

Unlucky bounces

Avon recovers its five fumbles

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BRUNSWICK — The Highland football team's 36-19 loss to Avon in the Division II, Region 6 final Friday was one of near-misses, all of which were a factor in the outcome.

The Eagles (12-1) advanced to play Walsh Jesuit, a 35-7 winner over rival Archbishop Hoban, in the state semifinals, while the Hornets finished 12-1 and in a familiar spot against a familiar opponent.

Avon put the ball on the ground five times, including twice on one kickoff return, and three came with plenty of Hornets nearby.

The only innocent one came when Eagles quarterback Blake Elder (12-of-16 passing, 123 yards) dropped the ball on his drop back but jumped on it for a loss of 10 yards, forcing a punt.

The rest of the near turnovers all went Avon's way as it beat Highland in a regional final for the third straight year.

On the Eagles' next possession, running back Quintin Smith (23 carries, 175 yards, TD) fumbled forward. Despite several Hornets being in the area, tight end Killian Haessig emerged from the pile with the ball.

"In a tight game like this between

two good teams, it comes down to the turnover battle," said Highland linebacker Jameson Gordon, who had a forced fumble and a half-sack. "We just couldn't get on those fumbles and they did."



Grillis

If we had been able to get on some of those fumbles it could have flipped easily, but that's not always the case."

Avon capped the drive two plays later on a 2-yard touchdown run from Cam Wendell (10 carries, 32 yards) for a 21-6 lead. That drive was also aided by a big roughing-the-passer penalty against the Hornets that turned a potential third-and-8 play into a first down after Elder's pass to Caeden Bennett fell incomplete.

On the opening drive of the second half, Smith again coughed up the ball attempting to push his way across the goal line, but center Jack Fitch recovered in the end zone to give Avon a 29-12 lead.

"It could have cost us the game, but stuff happens like that," said sophomore defensive end Lukas Grillis, who had a half-sack among 1½ tackles for loss. "Next year we are going to get better and train harder. Hopefully one day we can get this."

Casey Myser (10 carries, 105 yards, TD; 1 catch, 44 yards, TD) scored on a spectacular 57-yard run to pull Highland to 29-19 with 11 seconds left in the third quarter, and on the ensuing kickoff the ball was muffed at the 5-yard line.

Gordon forced a fumble on the subsequent return and again the bounce went Avon's way, as the ball was recovered by the Eagles at the 15-yard line after hitting the thigh of a closing Highland player.

"Those were huge," said Highland monster back Kallen Whiting, who had a sack and several other big stops. "It was momentum, it was everything. It would have brought our spirits up, gave our offense an opportunity to keep doing what they had been doing, and it gives our defense another opportunity to get a stop out there. It just doesn't go our way sometimes."

The Hornets forced a punt on the following Avon possession and drove the ball to the Eagles 21-yard line, where two consecutive missed opportunities allowed Avon to all but wrap up the win.

A late procedure flag on a third-and-1 sneak by Grady Gibb (7-of-12 passing, 167 yards; 18 carries, 28 yards) that would have been a first down pushed Highland back to the 26.

Gibb ran for 2 yards on third-and-6, forcing a 41-yard field goal attempt by Jonah Kowza.

Avon defensive lineman Lance Dawson broke through the line and blocked the attempt. The bouncing ball was picked up by linebacker Nathan Peters, who raced 72 yards untouched for a back-breaking touchdown that extended the Avon lead to 36-19 with 6:29 left.

Dawson also blocked a Highland extra point attempt in the first quarter, had three sacks and knocked down a Gibb pass.

"It's a game of inches," Gordon said. "One mistake leads to a way bigger loss than what the game actually looked like. It is unfortunate but you can't change the past."

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