Bulldogs Division VI State Champions

Fourth Quarter Drive Halts Marion Local Comeback

Putnam County Sentinel – Charlie Warnimont, Sports Editor

Marion Local finally seemed to have cracked Columbus Grove's offense in the second half of their Division VI State Championship game. However, with the Bulldogs needed a drive to eat time off the clock, they took it to the Flyer defense. And they took it to them in a big way.

Columbus Grove ran the final eight minutes and 13 seconds off the clock as they sealed their first State Championship in football with an exciting 28-26 win over Marion Local in the Division VI title game at Fawcett Stadium in Canton Saturday.

The win allowed the Bulldogs to finish the season with a 15-0 record, while Marion Local ended their season with an 11-4 record.

After scoring their last touchdown, the Bulldogs had the football for a total of eight plays that covered 28 yards. In running off the final eight minutes of the game, Grove ran 18 plays for 59 yards as they drove to the Flyer three yard line before taking a knee, three times, to run out the final seconds.

"I was concerned," Grove coach Jerry Cooper said as he sent his offense out for that final drive. "At the same time, I had a lot of confidence in the kids up front, in Blaine (Maag) carrying the ball and Ben (Stechschulte) executing from the quarterback spot. I told them let's go out and run our very best stuff at them. We didn't do anything out of character. We've been practicing this stuff since the very first day of two-a-days. And obviously that paid off. We executed well enough to take all the time off the clock and not let them get a shot at us."

During that final drive, the Bulldogs faced a pair of fourth down calls and both times executed plays to keep the drive going.

The first crucial play came with Grove facing fourth and three at the Marion Local 29. On fourth down, the flyers appeared to have Maag stopped short of the first down. However, he slipped away from the initial tackle and stretched out just enough for the first down. Later in the drive, Maag took a short pass from Stechschulte to pick up a first down at the Flyer 13.

"On the option, it was open, but the defender stuck with the wide receiver," Maag said. "I hit what I had to hit and thankfully I stayed up and got the first down."

"The pass play was supposed to be a three man route, but we kept one in for a little more protection, a little more time," Stechschulte said. "Blaine just popped out there and the linebacker wasn't watching him. I got it to him and he made a great catch."

"The offensive line knew we could keep the ball and just drive it and we could waste those eight minutes," senior lineman Mike Young said. "We got some big plays. Ben made a nice pass and Blaine made a nice catch for a first down. We just pounded on them. That's what we do."

Marion Local had put the pressure on the Bulldogs after scoring 19 third quarter points.

Columbus Grove led 21-7 after a pair of second quarter touchdowns and a defense that limited the Flyers to very little in the opening 24 minutes. But with halftime came adjustments and new life to the Flyer offense.

Marion Local scored on their first possession of the second half as Cory Luebke found Andy Schulze with a 15 yard scoring strike. The extra point was blocked by Brandon Baxter leaving the score at 21-13.

This drive was kept alive as the Bulldogs were called for roughing the passer after a third down pass fell incomplete.

Grove wasted little time in getting that score back as Maag ripped off a 56 yard scoring run. The drive lasted just two plays with Maag getting both for 70 yards.

For the game, Maag carried the ball 40 times for 287 yards and three scores. The junior's totals were just eight yards shy of the Division VI State Championship game record of 295 yards set by Delphos St. John's Chad Schulte in 1998.

"We just didn't have an answer for him," Marion Local coach Tim Goodwin said. "We couldn't stop him consistently. He carried the ball 40 times. We knew he would get his yardage. We talked all week about the big

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play and when he popped through the line we wanted to hold him to eight or ten yards and not 40 yards."

Despite the quick score by the Bulldogs, the Flyers came right back with a score of their own.

Marion Local went 69 yards in seven plays as Schulze, (five receptions, 54 yards) caught his second touchdown pass of the game, a nine harder from Luebke. Right before the score, Brian Wellman (five catches, 95 yards) caught a 29 yard pass from Luebke to the nine yard line. The extra point attempt was no good.

The Flyer defense then stepped up as they held the Bulldogs to three plays and a punt. Wellman returned the punt to the Grove 46 with 3:31 left in the third quarter.

From there, the Flyers went 46 yards in eight plays as Scott Garman bulled over from a yard out. With the extra point, it was 28-26 with just over a quarter left to play.

"I'm proud of our kids," Goodwin said. "There would have been a lot of teams that folded their tents in the third quarter. These kids didn't quit, they are fighters. The game dictated that we throw the ball. We were behind and were not running the ball with success. Cory Luebke had a great third quarter. Some of those guys weren't open by a whole lot and he drove it right in there."

Luebke was 13 of 21 passing for the game for 188 yards and two scores. He hit five different receivers in the game.

After the Flyers came within two points, the teams traded possessions before the Bulldogs ran out the clock. "A lot of credit goes out to Marion Local and Columbus Grove," Cooper said. "This was a great game. Both teams played with great emotion and great intensity. It ended up being a two point game and there's a reason for that, because there were two real good football teams out there. As efficient as they were on offense, it was critical that when we had the ball, we took as much time off the clock and score as many points as we could."

Despite the two point difference, it appeared early that Columbus Grove might own the Flyers on a windy and chilly morning at Fawcett Stadium.

Columbus Grove received the opening kick and went 80 yards in 11 plays to take a quick 7-0 lead. Maag scored the touchdown as he busted through the left side of the line for a 15 yard scoring run.

It stayed that way until early in the second quarter, when the Flyers changed the momentum. With Grove forced to punt from their own endzone, Garman came flying through the right side of the line, blocked the punt and recovered it in the endzone.

Columbus Grove came right back with drive of their own to retake the lead.

The Bulldogs went up 14-7 as Maag went 40 yards for a score with 3:30 left in the first half The drive covered 71 yards in just 10 plays for the score. Maag carried the ball eight times on the drive.

Columbus Grove then created a break of their own as Baxter forced a fumble that Mike Bowers recovered at the Marion Local 26. From there, the Bulldogs need just one play as Stechschulte hit Taylor Jesko with a 26 yard scoring pass.

On the play, Stechschulte was forced from the pocket and hit Jesko on the run near the sideline. Jesko made the first defender miss, then cut back inside and went into the endzone untouched for a 21-7 lead.

"There was a couple minute stretch when we were up 7-0 and I felt like we were winning the line of scrimmage," Cooper said. "They hadn't mustered much offense, but then we gave them a score. Our kids were able to dig in and score twice in a row, once off a turnover and we had the momentum going into the half."

And despite losing that momentum, the Bulldogs came up big when it counted the most on Saturday.