

Bixby Battles Past Union, Facing BA in Semifinals

By Ron Holt

It was a case of two steps forward and one step backward early in Bixby's Class 6A-I state quarterfinal battle with visiting Tulsa Union last Friday night.

The top-ranked and unbeaten Spartans overcame drive-altering penalties with their usual full-speed ahead approach in rolling past the tradition-rich RedHawks, 57-14, in front of a large Lee Snider Field crowd, earning a berth in next week's state semifinals in the process.

Bixby (11-0) challenges No. 4 Broken Arrow (9-2) in a state semifinal game, starting at 1 p.m. Friday (Nov. 28) at Catoosa High's stadium. In the other semifinal game at Catoosa, No. 2 Jenks (10-1) meets No. 3 Owasso (9-2) at 7 p.m. Friday.

Bixby set the tempo early, scoring 28 first quarter points but the Spartans had to keep regaining real estate after a series of penalties set them back on numerous early drives. In the first quarter, Bixby was flagged five times for 40 yards and were penalized four times for 35 yards in the second quarter. That's nine penalties for 75 yards in the first half – four holding penalties, two blocks in the back on special teams and three false starts.

To their credit, the Spartans remain focused and overcame the pesky penalty setbacks with solid production on both sides of the ball.

"We had a ton of penalties, which is frustrating, but I felt like we did a good job overcoming them. We had a couple on special teams which hurt as far as field position goes but I thought the guys played hard and played fast," Spartan head coach Loren Montgomery said afterward.

"It's neat playing someone we haven't played in a while and it's Union ... they've got tradition and history. I think our kids were excited to play."

Bixby, which finished with 452 yards of total offense, had a holding penalty on the opening kickoff return, starting the first possession at its own 17-yard line. The Spartans quickly drove to the 50-yard line before a holding penalty set them back to their own 40.

On the next play, senior quarterback Carson Kirby fired a pass to senior Nate Gonzales, who turned on the speed to outrun the defense for a 60-yard touchdown at the 10:50 mark of the first quarter. After a false start on the two-point conversion try, Bixby opted for an extra point kick by Bradley Thao for the 7-0 lead.

The Spartan defense set up the next score as Gonzales intercepted an overthrown pass by Union's junior quarterback Dylan Taylor and returned it to the Union 38-yard line.

Steady senior standout running back Jayson Moll burst 32 yards to the Union six-yard line before scoring from two yards out two plays later. The two-point conversion run failed as BHS led 13-0 with 9:08 left in the first quarter.

A block in the back penalty on a Union punt resulted in the Spartans' third possession starting at their own 35-yard line. On the third play, Kirby rolled to his right before firing back across the field to senior Gabe Blankenship, who was alone on the sideline while coasting into the end zone for a 46-yard TD with 5:22 left in the opening frame.

Bixby converted on a conversion pass play, but a procedure penalty nullified the play. Thao kicked the extra point for a 20-0 lead.

On Union's next possession, Bixby senior defensive back Emory Snyder intercepted Taylor and returned the theft 31 yards to the UHS six-yard line. It was Snyder's first interception of the season.

Two plays later, Moll scored on a one-yard run and Braeden Presley threw to Noah Engles for the two-point conversion and 28-0 lead with 3:10 left in the first quarter.

“We definitely prepared well, we knew they had the same staff that was at Owasso last year and they ran a lot of the same things,” said Snyder, who ended with two receptions for 30 yards, seven total tackles, five solos, to go along with the pass interception.

“I thought we responded well to the adversity. When we’d get a penalty on the first play of the drive, we were able to get the extra yards we needed to kick start the drive. We haven’t played Union in a while ... it was definitely cool to play this game.

“It was definitely a building block and now we’re looking forward to BA, added Snyder, who has 18 pass receptions for 323 yards and three TDs while also recording 49 total tackles this season.

Union (5-6) got on the scoreboard after a lengthy early second quarter drive, featuring a 35-yard scamper by LJ McGhee, and ending in a one-yard sneak by backup quarterback Skyler Moorman. Gavin Litchfield kicked the extra point making it a 28-7 game with 10:44 showing. Bixby’s defense dominated during Union’s next possession as senior Dawson Madden had a tackle for no gain, Hector Garcia sacked Taylor for an eight-yard loss and Nathan Hobbs smacked down Moorman forcing a punt from Union’s 14-yard line.

Senior Vincent Incremona blocked the punt by Stone Turner. The ball went out of the end zone for a Spartan safety and 30-7 lead with 2:08 left until halftime.

The Spartans weren’t finished. Bixby went on a nine-play, 66-yard drive to increase its lead to 37-7 at halftime after Kirby connected with senior Cord Nolan for a 24-yard TD and Thao kicked the extra point with 40 seconds left.

Bixby started another scoring drive at the 8:33 mark of the third quarter, featuring an eight-yard run by Moll, a 12-yard pass from Kirby to Tyler Wright and a 15-yard first down reception by Snyder, who broke two tackles on the play.

Moll ended the drive when he erupted for a 23-yard TD run and Thao kicked the conversion for a 44-7 Spartan lead.

Bixby ended its scoring with 3:37 left in the third quarter as Kirby connected with Gonzales for a 42-yard touchdown. Thao’s conversion made it a 51-7 game.

“On offense I’ve had a game like that before but not on defense,” said Gonzales, who ended his final game on Lee Snider Field with four receptions for 90 yards and two touchdowns and five total tackles and two pass interceptions on defense.

“I felt like we played great as a team, but we had too many mistakes. There wasn’t enough discipline ... I know I messed up on my part. After I scored (second TD), I had a little celebration and got a flag.

“But I felt like we played well together. Our offense and defense are on the same page and we communicate well. Union, we haven’t played them in a while, I think I was in the eighth grade the last time ... I was excited all week for the game,” added Gonzales, who has a team-leading 31 receptions for 498 yards and nine TDs this season along with 22 total tackles and three interceptions.

Bixby’s starters exited the game after the final TD and the remainder of the game was played with a running clock. Against Spartan reserves Union added its final score as Turner hauled in a 54-yard TD pass from Taylor.

“They’ve got some talented players,” coach Montgomery said of the RedHawks. “You’ve got to gang tackle that running back (Tayveon Parry), he’s strong and has great balance. I thought they did a good job of containing Stone for the most part, he’s also a great player.

And we got to the quarterback a couple of times.

“Nate had a big night, and I thought Cord had a great catch and Jayson ran the ball well. They gave us a little different look up front but we knew how to block it because we’ve seen it this year ... I thought our guys adjusted well.”

NEXT GAME – Broken Arrow defeated visiting Mustang 29-14 in last week’s quarterfinal game, a second win this season over the Broncos. BA defeated Mustang 21-14 in a regular season meeting.

The Tigers are being led this season by first-year head coach Travis Hill, who was BA’s defensive coordinator in its state championship season of 2018.

In non-district play this season, Broken Arrow won at Springdale, Arkansas (35-14), lost at Fayetteville, Arkansas (18-17) and defeated Mustang.

In Class 6A-I, District 2 play, BA lost to Owasso (28-14), won at Yukon (42-14), beat Edmond Santa Fe (38-20), won at Norman North (43-14), defeated Tulsa Union (29-10), won at Edmond Memorial (29-17) and defeated Westmoore (62-14).

BA dominated the series with Bixby when the Spartans entered Class 6A in 2010 while Bixby dominated in the past two meetings. The Tigers defeated Bixby in 2011 (58-19), 2012 (41-7) and 2013 (28-6) – all games played at BA. Bixby beat visiting Broken Arrow in 2022 (77-17) and at BA in 2023 (51-7).

Broken Arrow’s offensive ringleaders are 6-1, 180-pound senior quarterback Jeramiah Ssettimba, 6-1, 185-pound running back Octavian Robertson and sophomore running back Corey Sango along with talented receiver/defensive back Samaj Stanford.

‘O’ OUTLOOK – Despite the penalties, Bixby’s offense featured another efficient and balanced attack, led by Kirby, a three-year starter at quarterback.

Kirby completed 13-of-18 passes for 227 yards and four touchdowns while being picked off once. He completed .722 percent of his passes. On the season, Kirby has passed for 2,514 yards and 35 TDs. He’s also rushed for 230 yards and three TDs.

“One of the worst things that can happen in football are penalties, they can hurt a drive but I’m super proud of the way we battled back,” Kirby said of his final home game. “We had about 150 yards in penalties, but we still scored 51 points.

“I’m proud of the way we battled back but we’ve got to clean things up if we want to win a championship. It was like the same thing last year against Edmond Memorial when we had four turnovers in the first half. You can’t win games like that,” he added.

“Tonight’s game was super fun. Union had a bunch of fans, and their student section was loud ... it was a super fun game to be a part of. Next week will be fun too going against Union and now BA.”

Moll continued his impressive senior season as he rushed for 142 yards and three touchdowns on 16 carries. Workhorse wildcat quarterback Jack Gill continued his tough running ways, rushing for 44 yards on five carries as the Spartans averaged 6.3 yards per carry.

‘D’ PHYSICAL – Bixby’s defense was extremely physical and aggressive against the RedHawks, limiting the visitors to 234 yards while intercepting four passes. The Spartans have recorded 18 pass interceptions this season.

“We knew that was one of the biggest lines we’ve season all year besides Jenks, so we knew we had to be prepared,” said 6-1, 243-pound senior linebacker Dawson Madden afterward. “We had a few setbacks but that happens ... we’ll get that cleaned up.

“I’ve only played Union as a freshman, and I know the high school hadn’t played them in five years. It was fun,” added Dawson, who was credited with three tackles and a quarterback hurry.

Nolan, a talented two-way player, led Bixby's defensive effort with 10 total tackles, including five unassisted. Hobbs ended with nine tackles, six unassisted, while Presley and Snyder each had seven tackles. Maverick Nance had six tackles including one tackle for loss.

Senior linebacker Trey McGlothlin ended with four tackles including two sacks. Senior lineman Joe Peters had three tackles all for losses.

Gonzales had two pass interceptions while Snyder and Presley each had one interception.

NOTABLES – Bixby has now won 96 of its last 99 games and is on a 14-game winning streak. The Spartans remain ranked No. 16 nationally by MaxPreps. ... Since Loren Montgomery became head coach at Bixby in 2010, the Spartans have a 33-3 playoff record, including a 33-1 mark since 2014. ... Captains for the Union game were Cord Nolan, Braeden Presley, Kaden Penny and Trey McGlothlin. ... Broken Arrow won its only state championship (Class 6A) in 2018. ... Tiger head coach Travis Hill has led teams to two state championships – Tulsa East Central (Class 5A, 2005) and Muskogee (Class 6A-II, 2023). ... In BA's win over Mustang last week, sophomore running back Corey Sango had 21 carries for 160 yards and one touchdown. Teammate junior receiver/defensive back Samaji Stanford, a Division I recruit, had 60 yards rushing on 11 carries. ... This is Broken Arrow's first winning season since going 8-4 in 2021.

Bixby 57, Union 14

FIRST QUARTER

BHS – Nate Gonzales 60 pass from Carson Kirby (Bradley Thao kick)

BHS – Jayson Moll 8 run (run failed)

BHS – Gabe Blankenship 46 pass from Kirby (Thao kick)

BHS – Moll 1 run (Engles pass from Braeden Presley)

SECOND QUARTER

UHS – Skyler Moorman 1 run (Gavin Litchfield kick)

BHS – Safety, punt blocked out of the end zone

BHS – Cord Nolan 24 pass from Kirby (Thao kick)

THIRD QUARTER

BHS – Moll 23 run (Thao kick)

BHS – Gonzales 42 pass from Kirby (Thao kick)

FOURTH QUARTER

UHS – Stone Turner 54 pass from Dylan Taylor (Litchfield kick)