

Warriors' heart, iron will take them to the state championship

By Missy Chappell

The Tuscola Warrior football squad began the 2017 season with the slogan "Branded by Iron", not tough-as-nails, not stronger than steel but Branded by Iron. Time and time again this football season they proved it with come back wins over Clifton Central, Shelbyville, and a thriller versus St. Teresa in Decatur. Never did their Iron Will shine through stronger than Saturday, Nov. 18 under extremely adverse weather and field conditions when they came away with a 21-14 win over the Warriors of Athens in the semifinal matchup to earn a trip to DeKalb to play in the 1A state championship game.

But it didn't start off well...

Cade Kresin's opening kick into the wind was caught by Athens' senior running back Drayton Davis. Davis then took it 90 yards for a touchdown thanks to quality blocks along the way. With a good extra point kick and a mere 13 seconds of the clock, Athens led 7-0.

A big momentum buster to start the game could've taken the wind out of the Warriors' sails, and Coach Romine knew it.

"It put all the momentum

in their favor, but we were able to seize it back with a couple of big defensive stops."

Tuscola put together what appeared to be a good drive, getting into Athens' territory. But then a holding penalty and passing struggles forced a punt.

Athens answered with a drive that included a few personal foul penalties on Tuscola. The green Warriors decided to go for it on fourth and 1 at the Tuscola 36-yard line and fumbled the snap.

Starting with great field position, Tuscola called on Andrew Erickson and Luke Sluder to run it. They advanced the ball down to Athens' 7-yard line before Sluder threw an interception.

Coach Romine addressed the first quarter woes.

"It wasn't going well for us through that first quarter. We had a couple of personal foul penalties that are uncharacteristic. We finally answered the bell and got the stop and then answered with a drive of our own."

The defense came up big on the next drive, forcing Athens to turn over the ball on just four downs. That defensive stand got Tuscola back into the game.

Tuscola got the ball with 10:39 left in the half, and the offense came alive. With a fantastic starting field position at the Athens' 29-yard line, Tuscola needed only four plays to find the end zone on a 21-yard touchdown run by Andrew Erickson. Unfortunately, Athens was able to block the extra point kick so the black Warriors still trailed 6-7 with 9:20 left in the half.

Not for long though, as the defense once again made great tackles and forced Athens to go three and out. After starting from behind and struggling with penalties in the first quarter, senior Hunter Woodard said the defense just pulled together. "We were very mentally sound, mentally clear. Coach (Lenny) Sementi has really gotten us in a great place to stop them just like we did today. Everybody did their part, and that's what led to this win."

Athens' punt put Tuscola back on their 15-yard line to start the drive. After a quarterback keeper on first down gained no yards, the black and gold Warriors made one of their best plays of the season. Sluder dropped back to pass and had to roll left dragging a defender. He managed to get a pass off to Dalton Hoel who caught it with another Athens player holding onto his jersey. Hoel



Photos: Douglas Cottle

Warrior Andrew Erickson runs up the middle as he prepares to score a touchdown during 1A IHSA semifinal football action with Athens. The Warriors' 21-14 victory earned them a trip to the IHSA 1A State Championship.

ducked and pivoted away from the defender and ran across the field to his right. At midfield Noah Pierce drilled an Athens player to give Hoel room back left. Fifteen yards later, Haden Cothron knocked another player off stride to open up a huge hole for Hoel who scrambled 85 yards to the end zone. After missing the previous kick, Coach Romine called for a two point conversion, and Sluder once again hit Hoel for a 14-7 Tuscola lead with 5:51 remaining in the half.

In the post game, in relation to that amazing run, Hoel was asked if his short stature works to his advantage by allowing him to evade taller defenders.

His response, "It's what I'm stuck with. So I like to think it helps me out a little bit."

Both defenses controlled the remainder of the first half, so the Tuscola Warriors took a 14-7 lead into the locker room, knowing they'd receive the kick to start the second half.

After returning the kick to their 39-yard line, Tuscola gained short yardage to get into Athens territory. Where Sluder handed the ball to Erickson who drug defenders for a 25-yard gain that put Tuscola within 16 yards of the goal line. A pass to Pierce got them to first and goal at the 4-yard line, where Erickson once again got the call and scored. Four minutes into

the second half, Tuscola led 21-7.

Erickson was able to gain yards when the Warriors needed them, but if you ask him, he's just doing his job.

"I just had to keep my feet moving, and I had a great line that blocks for me."

Coach Romine talked about Erickson's ability and importance to the team.

"Andrew Erickson has been a man through the play-offs, and we put it on his shoulders on that last drive, and man he answered the bell. He's so hard to bring down, because he has such wide shoulders and a low center of gravity. They squared him up at about 1 yard deep in the backfield, and he just bounced off and then ran for 7 more yards. There was a stretch in the second half with the ball in his hands is where we felt really comfortable, and he'll probably touch it some next week too."

Athens took over on offense and kept the ball for an 8 minute 49 second drive that ended in a turnover on downs at their 48-yard line. The Tuscola Warrior defense to that point had not allowed Athens to score. Coach Romine was quite impressed with the ability of the defense to shut down Athens' big play makers.

"Our eye discipline in our secondary was fantastic today. We filled well. We didn't give up a lot of huge plays. When you're playing these kind of conditions, and you don't give up huge plays that's what wins games for you."

For the defense it was a little more simple. According to Andrew Erickson.

"We knew if we could just keep tackling and keep them from making big plays that we could get it done."

Athens, a wing-t team, changed up their formations for the matchup with Tuscola. Coach Romine talked

about that post game.

"We thought getting them out of the wing-t would be a good thing for us. But you're good at what you practice and all week long we practiced on the wing-t stuff. They went to the spread, and you've got to give their kids especially their quarterback a lot of credit. He made some really tough throws."

But again to Hunter Woodard, the defense wasn't doing anything special even when Athens gave them different looks.

"It didn't really change much for me, but we've seen other wing-t throughout the playoffs, and we've seen different formations during the year so we were ready for all of it."

The only misstep for the defense in the second half came on Athens final drive of the game. A couple of big penalties on Tuscola kept the drive alive and allowed Athens to score on a 4-yard touchdown run. With 4:24 remaining in the game, Tuscola's lead was cut to 7 points.

As it turned out, those seven points were all Tuscola needed to win. Tuscola ran the clock out and got to a first and goal from the 1 yard line, but ended up taking a knee. If you ask Dalton Hoel, that last score meant nothing. "Whether we win by 1 or we win by 2 we still won. That's what I was thinking we're out of here, let's go to DeKalb."

In 2013 Hoel, a then freshman, stood on Memorial Field with tears in his eyes after a semi-final loss to Maroa-Forsyth. His post game reflection draws on his playoff experiences that began that season.

"Obviously you want to go back there, and you want to win that game, but people like Nick (Bates), Keegan (Kibler) and all those guys they deserve every bit of playing in the state champi-

onship game. They were some of the best players to come through the program. More than just those two deserve it. But it's incredible to bring it back for our town. We have an incredible amount of support. Everybody on the team loves the loud atmosphere and it's awesome. It sparks you a little bit. Gets you going a little bit more. And especially on defense where a yard or two can make a difference, it just really helps out in games like this. We won the game and that's all I really care about. We come out with the win, and I'm just looking forward to next week."

Woodard too was on the 2013 team, and he was still wrapping his brain around the win after dousing Coach Romine with gatorade last Saturday.

"I can't even believe it. It hasn't even sunk in yet."

Erickson was not just happy to win, but added his thoughts on the championship game.

"This means a lot. We've been looking for this for a long time. For me since freshman year and for a lot of other guys too. We finally got there, and we're going to get it done."

This 2017 Warrior football team was unexpected. Many thought they'd lose three maybe four games this season. Coach Romine and his staff put the naysayers to rest by creating an environment where kids are excited to learn, ready to improve and always working to get better....and they did. Branded by Iron is headed to the final game of the season, the class 1A state championship game Friday, Nov. 24 at 10 a.m. in DeKalb, Illinois, the Warriors will take the field at Huskie Stadium to face the Lena-Winslow Panthers and with a whole lot of skill and a little bit of luck, they're hoping to pull off one more win.

Thanksgiving food drive, giving six different baskets to families in need in our Tuscola community. They were provided a full Thanksgiving meal to celebrate the holiday.

Students and teachers have three days off, plus the weekend, to enjoy time with family during Thanksgiving break - Wednesday, Nov. 22, Thursday, Nov. 23 (Thanksgiving Day), Friday, Nov. 24.

East Prairie Seventh Grade Girls' Basketball Regionals start that Monday the 20th; the eighth grade girls will kick off post season Tuesday, Nov. 28. Then, Friday, Nov. 24, our Tuscola Warriors play for the Class 1A State Championship at 10 a.m. in DeKalb at Northern Illinois University after their 21-14 victory last Saturday against Athens. Congratulations and good luck!

Now is the time.

Every year at the holiday time we face the same challenges — the calendar is filling up with parties, and who has time for eating healthy? There is never a perfect time to start a weight-loss program, and before the holidays is a great time to put you first. Enlisting the support of HMR® can help keep you accountable to your weight goals.

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AROUND the Falls

By Caleigh Parsley

Tuesday, Nov. 14, Key Club had Lego Night at the Public Library downtown. The kids that went were able to build anything they

wanted, and if they wanted to "show it off," they could take their creation upstairs for everyone to see. The Key Club members helped the kids build if needed or find pieces for them. It was a lot of fun for everyone that went. The Tuscola FFA held a