

# The Blitz Week 14

THE BEST OF HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL



# Guts, but no glory

## Hornets nearly rally from 21-0 deficit against powerhouse Eagles

Albert Grindle  
The Gazette

ELYRIA — The what-ifs could last for years.

What if the Highland football team didn't fall behind Avon by double-digits for the second straight season in the Division II, Region 6 final?

What if the Hornets didn't give up a long score on the first play from scrimmage and fumble away the ensuing kickoff?

What if one of two first-half drives didn't fall short on downs just outside the red zone?

What if Highland recovered two Eagles fumbles on kickoff returns when the outcome was in doubt?

The legacy of this season's Hornets will no doubt be professionalism and a never-die attitude after nearly rallying from a three-score deficit against the premier D-II public school in Northeast Ohio at Ely Stadium on Friday. The fact they had the ball with a chance to tie in the fourth quarter cemented both, but a 28-20 loss wasn't any easier to swallow.

Top-seeded Avon (14-0), which showed a tremendous amount of respect afterward, advanced to play Archbishop Hoban (12-2) in a state semifinal after beating the second-seeded Hornets (13-1) for the seventh time in eight playoff meetings. One week after continuing its post-season dominance of Whitehouse Anthony Wayne, Highland fell shy of reaching the daunting summit the Eagles represent.

"It's unreal. You never thought it would end," senior quarterback Dylan Borla said. "I've played this sport my whole life — since second grade — and I can't believe it's over."

See **HORNETS**, E2



Borla



McKeen



Myser



Gordon



AARON JOSEFCZYK / GAZETTE

Highland seniors Garrett Phillips, Carson Noonan and Dylan Borla, left to right, receive the Division II, Region 6 runner-up trophy from Elyria athletic director Heather Beck.

## There is no shame in losing to a great foe

Getting to the state semifinals in football is extremely hard, even with seven divisions and especially in the bigger ones, so there's absolutely no shame in coming excruciatingly close for two straight years.

That's the situation the highly successful Highland football program finds itself in this morning after losing to even more successful Avon in a regional championship game for the



RICK NOLAND

second year in a row. This time, in a battle of classy 13-0

public school teams that are perfect examples of what high school sports should be all about, the top-seeded Eagles defeated the second-seeded Hornets 28-20 in a Division II, Region 6 championship game on a cold, rainy and windy Friday night at Elyria Charities Field at Ely Stadium.

A year ago, Avon, which next week will make its seventh state semifinal appearance in eight years, downed

Highland 28-14 in the regional final. Both years, the Eagles jumped to 14-0 leads, with that advantage obtained Friday before the Hornets had run a play from scrimmage.

To their credit, the Hornets cut their deficit to 21-14 and 28-20, but the Eagles, as big and strong as Highland but a bit faster and with a few more game-breakers, held on.

See **NOLAND**, E2





AARON JOSEFCZYK / GAZETTE

Highland running back Casey Myser scores a touchdown during the second quarter. Below, the Hornets' Nick Dobkowski makes a catch in front of the Eagles' Gabe Miller.

### Avon 28, Highland 20

HIGHLAND Division II, Region 6 Final at Elyria  
 HIGHLAND 0 7 7 6 — 20  
 AVON 14 7 0 7 — 28

**First**  
 A — Nolan Good 65 run (Owen Warrick kick), 11:38.  
 A — Tyler Kaufmann 2 run (Warrick kick), 8:18.  
**Second**  
 A — Matt Maxey 58 run (Warrick kick), 11:50.  
 H — Casey Myser 2 run (Jonah Kovza kick), 3:42.  
**Third**  
 H — Myser 18 run (Kovza kick), 6:11.  
**Fourth**  
 A — Good 4 run (Warrick kick), 11:23.  
 H — Myser 3 run (kick blocked), 5:54.

	H	A
First downs	17	14
Rushing	35/150	37/222
Rushing average	4.3	8.7
Passing	15/24	4/8
Passing yards	187	44
Total offense	59/257	45/266
Punting	0/0.0	2/36.0
Penalties	2/25	4/25
Fumbles	1/1	2/0

**RUSHING:** Highland — Myser 24-106, Lucas Gerding 3-25, Dylan Borla 8-18, Avon — Good 13-100, Maxey 4-93, Kaufmann 12-89, Quante Smith 5-25, Cole Kepner 1-2, Grant Barr 1-0, Team 1-4-7.

**PASSING:** Highland — Borla 15-24-187-1, Avon — Good 4-8-4-0.

**RECEIVING:** Highland — Myser 5-56, Nick Dobkowski 4-49, Evan Foust 2-40, Kyle Williams 1-26, Luke Berkmyer 1-14, Lucas Gerding 3-2, Avon — Kepner 1-19, Smith 1-11, Ty Beerbohm 1-8, Maxey 1-6.

## HORNETS

From E1

"Man, I'm shocked," senior tight end/defensive end Caleb McKeen added. "We came out here expecting to win, and now it's starting to hit me: All of the things I'm going to miss about these boys and this whole game."

While the Hornets slightly outplayed Avon over the final 2½ quarters, their odds of victory went from just under 50/50 to slim in the opening minutes.

After nearly recovering a fumble forced by Jameson Gordon on the opening kickoff, Highland's defense was caught off-guard when slot receiver Maxey lined up behind center and handed off to star quarterback Nolan Good, who took a right-side sweep 65 yards for a TD. The Eagles pulled the right tackle and guard back left, moving the keying linebackers away from the direction Good was heading.

A howling 25-mph wind that wrecked havoc on kickoffs all night then made its presence known. A pooch kick by Avon's Owen Warrick began to spin back rapidly toward the Eagles, and a Highland returner who smartly called for a fair catch couldn't make the grab and the Eagles recovered on the Highland 39.

Tyler Kaufmann scored from 3 yards 3:17 later to make it 14-0, the Hornets failed on fourth down from the Avon 36- and 27-yard lines on their next two possessions and Maxey (4 carries, 93 yards) went 58 yards to the house on the same play concept that Good did to push the score to 21-0 with 11:50 to go in the half.

"It didn't bother us," Borla said. "Although we didn't have the best start, we were going to get back at them. It didn't stop us from doing anything we were going to do."

The Hornets, who were outgained only 366-337 overall, understood the assignment. They needed a score, a stop and another score on the opening possession of the second half.

They got all three to make the Eagles sweat on a rainy, 45-degree night.

Casey Myser (24 carries, 106 yards, 3 TDs; 5 catches, 56 yards) put Highland on the board from 2 yards to cap a 16-play, 69-yard drive that took 8:09 off the second-quarter clock.



The Eagles recovered their fumble on the ensuing kickoff — the ball somehow bounced 5 feet into the air and directly into the arms of Grant Barr after initially hitting the hands of the returner and then the ground — and ran out the remaining time, but the Hornets covered 75 plays in 10 plays and 5:49 to close to 21-14 midway through the third quarter on an 18-yard Myser run behind key blocks from left tackle Carson Noonan and wide receiver Nick Dobkowski.

As it has done time and again under long-time coach Mike Elder, Avon responded. Good floated a perfect 19-yard floater into the wind to Cole Kepner on a corner route to convert third-and-7 near midfield, then finished the 6:48 drive from 4 yards to put the Eagles ahead 28-14 with 11:23 on the clock.

Highland still wasn't done. While Avon focused heavily on slowing Myser — the Eagles led a great job taking away Myser's most effective play, outside zone — blitzed frequently and smartly made the Hornets play into the wind for the fourth quarter, Borla nearly pulled off a miracle.

The senior had converted third-and-13 to Kyle Williams on the previous drive, and this time found Luke Berkmyer for 14 yards on fourth-and-5 and Myser, who made a high-light-reel, over-the-shoulder grab, for 21 yards on fourth-and-12. Borla lifted another pass to H-back Evan Foust for a 21-yard gain, setting up Myser's 46th TD of the season with 5:54 left.

Avon's Jakob Weatherspoon blocked the extra point, but the Eagles were forced to punt on the Highland 41 with 3:50 left. The Hornets had their chance to tie against all odds with the ball on their 25.

"We kept our heads up," Borla said. "We didn't let it bother us, and going out on that final drive, we had full confidence that we

were going to do something."

Highland almost did, too.

Borla opened with a 7-yard crossing route to Dobkowski before flipping a 16-yard screen to Myser that moved the ball to the Avon 48. Unfortunately for the Hornets, they were called for a 15-yard facemask penalty on the next play, which was initially a 5-yard gain on a power read handoff to Lucas Gerding.

Borla did all he could, extending his completion streak to six to bring up third-and-12. A crossing route to Gerding was thrown slightly high and behind, and a fade to Dobkowski was intercepted by Weatherspoon with 2:10 left on a play in which Avon's coverage of all five receivers was perfect.

Highland again miraculously had one last chance to regain possession shortly after Good scampered 46 yards on first-and-20. On the next play after the Hornets called their final timeout, Gordon poked the ball away from Kaufmann while being blocked on third down and the ball bounced off two diving Hornets before Eagles tight end Tyler Beerbohm recovered on the Highland 27.

Good took a knee on the next snap to end the game.

It was the final what-if of the night — even if there were only approximately 40 seconds on the clock — but Highland instead looked at the big picture afterward. The Hornets are closing the gap on Northeast Ohio's D-II elite and will return a ton of skill-position talent in 2025.

"I want us to be remembered for our work ethic and not being scared of any opponent," McKeen said. "We were going out there knowing we have each other and every person on that field is 11 as one."

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