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Atop the mountain: Eureka drops Montgomery 30-17 to take NCS Division II football title

Sean Quincey/The Times-Standard
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ROHNERT PARK -- Eureka stood on the field after Friday night's game cold and tired, like its players had just fought in a war. And let there be no doubt, it was a war on the field.

But in the end, this band of brothers, these Eureka Loggers, won the war.

They stood on the field as champions of the North Coast Section.

"Montgomery came out wanting to fight, and we wanted a fight," said Eureka's Soma Vainuku, who faced his toughest test yet and still finished the night with 170 yards rushing and three touchdowns on 30 carries. "We played every down as hard as we could, every run, every tackle.

"Everyone came to play, everyone on offense, defense. Everyone came through in the clutch."

Vainuku was the focus of Eureka's game plan, but four players, in particular, helped the Loggers turn an early 10-0 deficit into a hard-fought 30-17 win in the NCS Division II championship game against Montgomery.

It was Eureka's second NCS title since current Cincinnati Bengals teammates Rey Mauluga and Maurice Purify led the Loggers to a championship in 2003. It was also a game that capped off an unbelievable playoff run, one that puts this year's Loggers up with the best teams ever to come out of the Humboldt-Del Norte Conference.

However, this run was made all the more possible by that legendary 2003 team, which went undefeated en route to its championship. Many of the current Loggers saw that old team with their own eyes and that

made them want their own championship rings that much more.

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"I remember going to Humboldt State, watching them beat Casa Grande (for the NCS title)," said Jeff Faulk, who was in fifth grade at the time. "I said 'I want that to be me one day.'

"This means a lot."

And it means even more because the fashion in which they won the championship game.

Heading into the night, Eureka had outscored its previous three playoff opponents 154-14 and averaged 457 yards rushing per game. From the outset on Friday, it was clear that this would be no cakewalk.

Playing in sub-40-degree weather with a heavy mist and steady wind, Eureka looked tight, even uneasy

early on. Montgomery, meanwhile, was energized, no doubt fueled by the challenge of stopping a running back who had gotten more attention in their local press over the last two weeks than they had.

As a result, Eureka started uncharacteristically slow, turning the ball over twice in the first quarter, the first a fumble

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on a pitch to Vainuku and the second a botched snap on a field-goal attempt after a 16-play drive stalled at the Viking's 5-yard line.

The Vikings and their "Pistol" offense responded with a quick, 51-yard, five-play drive that ended on a one-yard touchdown by running back Alex Ciudad-Real. It was just the second touchdown Eureka had given up on defense the entire playoffs.

After the botched field goal, Montgomery marched down the field again and threatened to go up by two touchdowns, but a coverage sack forced a 23-yard field goal, which put the Vikings up 10-0 with 1:59 left in the first quarter.

"I was kinda scared after that, but I was more mad because our offense wasn't doing anything," said tackle Matt Buckman. "When we finally figured out what defense they were in, then we started to play really well."

Really well. The Loggers scored 30 unanswered points before Montgomery gave them a scare with under two minutes left in the game.

After another stop, this one thanks to a strong secondary and pass rush, Eureka took over at its own 33-yard line and went down the field in seven plays before Vainuku scored on an eight-yard touchdown run. Quarterback John DeMartini had two runs for 17 yards on the drive, and his effectiveness gave Eureka another threat they desperately needed.

They also desperately needed a turnover, and they got it on the ensuing kickoff. Eureka recovered a fumble, and one play after Faulk's 25-yard run to the goal line, Vainuku punched it in.

Montgomery received in the third quarter, and on the opening drive ran four of its five total offensive plays in the period. Eureka punished Montgomery in the quarter, possessing the ball for roughly 10 of the period's 12 minutes.

The Loggers had a 12-play drive go down to the Vikings' nine-yard line when Vainuku had his second fumble of the day. The Vikings recovered, but on their first play they snapped it high and the Loggers tackled quarterback Max Heller in the end zone for a safety.

Another long drive ensued after the free kick with the Loggers holding the ball until the first play of the fourth quarter when Vainuku scored from three yards out to put Eureka up 23-10.

Montgomery, using a mixture of passes, runs, and a potentially costly Eureka personal foul, came down the field again the next drive.

But Logger safety Jake Cruz, on his first play of the game, intercepted a pass in the end zone to kill the threat.

Four plays later, Eureka's Zack Wilkinson took a sweep around left end, cut up inside his blockers, broke a backer's tackle and sprinted 50 yards for a touchdown that all but put the game to bed.

"After Wilkinson scored, I ran to Jake and said, 'That was all you, all you,'" Eureka head coach Garrett Montana said. "We were in big trouble right then and he bailed us out."

Montgomery scored a touchdown late in the fourth and recovered an onside kick, but never threatened to win the game after Wilkinson's run.

Eureka had taken Montgomery's best shot, after taking the best shots from the best teams in the North Coast Section. And they survived.

"I feel really proud of these boys," Montana said. "I've been with them four to five days a week for the past year. They've worked so hard, lifting weights, going to camps, going through practice. No team's deserved it more than these guys.

"I told them that this will not be the high point in your life. It's pretty sad if it is. But it's going to be something no one can ever take away from you."

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