

MONTGOMERY 4A

Whitman rallies to secure playoff spot

89-yard kickoff return sparks comeback by Vikings

BY JOSH BARR

It was obvious from the celebration exactly what was on the line. Riding running back Kevin Cecala's two second-half touchdowns, Whitman beat host Churchill, 28-24, in a Montgomery 4A West Division game with a playoff berth at stake.

Having earned their way into the postseason, several Vikings rushed onto the field as the final seconds ticked off the clock. A few teammates grabbed a water cooler and doused Coach Jim Kuhn. Finally, near midfield, Whitman's players came together and hoisted Kuhn onto their shoulders.

"No one likes to leave it to other teams to win. Controlling our own destiny was a big thing," Cecala said.

Just ask the Bulldogs. While Whitman (8-2, 6-0) advanced to the Maryland 4A West Region playoffs, Churchill could only watch the scoreboard. And Springbrook's 20-0 victory over Paint Branch eliminated Churchill (7-3, 4-2) from postseason contention.

Churchill started the season with seven consecutive victories, but lost its final three. It was the second consecutive season the Bulldogs lost a home game in the regular season finale with a play-off berth at stake.

For a while, it seemed that Churchill might be the team extending its season. After Matt Cole blocked a punt late in the first half, Bryan Crutchfield's 24-yard field goal gave the Bulldogs a 17-7 lead.

Then came the fist of several big plays. The ensuing kickoff bounced off Rico Djidotor's face mask but he recovered, picked the ball up and scampered 89 yards for a touchdown to make it 17-14.

Cecala's one-yard touchdown run gave Whitman a 21-17 lead in the third quarter. Churchill answered with Alex Kantor's 36-yard touchdown to Brandon Swenson for a 24-21 lead with 39 seconds left in the quarter.

Whitman then moved down the field in 11 plays, including a pair of fourth-down conversions. On fourth and one from the Vikings 44, Cecala ran for five yards.

"I felt like we were blocking pretty well up front and we were going to get a yard," Kuhn said. "I was confident. I never second-guessed myself."

Later, on fourth and four from the 9, quarterback Henry Kuhn, the coach's son, passed to Michael Flack for six yards. Cecala then scored the game-winner on a two-yard run up the middle. Cecala finished with 30 carries for 107 yards.

"That was exciting," he said. "I like having the ball in my hands in crucial situations like that. That's all I can wish for."

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All-around effort: Churchill quarterback-defensive back Alex Kantor threw two touchdown passes, ran for another score and recovered a fumble on defense.

Up next: Whitman (8-2) will host Paint Branch (8-2) in a Maryland 4A West Region semifinal on Friday.