

Mustangs Get to Finalize Their Football Season



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By Gregg McMullin

The Mira Costa High School football team has been on a mission ever since its 14-0 loss to Quartz Hills in the 2008 CIF Southern Section Western Division finals. The Mustangs have done what had to be done to prepare for this season by investing an incredible amount of time in the weight room, watching films and preparing for each opponent. Their investment has returned high dividends now that they will return to the finals with their 51-27 win over fourth-seeded Palmdale.

Though the final score may have looked like a blowout, it was anything but that when the two teams clashed in the first half. Palmdale certainly didn't have the physical size of the Mustangs, but did have the athletes to stay in the game.

Once again, one of the South Bay's most versatile players played a big part of Mira Costa's success on both sides of the ball. Kyle Nunn came up with two key interceptions and scored on a 50-yard pass play to lead the Mustangs. Nunn has six interceptions in the playoffs thus far and scored his 14th receiving touchdown of the year. "Kyle has a knack for being at the right place at the right time and he's a big game player," said Mustang coach Don Morrow.

The Mustangs opened the scoring in the first quarter when Nunn intercepted Palmdale's Joshua Shaw. That interception set up a Morgan Reece four-yard touchdown run to give the Mustangs a 7-0 lead.

The Mustangs increased their lead early in the second quarter. On third and 10 from the Palmdale 14 yard line, Mustang quarterback Kyle Demarco was scrambling for his life when he found Rico Wright open in the end

zone for a touchdown. What made the play so exciting was the fact that Demarco was nearly sacked in the backfield and just got the ball away before the defense got to him.

Trailing 14-0, Palmdale answered with a nine-play drive of its own. Shaw scrambled his way 41 yards to the Mustang four yard line. Three plays later, Shaw scored on a two-yard quarterback keeper to pull the Falcons within 14-6.

Shaw, who will continue his football at the University of Florida next year, had a rough night against the Mustangs, throwing three interceptions. But he did complete 15 of 26 passes for 249 yards and tossed three touchdown passes. He ran the option as well and rushed for another 87 yards on 13 carries. "He's a real talent, but everyone on the line did their job," said Mustang lineman JR Tavai.

Tavai, along with Andrew Brenner and Jake Jelmini, hounded Shaw all night long and it was something the 6'2' senior probably hadn't experienced much this year. The Mustangs' defense beat Palmdale off the line time and time again and was in the backfield chasing the Falcons quarterback. "We were a little more physical than I think they're used to and that's the way we try to be each game," said Tavai.

After Palmdale's next drive fizzled out at the Mustang 39 yard line when Tavai came up with his sixth sack of the year on fourth down, Mira Costa wasted no time scoring again. Tavai caught just his eighth pass of the year, an 11-yard reception. On the next play, Demarco found Nunn wide open near the Falcon's 20 yard line and Nunn coasted in for a 50-yard touchdown pass play.

On the ensuing kickoff, Palmdale's Shaw

nearly ran the ball back for a touchdown, but was caught at the Mustang 41 yard line by Colin Krasnoff near the Falcons' sideline. Once again, the Mustang defense held strong and forced Palmdale to turn the ball back over to the Mustangs on downs. With time running out in the first half, Rico Wright gained 34 yards on a draw play to the Falcon 28 yard line. From there, Alex Noroceca drilled a 45-yard field goal as time expired in the second quarter to give the Mustangs a 23-6 lead.

With Palmdale's explosive offense, Morrow wasn't going to allow any type of let-up against the Falcons. The Mustangs continued their assault by utilizing their running game that more than complemented their passing game. Morgan Reece, who rushed for 155 yards and scored two touchdowns, punished the Falcon's defense while Rico Wright added another 98 yards on just nine carries.

If the offense set the tone and the pace of the game, it was the defense that controlled the Mustangs' destiny. The defense punished running back Corey Washington and held him to well under his average of 7.3 yards per carry. "Give the credit to their defense; they were quick to the ball and they're a physical bunch," said a Palmdale coach.

In the third quarter, though, Palmdale scored on back-to-back possessions on pass plays of 19 and 14 yards from Shaw to Vincent Neilson to cut the Mustang lead to 23-20. With a big lead diminishing, the game eerily reminded some of the early season loss to Esperanza when the Mustangs held a big lead only to see the game slip away as time expired.

The Mustangs' offense then took control by scoring three consecutive times. Reece galloped in from seven yards out to make it 30-20. With Palmdale's offense surging, Nunn made his second interception of the night on the first play of the fourth quarter. Demarco later found an opening to run and scurried his way into the end zone from 14 yards away.

The interception and subsequent touchdown gave the Mustangs all the more momentum as the fourth quarter time kept winding down. Palmdale did get into the end zone one final time, but the Mustangs answered with a long 80-yard drive. Demarco scrambled his way 19 yards into the end zone for his 16th rushing touchdown of the year.

The win propels the number one-ranked Mustangs (11-2) into the CIF Southern Section Western Division finals at third-seeded Alemany (10-3). For Mira Costa, it will be its eighth appearance in a final and the Mustangs will be looking for their third ring. "This is fun and the players deserve it--they've worked their tails off this year,"

said Morrow. The Mustangs' defense will once again need to stop a team that leans on a rushing game. Malcolm Marable leads the Warriors ground game with 15 touchdowns while Vernon Adams has passed for over 2,000 yards this year.

Mira Costa's defense has met the challenge week after week, giving up an average of just 261 yards of total offense and 17 points per game.

In fact, the Mustangs have been so good to start their games on defense that they've given up just six points in the first quarter all year long.

The Mustangs' offense on the other hand has really been on a tear as of late, averaging 46 points per game in their last six games. It all starts with the quarterback Demarco, who has passed for 17 touchdowns and rushed for another 16 on the year. Reece and Wright are the two-headed monster who share the rushing load, having combined to account for nearly 1,600 yards and 15 touchdowns.

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