

Chippewa Valley ends its hex when it counts the most

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Chippewa Valley tossed aside 10 years of frustration in a day, finally defeating MAC Red rival Macomb Dakota for a Division 1 district championship Friday night.

Junior Stefan Claiborne had the game of his life, blocking a PAT with three minutes remaining to help Chippewa Valley (8-3) end a 16-game losing streak in the series with a 28-27 victory on Dakota's home field.

Claiborne, a three-star recruit who is being recruited by Michigan State, Ohio State and Michigan, blocked a field goal earlier in the game and pounced on a loose ball in the end zone for a touchdown off a blocked punt by sophomore Drew D'Angelo, who was promoted from the JV team late last month.

"I knew I could get to it since I had blocked a field goal earlier in the game," Claiborne said of the PAT. "I knew I had to get to it, too. I just got off the edge fast, dove and got a piece of it."

So, what about the TD off the blocked punt?

"We got pressure in the middle and (D'Angelo) blocked it," Claiborne said. "I just saw the ball rolling in the end zone and fell on it. It was a 7-to-7 game so it was definitely a game-changer."

So, what did Claiborne do to celebrate? Well, he was invited by the MSU coaching staff to attend the Spartans game against Ohio State Saturday. He has used his 4.5 speed to grab 10 TD passes while blocking five kicks (punts, field goals, PATs).

Chippewa Valley's reward is a trip to Detroit to play No. 3 Cass Tech (11-0) in a regional final.

"It was a heavyweight fight and the kids were under a lot of pressure to end that (losing) streak," Chippewa Valley coach Scott Merchant said. "Trust me, you're always reminded about it (streak). I wasn't here for all of it, but I inherited half of it when I came here in 2009.

"I felt like we had the game under control, moving the ball well, but we also fumbled inside their 5 twice. We didn't let that bother us. We kept fighting and I'm so proud of them. I felt we beat them up front. We rushed for 325 yards and held their all-conference running back (Kiser Carleton) under 50 yards. And, our special teams play was truly special. Stefan is a Division 1 player and played great."

Merchant has done an excellent job at Chippewa Valley after nine years at U-D Jesuit. He pointed out that U-D had longer losing streaks against Detroit Catholic Central and Birmingham Brother Rice, ending 30-year losing streaks against those schools while advancing to the state semifinals on two occasions.

Merchant's finest coaching job might be this season. Chippewa Valley has suffered 10 season-ending injuries, including senior running back and captain Troy Taylor (4.45 speed) to an ACL injury in the season opener. D'Angelo Washington, a third-stringer at the beginning of the season, rushed for 209 yards against Dakota.

Three linebackers have also been lost for the season, leading to starting quarterback Tyler Kulka moving to middle linebacker and getting an interception in the title game. Patrick Briningstool took over at quarterback and is 7-1 as a starter, throwing for 1,600 yards and 25 TDs with just six interceptions.

"When we had all those injuries we never put our heads down, we just kept fighting," Claiborne said. "Pat's done a great job of leading the team."

Briningstool had to do a great job because Chippewa Valley opened with a 1-2 start. He has done an excellent job of distributing the ball, including 9 TDs to Kyle Muller (900 receiving yards) and 8 TDs to Sean Bunting.