

# Defensive aggressiveness pays dividends

By ERIC SINGER  
East Oregonian

A common clichè in football is that defense wins championships. For the Hermiston Bulldogs on Saturday night against Churchill, it was more than just a saying. Their defense provided a pathway to the Class 5A state championship, just as it had all postseason long. The unit didn't exactly do their part in the sense of a dominant front seven that completely shut down the opposition, but instead earned it by a knack for creating turnovers in clutch situations. The Bulldogs picked off Churchill quarterback Jack Blackburn twice and recovered one fumble, bringing their postseason tally to 13 forced turnovers in the four games and a season grand total of 34. The Bulldogs say credit goes to defensive coordinator Scott Hammond having his players prepared for every situation and a mindset to be great. "It just goes back to what we started doing with our fundamentals," senior cornerback Tyler Rohman said after Saturday's win. "It was always aggressive, aggressive, aggressive. It's just the attention to detail and mindset we've developed. (Defensive coordinator Scott) Hammond always says at practice great players make MAD (Make-a-difference)



Hermiston defenders Eric White (18), Tyler Hunter (76) and Peter Earl chase down Churchill quarterback Jack Blackburn in the Bulldogs' 38-35 win against the Lancers in the 5A state championship game on Saturday in Hillsboro.

plays and that's what we do." Junior cornerback Youbani Razon was the first player to step up Saturday with a phenomenal interception in the second quarter. With Hermiston holding a 12-7 lead, Razon played soft coverage on his outside receiver and backpedaled a few yards after the snap. He read Blackburn's eyes and saw the slot receiver settle into a spot in the Bulldogs' zone defense roughly five yards in front of him jumped the route and beat the ball to the receiver. It was a huge swing as the Bulldogs cashed in on the turnovers with a touchdown to make it a 18-7 game. On Churchill's first play of the next drive, linebacker Jonathan Hinkle stepped in front of a short pass for an interception. Once again it set up a touchdown that Hinkle scored himself for a 25-7 lead with 2:34 left to play. "It's that mindset that they have," Hermiston coach David Faaeteete said. "They don't believe that the play that just happened, happened, they just move on to the next. And you know, we got our hands on balls, we got some interceptions, put in the coverage we knew we were going to be thrown to and our guys came up big with turnovers." However, Churchill continued to hang around with

a late first half touchdown and in the second half the Lancers would seemingly answer each Bulldogs touchdown. Yet late in the fourth quarter, the Hermiston defense was able to sniff out a turnover to swing things in their favor for good. With the Lancers facing second-and-seven at midfield trailing the Bulldogs 31-28 just over five minutes left in the game, a wild snap evaded Blackburn and bounced around the turf to his right and Hermiston defensive end Eric White pounced on it. The turnover gave the Bulldogs great field position, which the offense turned into the game-clinching touchdown pass from Andrew James to Dayshawn Neal. "The ability to have a gut check," senior safety Joe Gutierrez said of the team's knack for turnovers. "And that's when our backs are against the wall, when we need a big play we'll make it because we've just got that in us," When all was said and done, Churchill out-gained Hermiston 376-343, scored on all three trips to the red zone, and hung 35 points on the Bulldogs. But the Lancers are the ones taking home a second place trophy while the Bulldogs make the 200 mile trip back east with first place because of a detailed preparation and a mindset that was second to none.

# Determined offensive line powers Dawgs to championship

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Hermiston assistant coach Rick Wells posed for group photos with his offensive linemen on the field following Saturday night's game, smiling and looking around at each kid like a proud father. "They're like my sons," Wells said Saturday night, holding back emotions. "I'm blessed with three daughters and a bunch of sons, really." The bond between Wells and his players and amongst the players themselves played out to be a key factor for the Bulldogs this season, as a much-improved play from the linemen paved the way for an offensive barrage this season. "I'm really, really hard on them, I absolutely demand their very, very best and they respond," Wells said. "They don't worry when something is wrong. They are so coachable and it's just amazing and more than anything, we have five or six guys that just love each other to death and play so hard." Last season as Hermiston put together a middling 5-5 season, inconsistent play on the line led to an inconsistent season from the offense as a whole. The Bulldogs averaged 24 points and roughly 350 yards of offense per game in 2016, which ended



Hermiston's Beau Blake, left, finishes a block as Jonathan Hinkle drives through a hole in the Bulldogs' 38-35 win against Churchill in the 5A state championship game on Saturday in Hillsboro.

with a loss in the first round of the playoffs. But with four starters returning in 2017, the group decided to step up their game in the offseason to help their team reach the ultimate goal. "We wanted the state championship, there was no other goal than that," senior guard Beau Blake said Saturday. "We wanted to go for the state championship above all and never quit. We wanted to keep going no matter what." And all that work paid off. Hermiston's five starters of AJ Fernandez, Jacob Liebe, Jose Huato, Taylor Arnold and Blake helped the linemen come together to pave the way for Hermiston's offense to reach new heights this season. Hermiston averaged 36 points per game and piled up more than 5,700 yards of total offense on its way to winning the championship. "The four seniors we have, we've been playing since we were grade kids," Blake said. "We are such good friends. We spend every Sunday (together), we're eating biscuits and gravy together. We do everything together and we trust each other so much. We're such good friends and that's what helps us. We make sure we do the work on the field and in the weight room and that's what transfers on to the field." The area where the line's improvement was most notable was in the run game. The Bulldogs totaled 1,598 rush yards last season and topped the 200 yard mark

in a game just three times as a team, with the highest being 257 yards. This season the Bulldogs tallied more than 3,300 rushing yards, including six games with at least 300 yards, thanks to the linemen sealing blocks to spring the likes of Jonathan Hinkle, Peter Earl and Andrew James free. The line's bond was tested in the 5A quarterfinal game against South Albany, when Huato, the starting right guard, suffered a right knee injury in the second quarter and causing him to watch the last two games hunched over his crutches on the sideline. Chase Bradshaw, a sophomore stepped in to the starting spot and the Bulldogs didn't miss much of a beat, showing the confidence that the group has in themselves. "It means that we have a great program right here," Blake said. "No matter what, it's always the next guy up. We have such good players, even in the second team. We don't miss a beat because we work together and we don't give up." And Huato's injury also showed the selflessness that the unit has. As a senior and two-year starter Huato was disappointed he was not able to play, but he was thrilled to see Bradshaw fill in so well in his place and still be able to call himself a state champion. "I'm in shock," he said. "This is the best feeling I have ever had playing football." Churchill gave Hermiston's line perhaps its biggest challenge yet. After a relatively easy first offensive drive, the Lancers dialed up pressure with blitzes and stunts on nearly every snap to try and slow down the Bulldogs' red-hot offense. "They're a dang-good football team and there was a reason they were 12-0," Wells said of the Lancers. "The biggest thing we had to do is keep ourselves calm and stick with it and be patient. There's going to be times when we'll get stuffed and bad things happen, but we continued our road forward and that's what we do." Hermiston was held to just 181 rushing yards on 48 attempts against Churchill, its lowest output since a Week 3 loss to Mountain View, but it was more than enough for the Bulldogs to bring home the title. "Big-time people make big-time plays in big-time games," Wells said, "and our guys do that and that's one of the reasons we're going to get a ring soon, so it's pretty special." Contact Eric at [esinger@eastoregonian.com](mailto:esinger@eastoregonian.com) or 541-966-0839. Follow him on Twitter @ByEricSinger.

# DAWGS: Neal, James connect on game-sealing touchdown late in fourth quarter

Continued from 1B

guys, every single one of them, none of them gave up and it showed." The Bulldogs answered the Lancers score with a fundamentally sound defense that forced two four-and-outs and two interceptions all-the-while James led the offense in adding 19 unanswered points to the board. In the scoring span that gave Hermiston its lead back, the Bulldogs ran in two touchdowns and James connected with Neal for on a quick three-yard slant route. The pass to Neal wasn't the most exciting of the game and certainly wasn't the biggest play the junior-senior duo would come away with but it showcased something Bulldog fans have witnessed all year: the unwavering trust between a quarterback and his receiver. "It's a trust thing," head coach David Faaeteete said. "It's a long time coming for those guys. You know, last year was Andrew's first year at the helm and he's trying to find trust with his guys."

The trust extends beyond the line of scrimmage, as Faaeteete said the wide out called the play that aided in Hermiston re-gaining a lead it would never again relinquish before halftime. "He looked at me and said, 'we're going to run 92 (route) and we'll catch this touchdown,'" Faaeteete recalls. The trust in Neal's ability to finish plays extended late into the fourth quarter during the seven-play, 54-yard drive that ended with the game-clinching touchdown with 2:52 left. Prior to the scoring play, Hermiston called timeout after seeing a mismatch with Neal to set up a new play. Neal came out and lined up as a tight end on the right end of the line, broke out of his three-point stance 10 yards off the field before breaking off to the right where James hit the wide-open receiver for the score. "We saw their adjustment," Faaeteete said. "They were adjusting to where Dayshawn was and we put him away from everybody



Hermiston's Keaton Mikami runs into the end zone for a touchdown in the Bulldogs' 38-35 win against Churchill at the 5A state championship game on Saturday in Hillsboro.

and got him matched up with another corner, someone who hasn't guarded him all night. So anytime (there's) a one-on-one matchup that tight in the box within four or five yards, Mr. Neal should win." James ended the night 11-of-15 for 162 yards and two touchdowns, and relied heavily on one of his favorite targets, as Neal was good for 80 yards and two touchdowns off five catches in his final game as a Bulldog. Neal's best catch of the night came in the first quarter, when he climbed the ladder to snag a high throw from James on fourth-and-14 from the Lancers 32 for a first down conversion, which set up Hermiston's second touchdown. "This is something else," he said, "it's crazy man to go out on top. I love it." Hermiston's run game was not as effective as it was

in the first three rounds, but was still effective enough. Hinkle topped 100 rushing yards yet again on Saturday, finishing with 115 yards on 22 carries with two scores. He did cough up a fumble on the Bulldogs' own 25 late in the third quarter with Hermiston clinging to a 31-28 lead, making for nervous moments among Bulldog fans. However Hermiston's defense picked up its running back and forced Churchill into a 42-yard field goal attempt, which Trevor Groves pushed wide left, proving to be the difference in the game. Churchill scored its final touchdown with 33 seconds left, but an onside kick attempt bounced into the arms of Gutierrez and Hermiston's 'hands team', sealing the win for Hermiston. "That's why they are out there, they nicknamed that team AllState so we're good hands with all-state, right?" Faaeteete joked. "It's one of those things we rehearse on Thursday mornings. We rehearse those plays, those moments, those opportunities and that kid grabbed it on a good bounce, covered it up and then we hit victory twice and ended the game." Seventeen Bulldog seniors suited up for the final time in purple and black uniforms, each leaving their own mark in their own way in a program that has made it to the playoffs every year since joining Class 5A in 2006. The goal was always a state title, but the Bulldogs also wanted to leave a lasting footprint on their way out of Oregon this year before heading to compete in the WIAA — they wanted to end with a bang. "I think we left with a pretty big one, yeah?," Faaeteete said. "You know, these guys before last week the one memory they remember is sitting in the stands and rushing the field after Chase Knutz's group won it and for them to end their senior career the way that they saw fit. "Leaving Oregon with a bang?," Faaeteete asked. "Bang!"