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OHSAA football playoffs | Highland goes down fighting after big early deficit vs. Avon



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ELYRIA — Real men don't cry? Tell that to Highland football coach Mike Gibbons.

Gibbons had to fight through tears Friday, not because of his team's 28-20 regional final loss, but because "I won't get to see you guys at practice Monday."

"No one sees the hard work these kids put in day in and day out," Gibbons said. "It's not lip service. That's what they left to our program."

Highland's season ended Friday for the second consecutive year in the Division II, Region 6 final at the hands of Avon at Ely Stadium in Elyria.

Down by 21 points early, the Hornets (13-1) fought back to make it a one-score game, but couldn't overcome the Eagles' big lead. The loss was Highland's sixth straight to Avon.

Avon (14-0) faces Hoban in a state semifinal on Nov. 29 at a site to be determined.

Friday's game started in nightmarish fashion for the Hornets when a long touchdown run by Avon quarterback Nolan Good was followed by a muffed kickoff, which the Eagles recovered and turned into a 14-0 lead.

After a 58-yard TD run by Avon's Matt Maxey on the first play of the second quarter, Highland faced a 21-0 deficit.

"We couldn't have started any worse," Gibbons said. "We gave ourselves a shot. You can't put yourself in a hole like that against a good team."

Highland's record-breaking running back nearly brought the Hornets back. Junior Casey Myser finished with 113 yards and three touchdowns, including a 3-yard TD plunge to pull Highland within a score in the fourth quarter, though the extra point was blocked.

"We always fight. That's just our team," Myser said. "We have a bunch of dudes that want it."

Myser finished the season with school records in total TDs (46) and rushing yards (2,137).

"This has been a great season," he said. "I can't take all the credit. The line did a great job all year and the coaches put me in a great place to get all those touchdowns."

Myser said he would give the accolades back in exchange for a win for Highland's seniors.

"They were great leaders, every single one them," Myser said. "They just did so much for us underclassmen and I want to make sure I follow their lead. They're my brothers."

"It's amazing. The kid is just a phenomenal player," Gibbons said. "I couldn't be prouder of him and the rest of the guys. He's going to be a senior next year and he's going to continue to great things for Highland."

Highland will lose its entire offensive and defensive lines to graduation, along with quarterback Dylan Borla.

Despite heavy wind rain at Elyria, Borla finished 15-of-29 passing for 179 yards and one interception.