managed more than



Photo by Ben Lonergan/EO Media Group

A cadre of La Grande players wrap up Banks' Jamar Flippen Saturday night on a kickoff return.

two touchdowns.

So what put the Tigers among the best defenses in Oregon in the past four decades? Coaching and execution.

"It comes down to coach (Matt) Wolcott. He had a phenomenal defensive scheme," La Grande head coach Rich McIlmoil said of how the Tigers disarmed an explosive Banks offense and shut down two receivers who had more than 1,900 yards between them entering Saturday. "He's) organized. He spent hours

watching them (on film). He had a great idea of what they were doing. We made some adjustments on defense to put that pass (offense of Banks) in check and sure enough, the boys played out of their minds, and they did it."

Players, coaches and the superintendent alike pointed to Wolcott as the mastermind. "His preparation is insane," said defensive

lineman Eli Leavitt, who had a sack and a fumble recovery in the victory. "He's up early morning before he has to do his day job, cutting up film, sending it to us, making sure we know what we need to know. We're in at lunch, he's in at lunch, even during class. He's been working, working, working."

Mendoza called Wolcott one of the "unsung heroes" of the team's run to the title.

"Matt Wolcott has been special in his preparation for our student athletes," he said. "The amount of time he has put in to get them to play and to respond at a high level is commendable."

Wolcott, though, credited the players for their execution of the game plan week in and week out, even in instances where the defensive coordinator came up with an entirely new scheme. Case in point: Saturday night against Banks.

The Tigers ran several plays in a nickel package — five defensive backs — in an effort to slow down the Braves' attack when Banks was in a typical passing situation.

"I didn't know how it would work," Wolcott said. "It's the first time we ran it all year."

If it was a gamble, it clearly worked. A week after totaling 444 yards — 262 through the air — against the Marist Spartans, Banks had just 167 total yards and 150 passing against La Grande. The lethal wide receiver combination of Jacob Slika and Jarred Evans, which has 241 combined yards against Marist, had 68 against the Tigers.

"I think it caught (Banks) off guard," the coach said. "They hadn't seen it. Other than that it was just our usual defense that just made plays."

The Tigers also brought relentless pressure that disrupted Banks quarterback Tanner Shook. The defensive line was in the Braves' backfield repeatedly. Wolcott threw in pressure from different angles — one that stands out was a sack by Josh Zollman, one of four by the La Grande defense on the night, on a corner blitz.

"Our strategy was to confuse the quarterback a little bit with different coverages, and different people blitzing from different areas," Wolcott said. "It was something we felt like was important to install and emphasize this week. I watched the last three games, and nobody got pressure on (Shook). He got sacked like once, maybe twice in three games. We felt like if we could get pressure, we could get him rattled a little bit. The players have been awesome all year. They trust our schemes, they trust everything that we say."

The Tigers' run defense did the rest, holding Banks to just 17 yards — and minus-9 yards in the second half. La Grande recorded 10 tackles for loss, leveled several thunderous hits, and had multiple white jerseys — at times as many as six, seven or eight players — surrounding a Banks player or closing in when recording a tackle.

And every time Banks threatened to score, the Tigers came up with a key stop, whether it was Leavitt's sack in the second quarter to end a drive, or Nathan Reed's fumble recovery late in the first half, or Blaine Shaw's interception on what ended up being the Braves' final offensive play.

Reed, who also had a third-quarter interception return for a touchdown that effectively sealed the win, called it the Tigers' best defensive effort of the season.

Which is saying something, considering the elite — and even historic — level the team has played at all season.

"They had some plays," he said, "but we just shut them down."



Photo by Ben Lonergan/EO Media Group

La Grande players dump a cooler full of ice on La Grande head coach Rich McIlmoil following the Tigers' 21-0 win over Banks in Saturday's 4A championship game.

Opinion: It's a great time to be a Tigers' fan — enjoy it

There are a myriad of thoughts running through my mind about the La Grande Tigers' state championship win — enough to fill several pages if I stopped to flesh out each one.

Some of them I may delve into more in upcoming editions of The Observer, but for today I'll pick out three from the grab bag.

1. What a send-off for the seniors. There are 22 seniors on this squad, many of whom have been playing football together for years, even as far back as a traveling football team in fourth and fifth grade. They were driven by a goal that has been with them for about a decade now, one that was amped up by two painful quarterfinal losses in back-to-back years. They — and the rest of the team — put in an effort over the last year to improve and would not be denied the goal they set out for. The Tigers took part in three summer football camps. They went through extensive weight-training. They bled, sweated and probably cried in their efforts to get here.

Defensive coordinator Matt Wolcott called it a group willing to do whatever it took, whatever the coaches asked of them.

"If we say we need to watch film, they watch film at lunch. If we say lift weights — whatever it is. Their entire high school career they've been very coachable, and they execute it," Wolcott said. "Tonight you saw them execute it. Making plays. Interceptions. Forced fumbles. Tackling. Good gang tackling."

The group played all out for each other all season. They've built a dynamic family bond, and have bought into a motto that was scrawled on a shirt at one of the summer football camps: "We're greater than 'me.'"

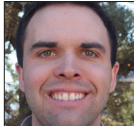
"We've been preaching that to the kids since that camp," Wolcott said. "It's not about any one person, it's not about any coach, it's about us. It's a whole team effort."

Senior lineman Chris Woodworth elaborated on what the motto looks like on the field. "It's) all of us working together to win the game. Instead of saying, 'I'm going to get this tackle, run this many yards, I, I, I,' (we say) 'we're going to win this game.'"

It's also a group, according to head coach Rich McIlmoil, that comes from families long invested in La Grande football, which is a part of what made the championship so special for the head coach.

"I'm just excited for these boys and this town, and for these people, and for the families," he said. "That's what it comes down to. We got great families and great kids in this town, and this town and these kids deserve it more than anything."

2. Speaking of the town, did anyone stay in La Grande to make sure things stayed afloat Saturday night? I make the comment somewhat tongue in cheek, but that was a heck of a showing by the Tiger faithful, filling the entire visiting team bleachers on the north side of the field and a large swath of the home



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team stands on the south side next to the Banks fans. I would go as far as to say there were more La Grande fans there than at any home game this season.

The show of support is nothing new. It does help that La Grande fans had to travel only 80 miles to Hermiston, but in being fortunate enough to cover several state championship events La Grande has been a part of in the last few years, I've seen firsthand how far Tiger fans are willing to travel, even when they do have to go to the other side of the state.

And the group wasn't just large. It was loud. Energetic. Almost every big play made by La Grande was greeted with a roar from both sides of the stadium.

"It was huge," LHS defensive lineman Eli Leavitt said of the crowd. "I didn't even realize. I knew (our side of the stadium) was full, but to know we had fans on the other side was insane."

Well done, LHS fans. Well done.

3. This win is just the latest in what has been arguably the best run in LHS history. Look at what the Tigers have done on the athletic field since the calendar turned to 2016: A boys swimming state championship. A baseball title. A boys track state championship. Two softball titles. And now a football championship. Add two golf titles earlier in the decade, and you have eight state titles — nearly half of La Grande's 17, in the last 10 years. That doesn't include several other second-place team finishes, individual championships, or team titles in OSAA sanctioned events that aren't sports — choir and band. That's a better four-year run for the school than at any other time, and means this present senior class has been in on five championship runs (they were in eighth grade when La Grande won its last boys swimming title). It's also over a more diverse range (six titles in five sports). The only other run for La Grande that compares was from 2001-2004, when the school won four straight swimming state titles and a boys golf title.

And this group isn't done, either. La Grande should be in the mix for a handful of additional titles in the coming months.

"(We have) A lot of championship-caliber athletes," La Grande School District Superintendent George Mendoza said. "That senior class has experienced winning at the baseball level, at the softball level, track level, choir level, a lot of wrestling champions. We just have a team full of players with great competitive spirit."

La Grande is in the midst of a run that doesn't come along often.

If you're a Tigers' fan or athlete, enjoy it.

BY THE
NUMBERS

45

The number of years since La Grande's only other state football championship, which came in 1974.

3, 5

The third straight shutout by the La Grande defense in the playoffs, and fifth shutout by the Tigers this season.

68

Combined yards by Banks receivers Jarred Evans and Jacob Slika, who had more than 1,900 yards on the season.

4

Points per game allowed in the 2019 playoffs by La Grande. Also the number of sacks and turnovers forced Saturday.

50

Yards gained by Banks in the second half, the second time La Grande has held a team to 50 yards in a half in the playoffs.

5

La Grande is the fifth team in the last decade, and first since 2015, to shut out its opponent in the state title game.

63

Number of games that had passed between games where Banks has been shutout (last one on Sept. 12, 2014).

1

La Grande is the first team since Corvallis in 1986 to record three straight shutouts in the state playoffs.

29

Combined points allowed by La Grande in its two state championship runs (13 in 1974, 16 in 2019).