# Hardin Northern Denies Bulldogs in Semi-Finals

## Polar Bears Earn First Trip to State

Putnam County Sentinel – Dar Nevergall, Sports Writer

Oh, so close again. For the second straight year, the Columbus Grove football team had positioned itself within reach of the Division VI State Championship game with only one obstacle standing in their way.

This time that obstacle took the form of the Hardin Northern Polar Bears and once again the Bulldogs quest came up short as the Blanchard Valley Conference champions broke away from a scoreless game at halftime to take a 20-0 win and end another outstanding season for the Bulldogs.

"Give a lot of credit to coach Pete Brunow," said Columbus Grove coach Jerry Cooper. "He's been in the State Semi-Final game three times, 1996, 1997 and 2002, and his program has had nine or ten playoff teams. Their kids played really well and Drew Snow ran real hard. That was a real good football team and they got a couple nice breaks in the game. We turned the ball over and gave them a short field and they got a score. The last two were kind of beside the point. The Columbus Grove coaching staff wants to wish them the best of luck in the State Championship game and they deserve to be there."

This game featured similar offenses and defenses and many felt it would be a key turnover that would make the difference. That turnover came in the second half when the Polar Bears Kyle Doll intercepted a tipped Ben Stechschulte pass to set up the only score Hardin Northern would need.

Prior to that, both teams were able to make forward progress in the first half, but neither could finish on a messy, snow-covered Donnell Stadium field as Grove drove deep within Polar Bear country on their first possession only to come up dry on downs at the five yard line and the Polar Bears moved to the Grove 16 before the Bulldogs Kurt Theising picked off a Clay Brunow pass.

Long drives would limit the possessions for both teams in the first 24 minutes as Grove had the ball twice in the first half and Hardin Northern handled it three times. Snow was the force for the Polar Bears as the senior churned up 47 yards on 11 carries in the first two quarters and finished the day with 119 yards on 27 carries.

For Columbus Grove it was once again Blaine Mg who would to the bulk of the damage on the ground as the sophomore runner garnered 36 yards on nine attempts in the first half and 51 yards on 13 carries for the game. A big blow for Grove came on a Stechschulte carry in the first quarter when the junior quarterback sprinted around left end for 19 yards, but came up limping.

Said Cooper, "We practice a lot of option, boot and mis-direction stuff to get Ben outside and when he got hurt that really changed some of the play calling. We went to a little bit more straight passing and less play-action and boot passing."

The second half continued where the first half left off with neither team giving up ground easily. Grove started the third quarter from their own 25 yard line and Stechschulte, despite the injured ankle, reeled off 20 yards on a keeper. Maag clipped off nine more, but two stops later the Bulldogs were forced to punt.

Hardin Northern then moved the ball steadily behind the running of Snow and the arm of Brunow to the Grove 48, but the Bulldogs came up big on a third-and-three and the Polar Bears had to kick it away.

Then came the play of the game for the Polar Bers as Stechschulte lofted a pass for Brandon Baxter that was tipped into the hands of Doll at the Bulldog 22 yard line.

Brunow went eight yards on a keeper and Snow nine more on a thrust through the right side to the

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six yard line. Snow then took the handoff around right end and dove across the line to give the Polar Bears a six point advantage. Jason Weirauch came on to nail the extra point to make it 7-0 with 2:26 to play in the third.

Said Hardin Northern coach Pete Brunow, "The big thing about the touchdown was making the extra point because I was real concerned about it being 6-0 and playing in this stuff. When we got the extra point I was feeling a little bit better, but at the same time wasn't sure seven points would hold up.

Hold up it did though as time and time again the Polar Bears came up with big defensive plays after the score to stop the Grove momentum.
When the Bulldogs moved into Hardin Northern territory with a 22 yard catch and run by Theising, the Bears shut the door with sacks by Weihrauch and Brett Thames. When Grove went to the air, the Bears' Matt Price knocked away two big passes and Tim Fulks added two more sacks. Then on the Bulldogs final possession, Brunow came up big defensively with an interception to set up a nine yard Snow touchdown to seal the win with 2:12 remaining.

The final tally of the game came when Palte fielded the Hardin Northern kickoff and handed off to Maag on a reverse. Maag was belted by the Polar Bear defense and the ball popped into the air and into the hands of Weihrauch, the kicker, who went untouched into the end zone for a 12 yard score. Weihrauch then added the extra point to finish the scoring.

"This is huge," summed up an exuberant Brunow. "This little team of ours has come a long way. There are not a whole lot of us, but the kids focused in on what we are doing. What a great effort by our football team. Columbus Grove obviously has a punishing ground game and it's nice to be able to stop them and make them predictable (forcing them to pass). We still had to make some great plays and a couple of times we tipped the ball away when the receiver was behind us. Our punter, (Weihrauch) has been a big weapon for us all year too." Weihrauch punted four times for a 32 yard average, including a final punt of 34 yards under a heavy rush that pinned Grove back at their own 38 with three minutes to go.

The Polar Bears, 14-0, will now move to challenge Mogadore, 13-1 and a 28-21 winner over Newark Catholic in the Division VI State Championship game at Canton Fawcett Stadium on Friday at 3:30 p.m. Coumbus Grove completes their season with a 13-1 record.
"We moved the ball real well in the first half and felt we could still move the football after the touchdown," stated Cooper. "We got a couple of first downs, but we didn't get it done consistently enough in the second half to deserve to go on to the next game."

"Steve (Palte) has been a fast, athletic kid that we have used out off of the perimeter, but because of the field conditions today, he wasn't able to get outside as much as we had hoped. I thought Blaine (Maag) ran real hard for us, but they made plays to get us stopped. Snow is a workhorse. We hit him a bunch of times and he bounced off stuff and made positive yards for them. We moved the ball really well the first time we had it, took it down to the 13 or 14 and didn't score. That was a big stop for them and a momentum changer for us."

Backing up Snow on the ground for Hardin Northern was Craig McMillen with 21 yards on five carries and Brunow with nine keepers for 40 yards. Brunow completed 2 of 8 passes for 20 yards with Damien Plaugher making both catches.

For Grove, Palte rushed eight times for 20 yards and Stechschulte carried 10 times for 60 yards. Stechschulte connected on 6 of 14 passes for 76 yards with Theising grabbing two passes for 35 yards, Palte three tosses for 26 yards and Baxter one pass for 15.

Said Cooper, "Our Columbus Grove people are great and they'll follow our Bulldogs again next year. We've got lots of nice kids coming back and we'll again be a good football team.

Indeed, they will and just think there are only eight months to go before opening kickoff.