

SARALAND

A LOOK BACK AT THE 2018 STATE CHAMPIONSHIP GAME

Spartan pride still shines

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Every team, with the exception of the state champion in each of the Alabama High School Athletic Association's classifications, looks back at the previous season and wonders how it might have gone differently.

Certainly Saraland's Jeff Kelly looks back at the Spartans' 2018 season, one in which they reached the Class 6A state championship game at Auburn's Jordan-Hare Stadium, losing a close 26-17 decision to Pinson Valley, and wonders if there was a call here or a decision there that might have led to the Spartans taking home the championship trophy.

But there's also this: Kelly left Jordan-Hare Stadium that day with a huge smile on his face. He recognized, at a moment when such recognition can sometimes be difficult to come by, what his team had accomplished during the season. The Spartans hadn't won it all, but they had accomplished a great deal, and Kelly was proud of his team and its effort.

That pride still exists today as he prepares Saraland for the 2019 season and another chase of the Class 6A state title.

His thoughts immediately after the championship game still ring true today. Here's a look back at his thoughts following the game.

"It's tough, it's tough," he said. "The locker room situation we just walked out of to come in here (for the post-game press conference), you've got young men who laid it on the line for their school, for their teammates, for their community, for four years.

"They get the opportunity to climb and claw their way to earning the right to play in the biggest game in the state, here at Jordan-Hare this year. We've got some unbelievable winners — tough, crazy tough warriors. And tonight was a good example of our season, especially our playoff season. A lot of things early, we had some adversity and we got down, but the guys continued to fight and continued to play throughout the second half and they continued to apply pressure to Pinson, and for that I'm proud.

"I want to congratulate Pinson Valley for the job they did — they made plays and they've got an outstanding football team. ... But I tell you what, that being said, I couldn't ask for anybody to play as hard and to play as tough as the young men over in my locker room. They have done that week in and week out.

"You think about what they had to do and the adversity they (faced) in having to come back, the last three weeks have just been battles, just wars, that have come down to the last play. Whether it was a 6-0 game in the second round



The Saraland Spartans celebrate a playoff victory during their march to the state championship game in 2018.

(against Hueytown) or coming back against Opelika three times or having to come back from a 21-8 (deficit) last week against Wetumpka.

"We were in that situation here and we just couldn't finish it off at the end. But what happened tonight is not going to define our football team and it's not going to define our young men. The way they play and the way they carry themselves, that's what's going to define them.

"So I'm proud of them and I know without a shadow of a doubt, whatever they want to do (in life) they're going to be fine. They're going to do a great job, not only in football but in life itself."

Prior to the game, a reporter asked Kelly what it would take for his team, for the Saraland program, to get over the hump and win a state crown for the program which has only a nine-season history? Kelly pondered that question again after the game.

"What is that hump? This is our eighth or ninth year playing, our second time in the finals, (semifinals once) in the last (few) years," he said. "It is a credit to these young

men — not only these guys but the guys who have come before them — that's made Saraland a tough out in the game of football.

"There's times when you look at it and you walk off the field after the game and you know it's hot and you know it's tough and you know it's things you can't always measure at times, and that's the thing that makes me so proud of with our young men. We've got outstanding football players. We've got outstanding players, and they play together and they play hard.

"And I am proud of where these young men have taken our program. It is hard. That's the thing, coming out of this run, the thing is you appreciate how hard it is to get to this level. We'll worry about the future later on, but right now, we're going to look back after this initial sting is over and we're going to look back and we're going to be real proud and our players are going to be real proud about how we played and how we represented. So we're just going to keep working and try to get better."

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