

Prosser defense rising to the occasion

Prosser D has 6 shutouts, one short of school record

Mustangs allowing just 5.9 points a game

Prosser avenged mid-season loss to Ellensburg



The Prosser Mustangs defense (clockwise from bottom center: David Ledesma, Michael Cruz, Michael Kernan, Thomas Niemeyer, Kolby Swift, Reese Aaberg, Jay Munn, Kason Blair, Roy Borrego, Riley Lusk, Colton Michaels, Javier Diaz) has recorded six shutouts this year and allowed fewer than 6 points a game. **Jack Millikin** Tri-City Herald

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The Prosser Mustangs are known throughout the state for their offensive prowess.

Players like Andy and Steve Harris, Kirby and Kellen Moore, Buck and Cody Bruns have all set the bar high for countless generations of Mustang football players with their passing, receiving and rushing ability, contributing to the program's four state championships.

But when push comes to shove — and in the state playoffs, it always does — the value of an uncompromising defense can never be underestimated.

“It's a big tradition here. Our defense is something we've always talked about. We really take pride in that goose egg up there,” senior cornerback Kason Blair said.

For players who realize the fleetingness of glory and all it brings, to surround yourself with talent and do something special is a unique and rare opportunity.

“You only get one chance to do this in a lifetime,” junior safety Michael Kernan said. “It's great to come out here every day with your friends. You get to make moments that you'll remember forever.”

If Prosser is to add a fifth state championship to its trophy case it might be defense that seals the deal. To do that, they'll have to get past the defending Class 2A state champions, Sedro Woolley, at 3 p.m. today at Zaepfel Stadium in Yakima. But if the Mustangs repeat their defensive performance of the last two weeks — a pair of shutout wins over Clarkston and Ellensburg — the chances of another state title are good.

So far, the Mustangs have allowed 71 points in 12 games, an average of just 5.9 points a game. That ranks seventh all-time among Prosser defenses — the 1942 Mustangs squad allowed just 27 points in 10 games, a 2.7 average — but is the lowest per-game average since the 1994 team allowed just 4.8 points a game. Prosser's six shutouts are one short of the program record of seven, set in 1994 by a defense that allowed just 53 points in 11 games.

The key has been a defensive unit that is as athletic and flexible as it can be rigid and uncompromising. Led by a trio of three-year starters — linebackers David Ledesma and Thomas Niemeyer, and defensive end Riley Lusk — Prosser has a chance to turn greatness into football immortality. If they pitch another shutout today, they'll have a chance to record four consecutive shutouts in the state playoffs.

But first-year Mustangs coach Corey Ingvalson isn't going to let his team get ahead of itself.

"We just try to focus on the task at hand. One play, one quarter, one game at a time," said Ingvalson, a Prosser graduate who was part of the 1999 state championship team. "Our biggest mindset this week is to find a way. It doesn't have to be pretty. Just get your name through."

Finding a way has been the Mustangs' specialty on defense this year. In their 14-0 first-round win over Clarkston, both Prosser touchdowns were scored by the defense.

"I feel like we're really good, and it shows in the shutouts we're putting up," Ledesma said. "Shutting out Ellensburg (21-0) and Clarkston was cool, because we didn't need to use the offense."

The shutout against Ellensburg felt especially good after the Bulldogs edged Prosser 27-26 in double overtime during the regular season. But defensive coordinator Kevin Gilman noticed a trend that made him change up the game plan for their quarterfinal matchup.

"I have a lot of respect for Ellensburg and Donny (Ellersick, the Bulldogs' quarterback). He just tore our zone apart, but he threw 30 percent against man coverage. So I decided on man coverage," Gilman said.

Ellersick completed just 7 of 21 passes and was picked off four times.

Lusk said part of Prosser's effectiveness comes from their experience playing together.

"If you watch film from two years ago, most of our starters were sophomores on that defense. That's one reason we're so dominant, the connection we have to each other," Lusk said.