

No. 1 Warriors surge into 4A finals

Written by Jim Ecker

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CEDAR FALLS - Paul James figured his glory days as a football coach were over when he stepped down as Washington's head man after the 2005 season to become the school's athletic director.

Unlike Ponce de Leon, James has discovered the fountain of youth.

The top-ranked Washington Warriors, blessed with great athletes making great players, rallied for a 28-17 victory over second-ranked Bettendorf in the semifinals of the Class 4A playoffs in the UNI-Dome Friday night.

James led Washington to the championship game in 2003 but never dreamed he'd return with headsets and a clipboard with a chance to win the ultimate prize in coaching again.

"That's what I just said to my family," said James, who returned to coaching last year. "I said, 'Would you have thought a year-and-a-half ago in May that we'd be where we are now?'"

"It's just a great feeling," he said. "All the credit goes to the kids and the coaching staff."

Washington (13-0) will meet Dowling Catholic (12-1) in the championship game next Friday at 7:06 p.m. in the UNI-Dome.

The Warriors had not trailed in a game all season, but that quickly changed when quarterback Reid Snitker suffered a pick-6 on Washington's first possession of the game. His sideline pass was intercepted by Dalton McLaughlin and returned 42 yards for a touchdown to give Bettendorf

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an early 6-0 lead.

Snitker responded like a champion.

He threw a perfect 34-yard touchdown pass to Isaiah Nimmers to get the Warriors on the board in the second quarter after they had fallen behind 10-0, and he threw a 45-yard dart to Landen Akers for a touchdown in the fourth quarter to give the Warriors a semi-comfortable 28-17 advantage that they rode to the end.

All told, Snitker completed 7 of 10 passes for 162 yards with a series of clutch throws. He hit 50 percent of his passes in the first 12 games of the year, then hit 70 percent when it really counted.

"I think it was really nice to finally have a good passing game," he said. "It couldn't have come at a better time. My teammates and coaches did a really good job of getting my head back in the game."

The Warriors needed a big passing game from Snitker because Bettendorf held Washington's powerful running attack to just 94 yards on 41 tough carries. James had confidence that Snitker would bounce back from the early interception.



"He's that type of kid," said James. "He's a winner and he's going to do whatever it takes."

Washington scored three touchdowns during a five-minute span in the second quarter to grab a 21-10 advantage and get moving in the right direction, with big plays on offense and defense.

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Snitker hit Akers with a 41-yard pass to the 6-yard line and two plays later Johnny Dobbs plowed into the end zone to make it 13-10. Gunner Lenzen's PAT made it 14-10.

The Warriors smothered Bettendorf on the ensuing kickoff return and on first down, Washington linebacker Connor Vincent broke into Bettendorf's backfield and made a huge play. He tackled Bettendorf tailback Justice O'Conner for a 9-yard loss and somehow recovered a fumble at the 6-yard line.

"I didn't know it was a fumble at first," said Vincent. "Everyone was just screaming 'Ball! Ball! Ball!' He kind of had it in his hand and I kind of swept it from under him and just cradled it."

Dobbs scored on another 1-yard plunge a few plays later and the Warriors had breathing room at 21-10.

Bettendorf drove all the way to the Washington 8-yard line in the final seconds of the first half, but Vincent sacked Cyle Cox on third down as the half came to a close.

Nothing came easy for Washington in this showdown between the No. 1 and No.2 teams in the state.

Bettendorf scored quickly in the third quarter to pull within 21-17. The Warriors had to punt and the Bulldogs were on the move again, but Akers saved the day with a leaping interception in the end zone after Bettendorf had reached the 23-yard line.

Bettendorf moved into Washington territory again, but Nimmers knocked O'Conner out of bounds on a 4th-and-2 play from the 43-yard line. This time Washington responded on offense and took a 28-17 lead on the Snitker TD pass to Akers.

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Back came Bettendorf, driving to the Washington 35-yard line where Vincent stopped Cox short of a first down on 4th-and-2 with 6 minutes, 40 seconds left in the game with a head-on tackle. Vincent made a series of big tackles all day, but he enjoyed that one the most.

"I stuffed him like one yard short of the first-down marker," he said. "That was probably my favorite. It gave me a headache, but it was worth it."

Vincent was a headache for the Bulldogs (12-1) all day.

"Connor, in my opinion, is the best linebacker in the state," said Snitker, who also plays on defense. "I won't even know what's happening and he'll be tackling the guy with the ball five yards in the backfield."

Bettendorf got another chance, but Akers recovered a fumble with 2:22 left in the game to seal the victory.

Akers was another one of Washington's great athletes who made a series of great plays with his interception, 45-yard touchdown, fumble recovery and 41-yard reception to set up Washington's second touchdown.

"That's going to happen when you have those kind of players," said James. "That's kind of what the expectation is. They're going to rise and do the things that help you."

Now the Warriors will be playing for the first state football title in school history. They finished second in 2003 under James and have another shot at the crown, 11 years later.

"That's been the goal since the start," said Nimmers. "We're not finished yet. We have to win the championship."

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Thirteen down and one to go.

"It's going to be exciting," said Snitker. "They're going to give us all they've got and we're going to give them all we've got."

Dowling beat Waukee, 41-28, in the other semifinal Friday night.

WASHINGTON 28, BETTENDORF 17

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First downs	11	10
Rushes-yards	41-94	31-146
Passing yards	162	100
Comp-Att-Int	7-10-1	8-17-1
Fumbles-lost	0-0	3-2
Punts-avg.	6-28.5	3-36.0
Penalties-yards	4-30	5-40

Washington 0 21 0 7 - 28

Bettendorf 10 0 7 0 - 17

B - Dalton McLaughlin 42 interception return (Matt Perk kick)

B - FG Matt Perk 21

W - Isaiah Nimmers 34 pass from Reid Snitker (Gunner Lenzen kick)

W - Johnny Dobbs 1 run (Lenzen kick)

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B - Cyle Cox 22 run (Perk kick)

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W - Landen Akers 45 pass from Snitker (Lenzen kick)

Individual Statistics

Rushing

Washington: Dobbs 12-45, Patrick 12-34, Smothers 5-16, C.Vincent 3-13, Akers 1-3, Nimmers 1-1, Snitker 7-minus 18.

Bettendorf: O'Conner 15-108, Cox 15-33, LaDoucer 1-5.

Passing

Washington: Snitker 7-10-1, 162 yards.

Bettendorf: Cox 8-17-1, 100 yards.

Receiving

Washington: Nimmers 3-48, Akers 2-86, C.Vincent 2-28.

Bettendorf: Cullor 3-41, Lane 2-3, Young 1-31, O'Conner 1-22, Himmelman 1-3.