

No. 3 Ellensburg rallies to beat No. 2 Prosser in a football game that lives up to billing

By Scott Spruill

sspruill@yakimaherald.com yakimaherald.com

ELLENSBURG, Wash. — As the celebration unleashed across Andreotti Field, Bryce Helgeson collapsed on the grass unable to join in. Both his legs, knotted in cramps, wouldn't allow it. "From the hamstrings down it's pretty bad, but that's OK — everything is great tonight," he said after managing to stand up with help from his Ellensburg teammates. "We're all brothers and we never, ever gave up."

Anything less than that wouldn't have been nearly enough to rally the gritty Bulldogs to their remarkable 27-26 overtime victory over Prosser in Friday's showdown of unbeaten state-ranked CWAC rivals. Even down 10 at halftime to big-play Prosser, the Bulldogs were not done. Even after two red-zone trips in the fourth quarter netted no points, the Bulldogs were not done.

And even trailing 20-13 with 90 seconds left and Prosser grinding out the clock, the Bulldogs were definitely not done. That's because Ellensburg cashed in a late turnover — Prosser's fourth — to tie the game with 58 seconds left and then, after both teams scored in the overtime, the Mustangs' bid for the victory fell short on a failed two-point conversion. Prosser quarterback Tanner Bolt, who had just thrown his third touchdown pass to Kason Blair, went back to the same roll-out play for the conversion and Helgeson was there with the coverage.

"It really wasn't supposed to be me but I switched with the linebacker because it looked like they might go back to that again," he said. "That game was as good as it gets. We gave it everything and when you never give up, you get rewarded."

Prosser jolted Ellensburg with three big scoring plays in the first half — Noah Flores' game-opening 90-yard kickoff return and Bolt's two strikes to Blair covering 63 and 55 yards. But Ellensburg was the superior ball-control team, running 83 plays to Prosser's

57. And even though the Bulldogs forced four turnovers, the two missed opportunities in the red zone during the fourth quarter appeared to foil their chances.

Until Matt England recovered a fumble with 1:17 left. Two plays later Donny Ellersick hit Seth Walker from 15 yards out and Elliot Hougardy added the PAT to tie the game at 20-20. Hougardy booted two field goals and was 3-for-3 on PATs. In the overtime, Ellensburg had the first possession and pounded away on the ground with six running plays capped by Ellersick's 1-yard plunge.

Prosser then rode Bolt's arm — which produced 305 yards for the game — on its ensuing possession. He found Blair on a 4-yard roll-out connection in the left flat. The Mustangs went for the victory and the misfire sprang Ellensburg's celebration. "The way we never give up showed on that last fumble we got," said Ellersick, who threw for 251 yards and two touchdowns and ran for a game-high 58 yards and the decisive overtime score. "It was frustrating in the second half, being so close and not being able to score. But you just keep playing hard. That's what we do."

Helgeson's physical struggles don't show in the stats. All he did was catch 11 passes for 158 yards and intercept two passes, the second coming in the end zone during the third quarter. "Bryce is one heck of a player and Donny does a great job getting the ball to him," Walker said. "On our team everybody makes plays." Extending its CWAC win streak to 25 games over four seasons, Ellensburg improved to 6-0 in league and 7-0 overall with its fourth straight victory over Prosser (5-1, 6-1).

The CWAC's top two teams advance directly into the 2A state playoffs while No. 3 and 4 will have play-in games with the Great Northern League.

Ellensburg has road games at East Valley and Ephrata over the next two weeks and concludes the regular season at home against Quincy.

Prosser's final stretch includes Ephrata (home), Selah (away) and Othello (home).

Ellensburg 37377 — 27

Pro — Noah Flores 90 kickoff return (kick blocked)

Ell — FG Elliot Hougardy 29

Pro — Kason Blair 63 pass from Tanner Bolt (Javier Diaz kick)

Ell — Xander Orejudos 24 pass from Donny Ellersick (Hougardy kick)

Pro — Blair 55 pass from Bolt (Diaz kick)

Ell — FG Hougardy 18

Ell — Seth Walker 15 pass from Ellersick (Hougardy kick)

Ell — Ellersick 1 run (Hougardy kick)

Pro — Blair 4 pass from Bolt (pass failed)

INDIVIDUAL STATISTICS

RUSHING — Prosser, Thomas Niemeyer 8-34, Michael Kernan 2-22, Bolt 3-6, JR Coleman 1-1, Josiah Stutzman 4-(minus 3). Ellensburg, Ellersick 15-58, Walker 8-29, Mason Sherwood 12-21, Luke Rinehart 11-14, Corbin Coates 2-3.

PASSING — Prosser, Bolt 20-39-2-305. Ellensburg, Ellersick 21-35-2-251.

RECEIVING — Prosser, Blair 6-149, Diaz 4-38, Jay Munn 3-29, Kolby Swift 2-18, Kernan 1-30, Ky Swift 1-12, Roy Borrego 1-12, Luis Fernandez 1-11, Eddie Zepeda 1-6. Ellensburg, Helgeson 11-158, Orejudos 5-56, Walker 3-31, Christian McDonnell 1-3, Sherwood 1-3.

Ellensburg-Prosser football is a fight to the finish

By Scott Sandsberry

ssandsberry@yakimaherald.com

ELLENSBURG, Wash. — In the end, a team that refused to quit got the opportunity to win the game of the year in Class 2A — maybe the game of many years — because a player on the other team did the same thing. He refused to quit. He refused to go down.

But because Prosser running back Thomas Niemeyer's team had a tenuous one-touchdown lead with barely more than a minute to play, his every wrenching twist and turn for another yard meant another Ellensburg defender was getting a chance to rip and pull at the football.

And when it popped free, and was covered by Ellensburg's Ethan Robertson, the No. 3-ranked Bulldogs — who had spent all night chasing the No. 2 Mustangs without ever quite catching up — got one final chance to do so. And this time, they did.

Three plays later, quarterback Donny Ellersick hit running back Seth Walker with a 15-yard TD pass, Elliot Hougardy's conversion kick tied the game and the Bulldogs won it in overtime, 27-26, when Prosser opted to go for a game-deciding two-point conversion — a gutsy call to cap a classic contest — and couldn't convert it.

So, after trailing 13-3 at the end of a first quarter punctuated by two quick-strike Prosser touchdowns, 20-10 at the half and 20-13 in the final 11/2 minutes — the Bulldogs somehow won.

"We never give up. We don't give up. That's the way Ellensburg football is played," an emotional Ellersick said through tears, minutes after scoring the Bulldogs' overtime touchdown on a one-yard plunge.

“We play to the end of the whistle, like coach says. After I threw that interception” — just moments before Niemeyer’s fumble — “I came to the sideline and the guys on the defense played their butts off.”

“Our coach just instills in us to keep going, to keep playing Bulldog football,” Walker said. “They’re a great team. Watch the game: It was an amazing game, and they’re a great team. We never gave up. We just kept working hard, kept grinding.”

And when they finally evened the game at 20-20 and got the ball first in overtime, that’s precisely what the Bulldogs did: They kept grinding. In a game that saw the two quarterbacks combine for nearly 600 passing yards, Ellensburg went to a ground-and-pound offense, with Walker toting the rock five times on the seven-play drive.

The last foot, though, went to Ellersick on a third-down quarterback plunge, after back-to-back Walker carries were stacked up at the one-foot-line.

“I came over to (Ellensburg head coach Randy) Affholter and told him, ‘We can get it right here,’ because there was a gap right there (in the middle of the Prosser defense),” Ellersick said. “And we never go under center for anything.”

This time they did, and Ellersick pushed just barely across the line. That brought Hougardy back onto the field for the extra point, but an Ellensburg penalty — an offensive lineman moved a tad early — pushed the ball back five yards for the PAT try. Facing the equivalent of a 25-yard field goal, Hougardy wasn’t concerned.

“I just believe in my team,” said Hougardy, who was kicking from the hold of Nate Andaya on the deep snap from Landon Miller. “And it’s just another kick to me.”

His kick was true. And when Prosser answered with the third Tanner Bolt-to-Kason Blair TD of the night but then missed on the two-point conversion pass attempt, a game that seemed destined to end in a Prosser victory instead went to the Bulldogs.

“You never know what to expect from a Prosser-Ellensburg game,” Walker said. “It’s just a great game to be a part of.”