



Highland's Chris Metzger is tackled by Avon's Ahmad Saleh, left, and Jairel Fenton on a second-half kickoff return.

NICK GAMMETT / GAZETTE

Classy, mature players are a program hallmark

Highland quarterback Grady Gibb had a 102-degree temperature a few days ago and still had a blotch on his left arm, courtesy of receiving intravenous fluids.

Gibb's high school football career had just ended Friday night with the top-seeded Hornets' 36-19 Division II, Region 6 final loss to third-seeded and defending state champion Avon.

The 6-foot, 195-pound senior had been hit from the left, the right, the front and the back by the Eagles' relentless defense, but never stopped giving everything he had while getting sacked four times and completing 7-of-12 passes for 167 yards and a touchdown.

Having just finished exchanging tearful hugs with teammates at Brunswick Auto Mart Stadium, Gibb was approached by a media member and asked if he had a minute. After being sacked as many times by Avon as he had been all season, he graciously stepped away from teammates and articulately answered one question, then ad-libbed on an entirely different subject.

"I just wanted to say thanks for all the articles," the first-year starter said. "They meant a lot to me and my family. It's really appreciated."

At least equally and probably more appreciated are the cooperative, thoughtful and humble athletes on the Highland team. Gibb was

one of many, as star running back Casey Myser and linebackers Evan Foust and Kallen Whitting were every bit as cooperative after the Hornets (12-1) lost to Avon (12-1) in a D-II regional championship for the third straight year.

They cherished the friendships they developed, thanked their coaches and credited Avon, which will play Walsh Jesuit next week in the state semifinals.

"They're just a very well-coached team," said Myser, who started in all three playoff losses to the

Eagles and finished his final game with 105 yards rushing on 10 carries and a 44-yard TD catch on a Hail Mary from Gibb to end the first half. "They've got a bunch of dudes. It's just a great program."

Highland, which has a 36-5 record over the last three seasons and a 59-8 mark over the last five — that's 36-2 and 59-5

if you subtract Avon — also has a great program, but even the odd bounces a football can take went the Eagles' way in this game.

Avon fumbled the ball five times and somehow recovered every one of them. One was by an offensive lineman in the end zone for a touchdown. Another was on an Eagles kickoff return after Highland, which never led, had made it a 29-19 game on Myser's 57-yard, tackle-breaking TD jaunt with 11 seconds left in the third period.



RICK NOLAND

See NOLAND, C2

NOLAND

From C1

"We didn't capitalize on the (possible) turnovers," Foust said. "We should have had all five of them and we missed on all of them. They're just a really good football team. I don't know what else there is to say."

"It happens," Whitting added. "We've got to get on that football. I thought we had one of them, but they should all go our way."



Whitting



Foust

Compounding Highland's problems, it had an extra point blocked after making it 7-6 with 4:01 left in the first period. Even worse, the Hornets later not only had a 41-yard field goal attempt blocked, but it was returned 72 yards for a touchdown. Instead of a 29-22 game, it was 36-19 with 6:29 to go, which marked the beginning of the end for a team that had outscored its first 11 opponents

— one game was a forfeit — 515-54, including 396-7 in the first half.

Highland players remained on the field for some time after the postgame awards ceremony, wanting to remain together as long as possible.

"You guys left your stamp on the program," coach Mike Gibbons told his team in its final postgame huddle. "You are family. You will always be family."

Gibbons went on to tell his players how they would one day tell their



NICK GAMMETT / GAZETTE

Avon's Lance Dawson sacks Highland's Grady Gibb on fourth down.

children about these times, as they no doubt will, but when something this emotional comes to an end, it's often difficult for 16-, 17- and 18-year-old kids to understand that.

Not these kids.

"I'm going to remember every minute with these guys," Myser said, "the good, the bad and the in between."

Almost all of it was good, but for Avon it's been even better. The Eagles, who lost in the state final in 2023 before finally winning it all last year, need two more wins to repeat as state champion. Highland, which has reached the state semifinals only in 2013, will continue to try to get back there.

"I really wanted this, but they're a

helluva team," Gibb said. "They deserve it."

"That's just football. Sometimes it goes your way and sometimes it doesn't. It hurts, but I love my guys. There's no better group of guys to go out with."

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