

# Team of destiny Grand Island proves its playoff mettle



Grand Island Ben Moskala rushes for a touchdown against Kenmore West during Saturday's Section VI Class A quarterfinal. (James P. McCoy/Buffalo News)

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Published October 26, 2019

Perhaps Saturday's victory will silence any people who felt Grand Island backed its way into the Section VI football playoffs. One thing the Vikings' 35-29 comeback win over host Kenmore West at Crosby Field will do – it will continue fueling talk that the Vikings are a team of destiny.

Of course, this corner began the “it’s meant to be” chatter last week based on how Grand Island qualified for the postseason.

The Vikings' only avenue into the tournament was beating Amherst by at least 17 points and have that coupled with a Williamsville South loss. All of it fell into place with South losing and GI scoring 15 points over a 24-second stretch in the final 1 minute, 8 seconds to secure the No. 3 seed out of the Class A-2 division.

They got in and they have plenty of reason to be beaming with pride. They're one of four teams still alive who can win the championship. They earned a semifinal spot by rallying on the road to beat a good team in Ken West with a stud quarterback in Zac Boyes.

Boyes, a senior, almost willed the Blue Devils into the semifinals for the first time since 2015 by amassing 289 yards passing and a touchdown and rushing for 105 yards and three scores. For the second time this season, he followed a Ken West loss with a big-time performance befitting a team leader.

It wasn't enough because of GI's ground-and-pound attack led by Blake Bielec, Jack Dlugokinski and Ben Moskala; and because of the defensive unit's ability to slow down West during the final 24 minutes.

Bielec, Dlugokinski and Moskala combined for 317 yards rushing with Moskala ending the Devils' final possession with an interception near the goal line. Moskala rushed for 146 yards and three TDs. Bielec scored what proved to be the game-winning TD.

"Watch this game. It proves that we deserve to be here, that we can compete with the best of them," said Dlugokinski, who rushed for 119 yards and caught a 6-yard touchdown he set up with a 62-yard kick return late in the first half to spark the latest comeback.

"Last week we needed that 17-point win to get in," he said. "(But) we work hard to do what we've got to do no matter what. ... Even when it's not looking good for us, our team is a bunch of hard workers. We all love each other. We stay determined. We have faith in our coaches. Our coaches have faith in us. We do whatever it takes to get it done no matter how hard it is."

Team of destiny.

Grand Island never led until late in the third quarter, trailing 29-20 with 2:01 left in the second quarter.

For a team that scored 15 points in 24 seconds under must-do circumstances, piece of cake.

Dlugokinski started the comeback by returning a kick 62 yards to give the Vikings a chance for points before halftime with a drive start at Ken West's 18. A razzle-dazzle play with Bielec launching a halfback-option pass into the end zone to Dlugokinski 87 seconds later pulled GI within 29-27.

"I knew we needed a spark to get us down the field, to get us back in this game," Dlugokinski said. "The blockers did their job. I saw a seam and went up in there."

GI limited Ken West to 42 yards and two first downs in the second half. The Vikings surged ahead with 3 minutes left in the third on a play anyone within ear shot of Ken West's sidelines knew was coming – a quick hitter to the fullback Bielec. It didn't matter as he scored from the 2.

"That's been our formula for winning all year," Dlugokinski said. "No matter which one of us gets the ball the offensive line blocks hard and we know we're going to get positive yardage."

Ken West had a couple chances to spark a rally of its own – including one with under 5 minutes left. Three straight completions had the Devils from their own territory at GI's 25. Mistakes prevented them from finishing the job as three straight incompletions (two dropped passes that would've extended the possession) preceded Moskala's game-clinching pick with 3 minutes left.

GI will face the team it lost to on opening night in South Park in a Class A semifinal at All High Stadium on Friday.

There's no shedding the team of destiny label, but the Vikings proved to the handful of folks who doubted them that they're one of the top teams in their classification -- a playoff team.

"I'm real proud of our guys," GI coach Dean Santorio said. "They earned the win and deserved it. The bottom line is our kids know what we can do."