

Hart-breaking end for Palos Verdes in Northern Division playoff opener

Bay League champion Sea Kings give up long touchdown pass and winning 2-point conversion in last minute.

By Dave Thorpe, Staff Writer

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Palos Verdes quarterback Zack Fixen leaves the field as... (Robert Casillas Staff Photographer)

All game long it looked and felt like a Palos Verdes win, and Palos Verdes even led most of the game.



But then it didn't, and then it wasn't, as Hart snatched a 15-14 victory from the claws of defeat in the first round of the CIF Southern Section Northern Division playoffs on Friday night at Mira Costa High.

Palos Verdes led 14-7 late in the fourth quarter when Hart quarterback Connor Wingenroth hit a wide-open Trent Irwin in stride streaking down the left sideline for a 51-yard touchdown pass with 38 seconds left in the game.

But that was only the second-biggest play of the game for Hart, because then it decided to go for a 2-point conversion. Wingenroth found Wes Fitzpatrick in the back of the end zone despite tight coverage by Robby Kolanz.

The official took a few seconds to make the call, then signaled touchdown, ruling that Fitzpatrick just did keep a foot inbounds while making the catch, giving Hart a 15-14 lead, which it held in the final seconds.

"They made a great play at the end on that 2-point conversion," Palos Verdes coach Guy Gardner said. "It was a gutsy call."

There was no reason to think Hart (8-3) was going to come up with two huge plays with less than a minute remaining.

Palos Verdes' defense came up big time and again. Wingenroth was 15 for 25 for 209 yards with two touchdowns, but threw three interceptions. Palos Verdes (8-3) held Hart to 106 yards rushing - running back Dylan Edwards had 38 yards on 10 carries and Wingenroth added 68 yards on 20 carries.

But Irwin, a freshman, had five catches for 106 yards and a touchdown.

"I didn't think it was going to happen for us," Irwin said. "I was feeling bad for the seniors; I thought our season was over."

Palos Verdes struck first after a scoreless first quarter when running back Carl Aguirre found a hole and rambled 64 yards for a touchdown, giving his team a 7-0 lead with 8:42 left in the second quarter.

Later in the quarter, Hart responded with a 10-play, 77-yard drive, capped by Wingenroth's 13-yard touchdown pass to Riley Stauffer with 1:09 left in the first half. The teams went into halftime tied 7-7.

Palos Verdes seemed to take command in the third quarter when a Matt Costa tackle for no gain forced Hart to punt. On Palos Verdes' first possession of the third quarter, it went 72 yards to score in 10 plays, and was helped by a roughing-the-kicker penalty on a field-goal attempt that sailed wide right.

The drive was highlighted by Aguirre's 30-yard run and capped by quarterback Zack Fixen's 13-yard run, which featured a helmet-removing block by Dean Alessi. Palos Verdes led 14-7 with 5:41 left in the third quarter.

But Palos Verdes never got much of a passing game going to help Aguirre on the ground. Fixen was 9 for 18 for 88 yards and no touchdowns or interceptions. Aguirre had 20 carries for 187 yards and a touchdown.

Palos Verdes' secondary delivered all game with two interceptions by Matt Lopes and one by Kolan, but could not come up with a big play in the final minute.

"We knew they passed a lot, so we were looking to make plays," Lopes said. "A couple just got away."

Most of the game it appeared Palos Verdes would move to the quarterfinals to play top seed Westlake, but it turns out the season is over for the senior-laden team, which captured the Bay League title outright this year.

"It was a pretty rough way to lose," Kolan said. "But I love these guys and this team. We'll be friends forever."

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