

No. 2 Bettendorf too strong for J-Hawks

Written by Metro Sports Report

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BETTENDORF – This wasn't David vs. Goliath. This was David's Skinny Little Brother against one of the super heavyweights of Iowa Class 4A.

To say a 4-and-5 Cedar Rapids Jefferson team was facing long odds against second-ranked and undefeated Bettendorf in the J-Hawks' first playoff game in six years was saying the currently 0-7 Oakland Raiders have some work to do to make the 2014 NFL playoffs.

Yet Jefferson, playing sloppy but impassioned nothing-to-lose football went all out from first play to last in its long-shot attempt to upset the Bulldogs Wednesday night at TouVelle Stadium.

Alas, the rules of football physics played out on this chilly night, though David never quit.

Bettendorf, thriving on its swarming, lights-out defense and quarterback Cyle Cox's effective work, overwhelmed the J-Hawks 35-7 and motored closer to the UNI-Dome.

Going in, Jefferson Coach Brian Webb said his team was not “going to be happy with just being in the playoffs.” But while making their first postseason appearance since 2008 and seeking their program's first playoff victory since 1992, the J-Hawks (4-6) ran into an absolute buzz saw in the Bulldogs (10-0), a perennial playoff force making their 17th consecutive postseason appearance.

Jefferson needed a perfect performance to have a fighting chance against this foe, and too many mistakes, offensive breakdowns and penalties prevented the J-Hawks from having a real chance at writing one of Iowa's all-time great playoff Cinderella stories. Five dropped passes, two

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blocked punts, two lost fumbles and a truckload of yellow flags made Jefferson's 100-foot tall task even taller.

“The message (of Jefferson's effort) is it's a step in the right direction,” said Webb, who made his long-struggling team a playoff club in just his third season at the helm. “We played a high-caliber opponent. Before Jefferson beats high-caliber opponents, we can't beat ourselves with mistakes, dropped balls and penalties. If we want to compete and beat these teams, we can't beat ourselves.”

Bettendorf, a 40.9-point per night juggernaut with a 2,000-yard rushing attack which hadn't really been challenged since Iowa City West pushed it to overtime in Week 6, leaned on its defense on this night.

“The expectation (of the Bettendorf defense) is you shut people down,” Bulldogs Coach Aaron Wiley said. “The kids delivered tonight. That was a great defensive performance.”

The Bulldogs lived up to their coach's great expectations, delivering a brilliant effort defined by their constant pressuring of J-Hawks QB Jesse Furrow.

Furrow, a transfer from Pendleton Heights, Ind., and the only J-Hawk with prior playoff experience, had little time to make things happen as Bettendorf's aggressive defensive line regularly crashed through his security detail to apply hurried pressure.

Bettendorf's special teams primed its offense for a big start. David Smith blocked Dakota Tomkins' first punt of the game to set up the Bulldogs at the Jefferson 24-yard line. Cox's 5-yard run began the scoring just 3:15 into the game.

The Bulldogs' special teams continued to put pressure on Jefferson, partially blocking Tomkins'

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next punt, allowing the Bettendorf offense to set up shop again in J-Hawk territory, this time at the J-Hawk 41.

But David wouldn't quit.

This time, the J-Hawk defense showed true grit, sacking Cox twice to force Bettendorf into a non-convertible 4th-and-39 situation and a punt. But Bettendorf's Smith (a big play machine on this night) blasted Furrow on the J-Hawks' next possession, jarring the ball loose and right to defensive tackle Cameron Maxfield, who returned the fumble 31 yards for a touchdown.

Despite having only 13 yards to their name, the Bulldogs owned a 13-0 lead with 3:13 to go in the first quarter.

Cox continued to befuddle the Jefferson defense on QB options in the second quarter, scoring on a 19-yard keeper with 7:53 left before halftime to up the Bulldogs' lead to 19-0.

The J-Hawk defense didn't fold against 4A's No.2 team, forcing a couple punts before Bettendorf re-established offensive dominance just before halftime. Cox drove the Bulldogs 94 yards on six plays with Cox capping the drive with a 17-yard touchdown pass to Austin Cullor with 1:26 left before halftime.

Bettendorf jet-setted into halftime with a comfortable 25-0 lead.

Meanwhile, with Bettendorf blitzing through the J-Hawk line to sack Furrow, Jefferson had just five net yards in the first quarter. The J-Hawks managed just 40 first-half yards on 31 plays. Furrow, often running for his life while Jack Kallenberger sacked him twice and Smith stalked him, had minus-25 yards rushing at halftime.

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Bettendorf kept rolling in fifth gear to open the third quarter. Cox hit Culler on a 53-yard gain on the Bulldogs' first play from scrimmage and on their second play O'Conner hit the end zone from 12 yards out to extend the Bettendorf lead to 32-0 and essentially put the game on ice.

Even when the J-Hawks caught a rare offensive break, they couldn't build any offensive momentum. After netting a third quarter first down on a Bettendorf personal foul, they lost 21 yards on their first play and later punted.

Still, Jefferson still wouldn't quit, even when things got scary.

In a frightening scene, the game was delayed in the fourth quarter when Jefferson lineman Caleb Borseth was hit on a play and lay face down on the field for several minutes. Borseth was responsive and was wheeled off the field on a stretcher to a standing ovation by both sets of bleachers.

With their chances of victory in the fourth quarter equaling their odds of winning the lottery, the J-Hawks never stopped fighting. With 9:08 to play, Jefferson's gutsy effort was rewarded when Furrow (who finished a tough 9-for-28 passing for 56 yards and netted just three rushing yards) broke free on a QB keeper to score from 8 yards out and deny the Bettendorf defense the shutout.

After all the bruising hits – including six sacks – he had taken all night, Furrow refused to go down easy.

It was a play that defined the heart and fight of the 2014 Jefferson J-Hawks, who – as Furrow said – came together as brothers and fought their way back to the postseason.

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"The way we came together (was special)," Furrow said. "We didn't accomplish everything we wanted to accomplish, but (with) the camaraderie on this team, we're all brothers."

In this autumn of progress, Jefferson laid a foundation of success that Webb firmly believes his young team can keep building on.

"We did a lot of great things this year," he said. "Not quite the result we wanted, but it was against a high-caliber team. These guys, in the summer, they lift six days a week. That's how committed they are to that. Football is a year-round commitment.

"We're getting there – I don't know if we're there yet, but we're getting there."

Jefferson 0 0 0 7 – 7
Bettendorf 13 12 10 0 – 35

B – Cyle Cox 5 run (kick failed)
B – Cameron Maxfield 31 fumble return (Matt Perk kick)
B – Cox 19 run (kick failed)
B – Austin Cullor 17 pass from Cox (kick failed)
B – O'Connor 12 run (Perk kick)
B – Perk 43 FG
J – Furrow 8 run (Caleb Kesterson kick)