

The Blitz Week 14

THE BEST OF HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL


**AVON 36,
HIGHLAND 19**


NICK CAMMETT / GAZETTE

Highland's Casey Myser catches a 44-yard Hail Mary for a touchdown on the final play of the first half.

Another heartbreaker

First-half deficit, late blocked field goal help end Hornets' season

Albert Grindle
The Gazette

BRUNSWICK — Skill position players understandably receive significant credit, but 6-foot-4, 300-pound Max Hauck and 6-5, 255-pound Lance Dawson were too large to ignore Friday night.

The Avon standout linemen combined to make game-changing plays on offense, defense and special teams in the Division II, Region 6 championship against top-seeded Highland at nearly-sold out Brunswick Auto



Myser



Bendau

Mart Stadium.

The third-seeded Eagles followed a familiar script of a fast start followed by holding off a furious Hor-

nets rally to emerge 36-19 on a rainy night and advanced to play Walsh Jesuit (12-1) at the University of Akron next week.

Hauck moved all around the offensive line to set the tone in a physical first half that saw Avon (12-1) take a 21-6 lead. The Cincinnati-bound Dawson was even more impactful with three sacks, a blocked extra point that forced Highland (12-1) to chase points and the game-sealing dagger when he stuffed a 41-yard Jonah Kowza field goal attempt that

was returned 72 yards for a touchdown by Nathan Peters with 6:29 remaining.

Highland scrapped, clawed and fought after adjusting to Avon's size but ran out of time en route to losing to the Eagles for the third straight year and eighth time in 15 seasons.

"This sucks," first-team All-Ohio running back Casey Myser said. "I watched those boys from Avon raise that (regional championship) trophy three years in a row, so it sucks."

The Hornets were reeling after Cam Wendell's 2-yard touchdown run made the score 21-6 with 49 seconds left in the half. The Highland first-team defense that had allowed one touchdown all season gave up three in its first four drives Friday, as Avon often subbed in Dominic Grasso as a sixth lineman, moved Hauck from left tackle to ineligible tight end and ran the crafty Quionte Smith (23 carries, 175 yards, TD) behind him.

See **HORNETS, C2**



NICK CAMMETT / GAZETTE

Highland's Nick Dobkowski tackles Avon's Trevor Daly for a fourth-down loss.

HORNETS

From C1

Knowing it couldn't afford to run out the clock, Highland used its timeouts and advanced to the 44-yard line with six seconds left. Avon called time to set up its defense for a Hail Mary, but Myser (10 carries, 105 yards, TD) still jumped between two defenders, fell to the turf, felt the ball teetering on his lap and curled his legs to secure a hair-raising touchdown.



Gibb

Miami of Ohio recruit Ryan Stolarski and safety Jerry Clements stuffed Myser on the two-point conversion attempt to critically keep the score at 21-12, but Highland had life.

"It was crazy, man," Myser said. "I didn't even know I caught it until I came down with the ball in my arms."

"That definitely gave us momentum going into halftime. We made some halftime adjustments, but they're a really good team and they made some adjustments, too. Again, they're a great team."

Avon scored on the opening drive of the second half when center Jack Fitch recovered a Smith fumble in the end zone — the Eagles coughed up the ball three times within the Hornets' grasp but recovered each — to complete a 12-play, 76-yard drive that ate 6:24. Highland failed on downs when Dawson strip-sacked Gibb for an 11-yard loss on the next possession.

The Hornets defense finally got a stop when safety Nick Dobkowski flew downfield and tackled backup quarter-

Avon 36, Highland 19

Division II, Region 6 Final at Brunswick

AVON 36 HIGHLAND 19

First 7-14-5-7-36

H — Blake Elder 4 run (Peters kick), 6:51.

H — Grady Gibb 1 run (kick blocked), 4:01.

Second

A — Quante Smith 4 run (Peters kick), 11:18.

A — Cam Wendell 2 run (Peters kick), 9:42.

H — Casey Myser 44 pass from Gibb run failed, 0:00.

Third

A — Jack Fitch offensive fumble recovery (Dylan

Laker pass from Trevor Maly), 5:38.

H — Myser 57 run (Kowza kick), 0:11.

Fourth

A — Nathan Peters 77 blocked field goal return

(Peters kick), 6:29.

First downs

Running

Passing

Penalties

Fumbles

RUSHING: Avon — Smith 23-175, Wendell

10-32, Maly 2-7, Michael Colburn 1-4, Elder 8-1

8; Highland — Myser 10-105, Gibb 18-28, Lucas

Gerding 2-5.

PASSING: Avon — Grant Barr 3-65, Fin

Jackson 4-28, Jerry Clements 1-17, Smith 1-11,

Wendell 2-2, Gidon Clapham 1-7, Highland —

Gerding 9-85, Myser 1-44, Nick Dobkowski 1-38,

MISSED FIELD GOAL: Highland — Kowza

41 (BLK).

back Trevor Maly for a 1-yard loss on

fourth-and-3 from the Highland 37.

Just two plays later, Myser took what

was supposed to be a counter to the

right, saw the defense squeezed hard

to that side and instead sprinted up the

middle for a 57-yard TD. Right guard

Cody Bendau pancaked his man and

right tackle Thomas Fearn made a

heady play to seal the impromptu hole,

and Myser stiff-armed a defender at the

40 to break free.

Now down 29-19, Highland nearly

recovered a Jameson Gordon forced

fumble on the ensuing kickoff — the

ball bounced off the thigh of a closing

Hornets player before the Eagles recovered

on their 15 — and again got a huge

stop when Avon quarterback Blake

Elder (12-of-16, 123 yards) overshoot top

receiver Grant Barr (3 catches, 65 yards)

on third down.

The Eagles punted to the Highland

8-yard line, but Grady Gibb (7-of-12,

167 yards; 18 carries, 28 yards) found

Nick Dobkowski for a 38-yard gain on the first play, the running game came to life and Highland was in a favorable situation facing third-and-1 from the Avon 21.

Disaster then struck.

The Hornets were called for a false

start on a QB sneak attempt. Gibb was

forced to scramble for a 2-yard gain

after Caden Clapham pressured the

backside on a corner blitz, and Highland

elected to a try a 41-yard Kowza

field goal that would have cut the deficit

to one possession.

Dawson had other plans, getting

great penetration off the left side to

block the attempt. Peters, who lined up

to Dawson's right, then alertly scooped

the ball on the run and nimbled 72

yards to the end zone untouched for a

stunning 10-point turnaround.

Instead of trailing 29-22 with multiple

timeouts, the Hornets were all but

finished down 36-19.

"Obviously, the field goal block was a

knockout blow," Highland coach Mike

Gibbons said.

Highland knew it had to avoid a poor

start after falling behind 21-7 in a 28-14

loss in 2023 and 21-0 in a 28-20 defeat

last season. Unfortunately for the Hornets,

a three-and-out and an eight-play,

75-yard Avon drive capped by an Elder

4-yard TD scramble on fourth-and-

goal was exactly what they didn't want

to happen.

While the Hornets responded with

27- and 25-yard catches by Lucas Gerd-

ing (4 catches, 85 yards) that set up a

1-yard TD sneak by Gibb, they never

ried after Dawson blew through the

middle to block the extra point.

Avon then converted third-and-4

and picked up another first down when

Highland jumped offenses on third-

and-1 to eventually go ahead 14-6 on a

4-yard run by Smith.

The Hornets offense, which strug-

gled to protect Gibb all night, went

three-and-out again. Further estab-

lishing the line of scrimmage with the

six-man line that usually saw Hauck

at tight end, Avon avoided a potential

game-changer when tight end Killian

Kaessing barely beat Dobkowski to a

Smith fumble on the Highland 13

before Wendell scored two plays later

to make it 21-6.

"That offensive line, we knew coming

into this game that they're so discipli-

ned and they're very well-coached,"

said Highland right guard/defensive

tackle Cody Bendau, who along with

tackle Josh Messina played both ways.

"They're people-movers, man. I'm

sitting in my gap and they were moving

me, but I didn't quit. I'm proud of

myself for that, and I'm glad I finished

my career with no regrets. That's all I

can talk about. I emptied the tank. I'm

so blessed to be able to play this great

sport."

Tears slowly but surely turned to

proud smiles after Highland broke the

postgame huddle. The Hornets are 59-8

over the last five seasons — included

are three losses to Avon and two to

Toledo Central Catholic, which went on

to win the 2022 state championship —

so there was nothing to be ashamed of.

Highland had too much respect

for Avon to ponder the what-ifs and

instead reflected on giving everything

it had.

"It sucks we didn't accomplish our

goals, but I'm so damn proud of this

team," Bendau said. "We overcame so

much. ... We came out here, we battled

and we battled until the last second.

When we were on the field, we were

just thinking 'How bad do you want it?'

How do you want your last play to feel

the rest of your life?"

"We let that resonate, and I just

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