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OSAA 5A FOOTBALL STATE CHAMPIONSHIP | Saturday, Nov. 25, at 6 p.m. • Hillsboro Stadium

ONE STEP AHEAD

CHAMPIONSHIP MATCHUP

No. 4 Churchill Lancers (12-0) vs.

No. 3 Hermiston Bulldogs (10-2)

Hermiston's QB Andrew James went 10-of-17 passing for 164 yards, and carried the ball 12 times for 82 yards and a touchdown in the Bulldogs' 35-27 win over Wilsonville in the 5A semifinals in Hillsboro.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF CHASE ALLGOOD/THE OREGONIAN

QB James keeps his standout season going as he leads the Bulldogs to 5A state title game

By ERIC SINGER
STAFF WRITER

Carrying the lead but losing momentum, Andrew James and the Hermiston Bulldogs were facing a 3rd-and-10 from midfield as the time on the fourth quarter clock slowly ticked away.

The Bulldogs were grasping tight to a 29-20 lead in the Class 5A semifinal game on Saturday, and a failure to pick up the first down would give Wilsonville the ball back with plenty of time to make a dent in its deficit. However, there was no panic amongst the Bulldogs on the field or sidelines. James, the Bulldogs' junior quarterback, relayed the play to his team, walked to the line and surveyed the defense. He received the snap, made a quick three-step drop and threw a confident throw to a wide-open Dayshawn Neal for a 19-yard gain and a crucial first down.

The throw was just one of the 10 passes James completed, but perhaps none was more important. It set up Hermiston's final score of the game as the Bulldogs defeated Wilsonville 35-27 to advance to the Class 5A state championship game under the lights of Hillsboro Stadium.

"That play, we knew it was going to be there," Hermiston coach David Faaeteete said. "We knew he (Andrew) could make the throw, we knew Dayshawn was going to catch the ball, we knew he was going to be open."

The clutch play was the latest example of the maturation of James as a quarterback for the Bulldogs. As a sophomore last season, James flashed his potential throughout Hermiston's 10-game season, throwing for more than 1,900 yards with 18 touchdowns while rushing for 624 more yards with another seven touchdowns. But throughout the same games, he also showed the growing pains of relying on a young, inexperienced quarterback with a mediocre 57 percent completion rate with a combined 15 turnovers.

This season as a junior, however, James has grown as a quarterback and in the meantime helped his Hermiston offense transform into a unit opposing defenses are scared to face. He has the ability to make most throws, such as a 26-yard toss to Jordan Ramirez in the first quarter Saturday, where James



Hermiston's Dayshawn Neal celebrates following a play during the Bulldogs' 35-27 win over Wilsonville in the 5A semifinals on Saturday in Hillsboro.

rolled to his right and then threw off-balance across the field to Ramirez running deep and connected with his receiver to set up Hermiston's first touchdown of the game. He also had the awareness to operate the read-option run game to near perfection.

He finished Saturday's semifinal completing 10-of-17 passes for 164 yards, and also ran the ball 12 times for 82 yards with one touchdown, a five-yard scamper on a quarterback draw in the third quarter which gave Hermiston a 29-14 lead at the time.

Now through 12 games this season, James has 2,211 passing yards with 27 touchdowns and just five interceptions and is also Hermiston's second-leading rusher with more than 1,000 yards with six touchdowns. He says he owes his improvement to a better relationship with everyone on the offense.

"I mean, it's a confidence I've built with the guys," James said on Saturday. "I trust every single one of them on the field and that's what happens when you have that trust."

James and Hermiston's offense picked apart Wilsonville's defense on Saturday night, piling up 471 yards of offense. The Bulldogs punted on their first two possessions, but found the end zone first on a seven-yard scamper by Jonathan Hinkle to go up 8-0 with 2:12 left in the first quarter. The rest of the way, Hermiston established itself with a successful run game — thanks to a dominant offensive line — that opened up some big plays in the passing game to beat the Wildcats.

"I mean they (Wilsonville) brought pressure the whole game but we found those little creases when we ran the ball, we found the little holes when we passed the ball," James said. "It was the little things that got us through."

Hinkle carried a pile five yards for his second touchdown in the second quarter and Peter Earl busted a 45 yard touchdown run midway through the second quarter to give Hermiston a surprising 22-0 lead. Wilsonville began to figure out Hermiston's defense as the first half came to a close, with the Wildcats finally finding the end zone with 21 seconds left, giving them momentum into the second half.

"(Faaeteete) said don't let up," James recalled from the halftime talk. "Great teams try to come back and that's what they (Wilsonville) did. We just had to stop them and that's what we did."

The Wildcats got within 22-14 but the Bulldogs answered on the next drive when Hinkle ripped off a 67 yard run to get inside the Wildcat 10, and James finished off the drive with a touchdown run. Wilsonville again got on the board early in the fourth on a five-yard run by Cooper Mootz to make it 29-20 before Hermiston's crucial drive was capped off by a four-yard touchdown run by Keaton Mikami on 4th-and-goal.

James was also a leader on defense Saturday with seven total tackles, part of a unit that forced two turnovers, two turnovers-on-downs inside the red zone, and tallied four sacks. Wilsonville did tally more than 400 yards of total offense, but the Bulldogs' early successes put the Wildcats in a hole that proved to be too big to dig out of.

"We were playing with a killer mindset," Hermiston senior Joe Gutierrez said, "and when we play like that our defense rolls."

Now, Hermiston will get back to practice as they prepare for No. 4 Churchill in the state championship game on Nov. 25 at 6 p.m. at Hillsboro Stadium. And James will get another week to make himself a household name in Oregon.

"It's an awesome feeling," James said of the chance to play for a title. "Our guys worked so hard, our line, just everyone, and it just feels so good."

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