Knauer-led rally in final quarter not enough for hard-working Grafton in close loss to Cedarburg

If football teams received extra points for grit, the Grafton Black Hawks could have walked off the field with an upset win last Friday night.

As it turned out, coach Shaun Behrend’s team had to settle for a what-if, 20-17 loss to rival Cedarburg in a North Shore Conference tussle that wasn’t decided until the final minute.

“We had our chances. The kids played hard,” said Behrend, whose team fell to 1-5 in NSC play with the Senior Night defeat.

“We just have to learn to make more plays at the right time.”

Trailing, 20-9, entering the fourth quarter, host Grafton warmed up a comeback bid on a chilly night with a 45-yard touchdown run by Caden Knauer.

The sophomore snagged a pitch from quarterback Hayden Proefrock on an option play to the left and sprinted down the sideline for the score. A two-point conversion pass failed, but the Hawks pulled within 20-15 with nine minutes, 15 seconds left.

Cedarburg mounted a time-consuming drive on its next possession, during which a 31-yard touchdown run by Clayton Van Tassel was wiped out by an illegal block. When the Bulldogs
failed on a fourth-down pass, Grafton got the ball back at its 29 with 4:04 to play.

Grafton quickly returned the favor when Proefrock’s first-down pass was intercepted by Van Tassel. However, the Hawks’ defense forced a three-and-out punt, giving them another shot at a winning march.

This time, Grafton drove to the Cedarburg 38, only to have Proefrock’s pass intercepted by Alec Baye at the Bulldogs’ 7 with 1:11 left.

Although Cedarburg tried to run out the remaining time, Grafton was able to force a fourth-down punt from the end zone with 6.2 seconds to go. A bobbled snap forced punter Nick Krueger to down the ball for a safety, pulling the Hawks within three points.

A free kick gave Grafton the ball back at its own 39, but the suspense ended when Proefrock was sacked on a scramble as time expired.

Cedarburg escaped with a critical win that gave it a 4-2 conference record and a return to the WIAA playoffs that start next week.

Grafton was handed its fourth straight loss in a game that could have gone the other way. Not only did the Hawks outgain Cedarburg in total yardage (293 to 217), they held an early lead and stayed within striking distance throughout the night.

Knauer powered his team’s offense by rushing for 144 yards and two touchdowns in 15 carries. In the first quarter, he gave the Hawks a 6-0 lead with a 10-yard touchdown run that capped a 73-yard drive.

“Caden is our fastest kid. He’s a good, hard runner who falls forward and has good pad level,” Behrend said.
Proefrock was 13-for-32 passing for 135 yards. His top target was Brandon Koepp, who had four catches for 84 yards and earned his coach’s praise for a breakout performance.

Behrend also singled out the improved play of his defense, which rebounded from a rough outing in a 42-21 loss to Port Washington the previous week.

“We fixed a lot of things, and got some people back from injuries. They did a nice job,” he said. “It’s something we can build on.”

Behrend praised the play of senior Vince Giorgi, who returned to help anchor the Grafton secondary after being sidelined with an injury.

Van Tassel finished with more than half of Cedarburg’s offensive output, rushing for 114 yards on 24 attempts.

Quarterback Jack Meyer added 13 carries for 53 yards and all three of the Bulldogs’ touchdowns.

Grafton (1-7 overall) has one more chance to crack the win column this season, and it won’t be easy. This Friday, the Hawks travel to Whitefish Bay (4-2) for a 7 p.m. game against the playoff-bound Blue Dukes.

Image Information: GRAFTON’S CADEN KNAUER broke through the line for yardage against Cedarburg. The sophomore rushed for 144 yards and two touchdowns, but it wasn’t enough to keep Cedarburg from pulling out a 20-17 win.  Photo by Sam Arendt