

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 for two 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 Charles 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.

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NOLAND

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"We came into this game with confidence," Hornets senior center/defensive tackle Ryan Zywiec said. "In my opinion, this is the best team to ever come through Highland. We have stars everywhere and we left a legacy."

"Hopefully, we'll be back next year. I wish all the luck to the juniors and sophomores. They're going to fill the shoes real quick."

Discussions about best teams ever are great topics for debate, but the 2024 Hornets are definitely in the mix at Highland.

The only Highland team to reach the state semifinals was the 2013 Hornets, who featured quarterback Bruce Kinsey and guard/defensive tackle Myles Houska.

That team, which was led by current St. Edward coach Tom Lombardo, who is the brother-in-law of current Highland coach Mike Gibbons, lost 41-13 in the D-II state semifinals to state runner-up Glenview, whose roster included future Ohio State All-American and first-round NFL Draft pick Marshon Lattimore, who made his money as a cornerback but had four receiving touchdowns against the Hornets.

Despite deep playoff runs by the Hornets and Medina in recent years, only two other Medina County teams have reached the state semifinals: Brunswick in 1995 and 2007.

The 1995 team, coached by Tom Fasko and led by quarterback Darian Miskewycz and running back Les Brock, fell 49-7 to Colerain in the D-I semifinals. Colerain, however, was disqualified the Monday after the game for using a fifth-year senior and the Blue Devils got the opportunity to play four-time reigning champion St. Ignatius for the state championship.

The Wildcats were ranked No. 1 in the state and No. 2 in the nation, but the Blue Devils, given a unique second chance, had a 15-6 lead in the second quarter and were still up 15-13 at halftime. St. Ignatius, whose roster included future NFL defensive lineman Chris Hovan and John Favret and at least 15 other players who went on to play D-I college football, took over from there and won 41-21.

In 2007, a Brunswick team led by coach Rich Nowak and quarterback Sean Bedevelsky fell 39-14 to state runner-up Mentor, which was led by Mr. Football Bart Tanski at QB, in the D-I semis.

The Hornets fell just short of reaching the final four Friday but exited the postseason with their heads held high, as they should have.

"It's sad, but it's definitely motivating for the underclassmen to get better and be here again next year," senior guard/defensive end and Miami (Ohio) recruit Carson Noonan said. "I've got all respect for Avon. They're a great team, and they have a great program."

For all their success, the Eagles are a perfect example that it is even harder to win a state title than it is to reach the final four, dynasties like small-school powers Kirtland and Marion Local excluded. Avon has reached the semifinals on eight prior occasions but has not won a state title. Only in 2011 did it reach the title game.

In recent years, Avon's albatross has been Archbishop Hoban, which it will meet again next week in the state semis. This very well could be the year the Eagles get past the Knights, but even if they lose, it won't lessen the program they've built.

The same is true of Whitehouse Anthony Wayne, which has lost to Highland in the playoffs in four of the last eight years, and the Hornets, who have lost to Avon seven times in eight postseason meetings since 2011.

The point is this: Just as Avon works every day and will eventually get past Hoban and then maybe win a state championship, Highland will eventually get past Avon.

When those things happen, they will be a just reward for two programs who do things the right way.

"Eleven is one," the 6-foot-3, 270-pound Noonan said. "Everyone has to do their job 100%. A bunch of us made mistakes. I made mistakes, and they will be. We have one of the closest bonds and a great brotherhood. I'm proud of everyone."

Zywiec, who talked at length about his teammates, would have it no other way.

"I'm just overwhelmed," the 6-3, 260-pounder said. "I've been playing with these guys from my first day of flag football until now. (Noonan) and I have been side by side since youth football. I may never see some of these guys again, but I love them to death and always will love them. Our motto is family, and this is the closest to family you will ever get."

"There's no recruiting going on here," he added. "It's all started at the youth level. (Quarterback) Dylan Bortis's dad (Brian) has been my coach every year — every year! — from kindergarten all the way up to here. He's still my coach up in the stands."

Not as verbose as Browns quarterback Jameis Winston but never at a loss for words, Zywiec then spoke about the pursuit of a goal, which can be every bit as important as actually reaching it.

"It's all about the offseason, how hard you train," he said. "We trained like, whew, we were about to die every day. You have to train with a champion's mindset."

"We had a list going into this year. It was (beat) Hudson, Aurora and Avon. We got two off the list. It wasn't fully successful, but it was still a helluva season."

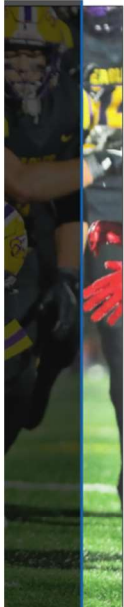
That it was, because there's absolutely no shame in setting lofty goals and falling just short, provided you continue to put everything you have into trying to reach them in the future, which Highland no doubt will continue to do.



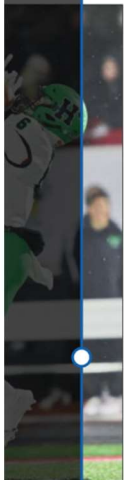
Noonan



Zywiec



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