

Lions *from B1*

his players going into the game, explaining how it was a good opportunity for players to really step up.

“And they did,” said Polamalu. “We went in there really focused on effort, communication, be-ing a good teammate and understanding those things. Mistakes were going to happen, we knew that. Even as a coach, we’re going to make mistakes. But I think the effort and attitude [were there], and we had to battle to the last second to keep it. All those things are good teaching points whether you win or lose.”

Polamalu was especially proud of his front line, as they had to play the game missing one of their starters. The circumstance forced the team to piece it together, step up and be account-able to themselves and each other.

The Lions had standout performances from running backs Jason Travis and Brennen Bouche, as well as quarterback Brayden Crump.

“Throughout the night we had some hard running with Travis and Bouche,”

said the Polamalu. “Crump was consistent and took care of the ball. We surprised ourselves with a good strong run game. I think it’ll help in the future with Travis and Bouche running as hard as they did, and [knowing that with] the frontline, we can piece it together.”

The Lions played the first half strong, going into halftime with a tie score of 14-14. Polamalu stressed to his team the fact that they would need to come out strong in the third quarter — and they took it to heart.

“We had a kick return, which was surprising, from Matthew Binder,” Polamalu said of Binder, who ran the ball all the way for a touchdown. “I think it surprised him, too! Things kind of opened up and, lo and behold, he found himself in the end zone. To get the opening kickoff at the start of the third quarter and take it back was a good thing.”

The Lions roared on into the fourth quarter, relentlessly holding onto the lead. Some key turnovers helped them grab the win.

“We caused a couple of turnovers, especially at the end,” said Polamalu.



NED HICKSON/COTTAGE GROVE SENTINEL

Cottage Grove junior Jason Travis finds an opening with blocking from fellow junior Ayden Freeman in the second quarter against North Bend on Monday. The Lions will be back on the road March 22 at Marshfield.

“Bouche knocked the ball loose with about 15 seconds left, and we were able to kneel to run the time out, because they didn’t have any more timeouts.”

The Lions’ defense was also extraordinarily strong

throughout, heavily contributing to the team’s victory. In all, Polamalu was pleased to see his and team’s efforts in the pre-season be-ing executed in this first game.

“We’ve got a lot of things

to shore up, but it gave us a lot of good information to understand the things that we’re trying to work on. [I knew] we were going to find a lot about what we’ve been coaching, teaching and drilling,” Polamalu said of the team’s debut. “It’s kind of like Judgment Day, that first game, to see what we’re doing, are things working, or do we need to go back to the drawing board? I think we saw enough between attitude, effort and scheme — whether it be offense, defense or special teams — and I think we’re heading in the right direction. But [there are] a lot of things in all of those areas to work on that can definitely improve.”

Although COVID-19

has caused Cottage Grove football a great deal of tumult, Polamalu takes a positive view. “I think it’s been tough doing this right now,” he explained, “but I also feel like it’s been an important piece for me to get to know them and the staff. It’s probably been kind of a blessing to have an opportunity to implement some things, whether it be on the field or off.

“I think we’ve able to begin the process a lot sooner looking at the ‘21-’22 season, and knowing that a lot of what we’re doing now is going to be a foundation. So, I am thankful for that I think we all are.”

The Lions play next Monday (March 22) at Marshfield. Kick-off is at 6 p.m. against the Pirates.

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