

Niemeyer's move from running back to offensive line pays off for Prosser football

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YAKIMA, Wash. -- Late in his final season of football at Prosser, senior Thomas Niemeyer was suddenly faced with an unexpected and unwanted choice. Remain at running back — a position he coveted and where he received all his offensive training in high school — or give it up and become a lineman.

In a day, just like that.

With the playoffs looming, the timing seemed unthinkable. Move a senior from the backfield into the trenches with little time to adjust — such a thing was not only risky but hinted of desperation.

But to Niemeyer, it wasn't about him.

And that made it no choice at all.

"I love that running back spot, I absolutely do," he said. "But the thing is I had two options — either be selfish and say no, or go with it and try to help my brothers move on."

Niemeyer made his move — and there were others — in the wake of an overtime loss at Ellensburg on Oct. 16 and the Mustangs haven't lost since. After avenging that loss last week with a resounding 31-0 state quarterfinal victory, Prosser is indeed moving on

with a return to Zaepfel Stadium on Saturday to face defending champion Sedro-Woolley in the semifinals.

The 5-foot-11, 215-pound Niemeyer, known as Nemo, is wearing No. 50 these days, having traded in his No. 2 jersey. He and Kolby Swift were moved into the right side of the offensive line after Prosser generated little running game in the loss to Ellensburg. Coach Corey Ingvalson and his staff decided a more physical presence was needed on the line, and that's the kind of running back Niemeyer was — physical and tenacious. He is also a CWAC first-team outside linebacker and three-year starter.

“I hadn't been a lineman since Grid Kids, but the coaches tried me and Kolby out that next week and they liked us there,” Niemeyer explained. “Kolby's a little more agile than me, and I've got a little more of the brute strength. We both wanted to do what was best for the team — that's a big deal in our program.”

For Niemeyer, there was more to it than just personal sacrifice. He's obviously a team player — to his core, in fact — but there's also an underlying sense of redemption. Even if no one else sees it, he does.

The last time Niemeyer carried the ball, Prosser had a 20-13 lead at Ellensburg with just over a minute left in the game. Bouncing outside and striving for extra yards in a tangle of pursuers, he lost his grip on the ball. Ellensburg recovered, drove quickly for the tying touchdown and went on to win in overtime.

Try shaking that off.

“At first I was very depressed,” he admitted. “Coach called me that weekend, I went to his house and that's when we started talking about the change. It wasn't because of the fumble, they just needed my strength on the line. If coach believed it would work, I had complete faith in him. I took that fumble, and how depressed and pitiful it made me feel, and turned it into determination as fast as I could.”

Ingvalson knew it could work. It had to.

“Tommy’s one of our more physical and fast players, and he’s very smart — we knew he could pick up the schemes quickly,” Ingvalson said. “I was also candid about it, saying if we stayed pat our season might end earlier than we’d like it to. That fumble had nothing to do with it and didn’t cost us the game, we just needed more on the line. Tommy’s a great leader and his whole mind set is about making the team better. He didn’t need a night to think about it, he was ready to switch that moment.”

In Saturday’s quarterfinal rematch, the Mustangs ran for 164 yards on 46 carries, nearly triple the numbers from the first game against Ellensburg.

With that bolstered performance in the ground game, the Mustangs flourished on Saturday as Tanner Bolt’s four touchdown passes and a remarkable defensive shutout earned the program its 13th trip to the semifinals since 1991. It was a holiday tradition in Prosser this week with dozens of alumni players attending the Thanksgiving practice, a day after Niemeyer’s birthday.

How that for a present?

“I got pulled up to varsity my freshman year as a running back, so I’ll always see myself as that,” Niemeyer said. “But we aren’t selfish — that’s not the way Prosser football is. I’m not carrying the ball, but I’m in front pushing whoever is in front of me. It’s all about keeping my team moving forward.”

Always downfield. For a first down, a touchdown, a victory.

And maybe a state championship.