

Sports

CLASS 4A STATE FOOTBALL CHAMPIONSHIP GAME

La Grande caps perfect season to end 45-year state championship drought

By Ronald Bond
The (La Grande) 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 line-man 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 champion Banks Braves into four turnovers and held them to 167 yards — including just 50 in the second half — and 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 over-all) flew around, confounding a Banks team (11-1) that had scored 56 points in the semifinals a week before and



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La Grande linebacker Nathan Reed, right, picks off a Banks pass and returns it for a touchdown. The La Grande Tigers shutout the Banks Braves 21-0 in the OSAA Class 4A Football State Championship at Kennison Field in Hermiston Saturday night.

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

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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 line-man 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-yard effort came a week after amassing 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, 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 Slifka and Evans.

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