

GAMEDAY: Rituals and routines bringing Bulldog players closer together

Continued from 1B

Quiznos, a chicken carbonara hold the mushrooms. Senior linemen AJ Fernandez and Tyler Hunter will make a trip to Taco Bell on Thursdays, and on Friday mornings you may catch head coach David Faaeteete getting a breakfast croissant from Jack in the Box.

Whether its a signature meal or getting a clean cut before the big day, like Gutierrez and senior lineman Beau Blake, who grows his beard out all week just to shave it the night before, the Bulldogs will have one last weekend to complete their routines. And often times, they are not done in isolation.

The Bulldogs' pre-game rituals involve getting together with a number of other players and focusing on something other than the upcoming opponent, which this weekend will be the undefeated Lancers who will be playing for their first chance at a state title in 32 years.

At a number of players houses, including junior quarterback Andrew James'

and the Walchli residence, Bulldogs are firing up game consoles and manning remote controls.

"Madden before every game is a must," sophomore Garret Walchli said.

The wideout duo of Garret and his brother Luke Walchli — who has eight catches for 153 yards and a touchdown this season — are joined by Fernandez and others the night before a game.

If Madden helps players practice their moves, then arguably no one has benefited more than Gutierrez. Lately, he's been showing off his speed on offense and his football IQ on defense with long runs to the house and interceptions to give momentum back to Hermiston.

He joins juniors Jordan Ramirez, Adrian Mendez and Sergio Rosales at James' house the night before every game.

The bond the boys share off the field has translated to the turf. The Bulldogs are coming off their best game of the season where almost every aspect of their game is in sync.

"I think it's all starting to

come together," he said. "I don't think we all thought it would as freshman but now we are here and it's just all starting to piece together."

The pieces, however, didn't all fit together for quite some time.

Blake remembers a time when the group of boys weren't as cohesive or as focused as they are now. One of the core group of seniors on the offensive line, Blake's presence is felt whenever senior running back Jonathan Hinkle finds a gap to run through or James uses his ability to run to pick up the first down and then some.

While the season-long trip to the championships have been filled with memorable stops along the way, what Blake will cherish the most is the bond that has formed even after some bumps in the road.

"The last two years it's kind of been really divided but this year we've really come together and we have an amazing group of guys right now and it's been great," he said.

What divided the team years ago has actually been

what's working for them now.

"The biggest thing was attitude," Blake added. "We had a lot of attitude problems with everybody, even myself — I had some attitude problems. Once we learned that we can take our attitude and put it aside and actually focus and play the game that's what kind of finally brought us together."

In Faaeteete's third year as head coach, he's instilled a championship mindset and every week makes sure each box is checked. The steadiness and trust he puts in James and crew translates into confidence on the field. It's something that James reflects on as he leads his team to their final chance at an Oregon state title.

"The connection between all of us guys," he said, "we have great relationships with every single one of those guys and even coaches, so all of us. Coaches and kids, kids and parents, kids and coaches, everyone."

For the group of seniors, many of whom will play their last game of football Saturday, it took years to

get to this point. Not only to build the connect as Blake stated, but for their efforts on and off the field to come full circle. Faaeteete commends their hard work, effort, and resilience as they wrap up their OSAA Farewell Tour.

"You know they came out of a class of about 28, 30 freshman," he said, "their numbers were a little down. They were 2-and-7 as freshman, barely won a game. They were close, competed well but then they worked themselves out to do what they have been doing (recently)."

"It's four years of growth and it just shows that dedication to the process, belief in the goals, and belief in what we're doing here is going to pay off. It really — even though there are doubters and whatnot, I think that's what I'm going to miss most about this group just their ability to put the naysayers at bay and focus on what they can control: their effort, their attitude and just playing football and competing as a family."

By the time the Bulldogs get to Hillsboro on Saturday, fast food will have been

consumed and the game consoles will be cooling down from a long night of work, but one ritual will still need to be performed.

It happens away from the public's gaze and in a locker room while teenage boys are transforming themselves into Dawgs.

"We have all the linemen go in a group and we play Phil Collins 'In the Air Tonight,'" Blake said. "It's a tradition that we slowly put on all of our stuff and right before that big drum solo, I find a wall."

What happens next is what many have done in their cars while driving or with friends, but Blake does it surrounded by his teammates, his brothers in purple.

"I have to do the drum solo perfect, just hitting (the wall) as hard as I can," he added, "and then once we do that, we start yelling 'woo, woo' and then coach comes in and gives us his speech and then we break on two."

"Ready, go."

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KEYS: Dawgs have to use physicality, speed to stop the streaking Lancers

Continued from 1B

found its identity as a run-first team and rolled to nine straight wins overall and three dominant wins in the 5A playoffs.

Hermiston has pounded the ball on the ground with running backs Jonathan Hinkle and Peter Earl and quarterback Andrew James for more than 300 combined yards in each of the three playoff wins.

Hinkle leads all of Class 5A in the postseason with 504 rushing yards on 49 carries — a whopping 10.3 yards per carry average — with five touchdowns, while James has 217 yards and three touchdowns on 33 carries.

A key reason for this success has been the play of Hermiston's offensive line. The five-man unit of AJ Fernandez, Beau Blake, Jacob Liebe, Chase Brad-

shaw and Taylor Arnold have pushed around opposing defensive fronts to pave the way for the runners. They will be facing a tough Churchill front, but one that is vulnerable to a good rushing attack. Last week against Mountain View, the Lancers gave up 267 yards on 51 rush attempts to the Cougars.

Getting the run game going is crucial for the Bulldogs because it opens the field up for the vertical passing game for players like Dayshawn Neal, Joe Gutierrez and Jordan Ramirez to find space to make big plays. It will also help the Bulldogs continuously move the chains on offensive drives and eat up time on the game clock, keeping Churchill's electric offense off the field.

START FAST, FINISH FAST

As it was mentioned last week after the 35-27 beating it gave Wilsonville,

Hermiston has had the ability in each of the last two weeks to come out and hit their opponent in the mouth before they even knew what happened.

Against South Albany, Hermiston took a fast 21-0 lead, fought off a Rebels' comeback, and then cruised to a win. Then against Wilsonville in the semifinals, Hermiston again stunned the opponent with a quick 22-0 lead midway through the second quarter before Wilsonville could find a groove. The Bulldogs again fought off a run by the Wildcats and earned the win.

The Bulldogs need to have that same game plan and try to get the Lancers out of sorts on the field, making them play from behind rather than having to chase them down.

Head coach David Faaeteete said Thursday that the you will find out in the first

four to five snaps how this game will go — and he, of course, is hoping it goes in the Bulldogs favor as it has been lately.

WIN THE TURNOVER BATTLE

The Hermiston defense has been a turnover machine in the postseason, with 10 forced in its three games, including six alone in the quarterfinal win over South Albany. And on the other side of the ball, Hermiston's offense as just two turnovers, both of which were lost fumbles.

While the defensive turnover total is something to marvel at, it's also been necessary for the Bulldogs' unit to stay afloat.

Opposing teams have torched Hermiston in the passing game for a combined 884 yards while running for another 421, and without the help of turnovers the Bulldogs would likely be at

home focusing on basketball and wrestling by now.

It will be necessary again for the defense to play aggressively in that aspect as the Churchill offense brings plenty of firepower to the table.

Quarterback Jack Blackburn is second in the 5A with 707 pass yards in the playoffs with eight touchdowns and four interceptions and a full stable of talented receivers. Dalton McDaniel is a 1,000-yard rusher on the season with a talented No. 2 in Tyson Bennion.

Limiting the amount of long drives and scoring chances will be key for the Bulldogs.

And on offense, Hermiston needs to keep playing the way it has been for the month of November. Hinkle, Earl and James do a good job of holding the ball tight when running through defenders, and the run game has opened

up the field and reduced the amount of dangerous throws into traffic for James that could lead to turnovers and extra possessions for the opposition.

The fumbles that have recently occurred have been from extra efforts for a few more yards and while that is commendable, the Bulldogs need to play smart on defense.

Churchill's upset over the top seeded team was due in part to two mishaps Mountain View had in the red zone, and that's something Hermiston cannot afford to let happen Saturday.

The winner will come down to not only who can have the better start, but who can play mistake free for 48 minutes.

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BLAZERS: A late 8-0 run in the fourth quarter was key to earning road win

Continued from 1B

center snatched it away and put it through, drawing a foul and capping a three-point play with 27 seconds left to put his team ahead for good, 126-123.

"I learned never quit," said Nurkic, who had eight rebounds and two of his four blocks in the final period. "There's no lost possession. I see an opportunity to steal the ball and try to make a

play. It (went) in." Despite Lillard's words of encouragement, he was still beating himself for making 5 of 10 free throws.

"I know I am a way better free throw (shooter) than I am showing," said Nurkic. CJ McCollum chipped in 26 for the Trail Blazers, who found themselves down by 11 in the first quarter in a post-Thanksgiving noon tip.

The Trail Blazers' defense

held the Nets 0 for 5 from the field during their key fourth quarter 8-0 run, two days after a disappointing 20-point loss at Philadelphia.

"We made some good defensive stops in the last minute and a half and were able to convert in the other direction," Portland coach Terry Stotts said.

Dinwiddie had 23 for the Nets, who have lost three straight games — the pre-

vious two to the defending champions, Golden State Warriors, and Cleveland Cavaliers.

After cutting Portland's lead to 126-125 with 15.7 seconds, he had a chance to put the Nets ahead but missed a 3-pointer with 4:8 seconds left.

"I felt like it was a good look," Dinwiddie said. "It bounced around the rim a couple of times but didn't go in."

TIP-INS

Trail Blazers: Reserve forward Al-Farouq Aminu remained out again with a sprained right ankle he suffered during a game Nov. 1. He's missed his last 10 games.

EARLY BIRD SPECIAL

Portland's noon start at Brooklyn was the first of two on their regular-season schedule. They'll tip-off again at noon at Boston on

Feb. 4 — the second game of a three-game Eastern Conference road trip.

SNAP OUT OF IT

McCollum made 10 of 19 shots to rebound from Wednesday's dreadful shooting performance at Philadelphia, in which he went 1 for 14 from the field, scoring five points.

UP NEXT

Trail Blazers continue their five-game road trip at Washington on Saturday.

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