Bixby Topples Union, Meets Jenks in State Semifinal

By Ron Holt

In what has become a yearly tradition, Bixby's second-ranked Spartans will participate in another Thanksgiving Day morning practice – a goal of every high school football team.

Since 2014, Bixby has practiced on Thanksgiving morning every season in preparation for an upcoming state playoff challenge. The Spartans are usually joined at practice by former players, which is another yearly tradition.

A fast start to each half paved the way for the Spartans' 57-24 victory over the surging Union RedHawks in a Class 6A-I state quarterfinal battle last Friday night at Lee Snider Stadium as Bixby advanced to the state semifinals for the 13th straight season and fifth straight in Class 6A-I.

A familiar foe – third-ranked Jenks - awaits the Spartans in a Class 6A-I state semifinal game starting at 7 p.m. Friday (Nov. 27) at Sand Springs' Memorial Stadium. In the other semifinal game, set for 1 p.m. Friday at Sand Springs, No. 1 Broken Arrow (11-0) meets fourth-ranked Owasso (8-3).

Bixby, which compiled 538 total offensive yards, played well especially in the second half against UHS but the Spartans turned the ball over twice and were flagged eight times for 54 yards. At this stage of the playoffs, playing disciplined and limiting the miscues become pivotal.

"They're a good team and had won six of their last seven games … they're playing well and have good personnel," Bixby head coach Loren Montgomery said of Union. "I thought we did some good things. It wasn't as clean as we'd like it to be at this point in the playoffs, but we got the win and came out healthy.

"We put the ball on the ground and had some penalties, especially pre-snap penalties which put you behind the chains. We've got to clean those things up, those are things you can't have this time of the year. We'll continue to work on that," he said.

Bixby (10-1) wasted little time taking the early lead over visiting Union (5-6). After the Spartans' defense forced a three-and-out opening the game, talented BHS junior Connor Arant blocked a punt attempt by Isaac Mooney at the UHS 30-yard line with senior teammate Cain Brackney returning 20 yards for a touchdown.

A conversion kick by senior Lincoln Aragona gave Bixby a 7-0 lead at the 11:02 mark of the first quarter.

"Coach (Trevor) Suffal did a great job drawing up a middle rush for the block. I wasn't really involved but they didn't block me and I was able to get to the punter and get a hand up," the 6-6 Arant said.

"I think it was definitely good to start off the game with a defensive stop and then get the block on the punt. They've got a lot of good players, so we knew we'd have to play well. I don't think we played our best … we've got to improve before our next game.

"As a team, we've got to make sure we're communicating on defense and limit our turnovers," added Arant, who was credited with five tackles, three sacks while causing a fumble.

Union capitalized on a Bixby fumble to tie the game on a 38-yard touchdown pass from quarterback Dylan Taylor to Grayson Betts with 5:17 left in the first quarter.

Bixby regained the lead at 14-7 after a nine-play, 80-yard drive ended in a 13-yard touchdown dash by junior BJ Jones and a conversion kick by Aragona with 2:57 left in the first quarter.

A 31-yard run by junior quarterback Isaiah "Q" Butcher IV and a 28-yard pass from Butcher to freshman Maverick Owens, who criss crossed the field on the play, highlighted the drive.

Junior quarterback Reece Madden's 21-yard pass to Arant and Madden's seven-yard pass to Reed Haack led to a six-yard TD run by Butcher and a 21-7 Spartan lead with 9:29 left in the second quarter.

Union narrowed the deficit to 21-10 after a 31-yard field goal by Leo Esparza but Bixby relied on three big plays – a 35-yard pass from Madden to Owens, a 29-yard pass from Butcher to Arant and a 16-yard run by Tylan Montgomery – to get into position for sophomore quarterback Jax Rice's eight-yard TD keeper and Brackney's two-point conversion run for a 29-10 lead with 3:58 left.

The RedHawks battled back to make it a 29-17 game at halftime after Taylor's 13-yard TD pass to Tristan Birmingham.

Bixby iced the game away in the third quarter with an 11-yard TD run by Butcher, a scrambling nine-yard TD pass from Butcher to Arant, a 44-yard TD dash by Jones and Brackney's four-yard touchdown run gave the Spartans a 57-17 lead with 1:05 left in the third quarter.

With Bixby reserves playing the fourth quarter, Union ended the scoring on a 24-yard TD pass from Taylor to Pat Thompson with 9:59 remaining in the game.

Butcher had an impressive return to the field after being injured in the Broken Arrow game during Week Eight. He sat out the Southmoore regular season finale and the Spartans' bye week helped in his recovery.

"The time off helped. I had a knee injury early in the season and having a bye week and a whole game off really helped," Butcher said afterward. "The first quarter we could have played better but defensively I thought we played well and offensively we executed better later in the game. "In practice for Jenks we're definitely going to focus on cutting down on our mistakes, offsides and things like that. Perfect practice is what we need."

On the touchdown pass to Brackney, Butcher was pressured by the RedHawks and had to scramble before finding Brackney for the TD. "It was a bootleg play, and I got pressured but I knew Cain was out there somewhere, so I found him," Butcher added.

Butcher was five-of-six passing for 83 yards and a touchdown while he had eight rushes for 68 yards and two touchdowns. He's the Spartans' rushing leader this season with 885 yards and 14 TDs.

"I thought he ran and threw the ball well … he had a really good week of practice," Coach Montgomery said of Butcher.

Brackney also had an impressive final performance at Lee Snider Stadium against his former team. He contributed more to Bixby's offense than any other time this season.

"We had been practicing those (offensive) plays a lot and tonight I just wanted to come out and help my team on both sides of the ball. I'm pleased coach believed in me to hand me the ball," Brackney said.

"The pass was a drawn-up play for me in the flat. They ended up getting to our quarterback and "Q" made a risky throw and it worked out for sure."

On playing against the program he came from, Brackney said, "I've got personal relationships over there, but it doesn't affect football at all. I enjoyed my time but I'm happy being a Bixby Spartan," added Brackney, who was also credited with three tackles and one tackle for loss to go along with his two offensive touchdowns and special teams TD.

Defensively, Bixby limited Union's athletic offense to 369 total yards while holding the RedHawks to 62 rushing yards. And the Spartans forced two UHS turnovers.

Senior Ben Puckett paced the Spartans as he was credited with a game-high 10 total tackles through three quarters. He had eight unassisted stops, one tackle for a loss and one fumble recovery.

Senior Kaiden Flowers ended with eight total tackles and Arant ended with five total tackles and three sacks.

"The first half we didn't really play great, but we had some big plays. The second half we came out and really got after it," Puckett said. "We've got to clean up some mistakes. Jenks is a great football team with a great history. It's always fun to play Jenks."

FIRST MEETING – Friday's semifinal game will be a rematch of both team's third game earlier in the season with Bixby holding on for a 13-6 win at the University of Tulsa's H.A. Chapman Stadium in what was billed as the Battle for the Big Q.

A one-yard sneak by Jenks quarterback Landon Kizziar for a touchdown gave the Trojans an early 6-0 lead after the extra point kick failed. Jenks later missed a 35-yared field goal attempt before Bixby capitalized on a recovered fumble which led to a 21-yard field goal by Lincoln Aragona, narrowing the gap to 6-3.

Spartan quarterback Isaiah Butcher bolted 42 yards for a touchdown for a 10-6 Bixby lead, which grew to 13-6 when Aragona kicked a 26-yard field goal with 3:22 left in the game. Bixby ended with 401 yards of total offense while limiting the Trojans to 257 total offensive yards.

"They're phenomenal, they always are. Their kids are well coached … we had a knock down drag out the first time, and I expect the same this time," Coach Montgomery noted of Jenks. This will be the third meeting in the state playoffs between Bixby and Jenks. The Spartans captured a 49-21 win in the Class 6A-I state finals in 2023 while also defeating the Trojans, 28-14, in the state semifinals in 2022.

NOTABLES – With the quarterfinal win, Bixby has won 108 of its last 113 games. … The Spartans were ranked 69th nationally by MaxPreps last week. … Captains for the Union game were Ben Puckett, Kaden Penny, Nathan Hobbs and Cain Brackney. … While Bixby defeated Union last Friday, other quarterfinal results included Jenks downing Yukon (42-14), Broken Arrow toppling Moore (41-21) and Owasso defeating Mustang (38-22). … When Bixby attempted a punt from its own 44-yard line late in the first half, the ball was snapped over the head of Spartan senior punter Logan Haddon. The athletic Haddon scooped up the ball before getting off a punt in front of Union pursuit, a 26-yard punt which was downed at Union's 30-yard line. "The snap came out bad and I tried to jump to get it," said Haddon, a linebacker who was also credited with four tackles, two for loss. "I'm always ready for it. I was able to pick it up and got it off … considering the situation I'm happy with the way it turned out. All the off-season work we do paid off tonight. We played good tonight, but we've got a lot to clean up. We're getting there … we've got our eyes on the prize." … While Connor Arant led Bixby with three sacks, teammate Gavin Wilson was credited with two sacks. Senior Keanu James had the only pass interception for the Spartans. … Spartan kicker Lincoln Aragona was seven-for-seven on extra-point kicks. … Union was led by quarterback Dylan Taylor, who was 23-of-37 passing for 307 yards and three touchdowns while being intercepted once. RedHawk receiver Pat Thompson ended with six receptions for 126 yards and one TD.

BIXBY 57, UNION 24

FIRST QUARTER

BHS – Cain Brackey 20-yard punt block return (Lincoln Aragona kick), 11:02

UHS – Grayson Betts 38 pass from Dylan Taylor (Isaac Mooney kick), 5:47

BHS – B.J. Jones 13 run (Aragona kick), 2:57

SECOND QUARTER

BHS – Isaiah Butcher IV 6 run (Aragona kick), 9:29
UHS – Leo Esparza 31 field goal, 8:31
BHS – Jax Rice 8 run (Brackney run), 3:58
UHS – Tristan Birmingham 13 pass from Taylor (Mooney kick), 2:22

THIRD QUARTER

BHS – Butcher 10 run (Aragona kick), 10:37
BHS – Brackney 9 pass from Butcher (Aragona kick), 8:44
BHS – Jones 44 run (Aragona kick), 3:51
BHS – Brackney 4 run (Aragona kick), 1:05

FOURTH QUARTER

UHS – Pat Thompson 24 pass from Taylor (Mooney kick), 9:50