

Powerful LeRoy team too much for Hawks in IHSA Class 1A football matchup

by John Hough, Sports Writer
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LEROY - After a long two hours of being tackled, beaten, and out-muscled, **Cole Brannan** looked back and thought for a couple of seconds of what his Carrollton football career felt like and his answer was short and simple, “Very blessed.”

The **Carrollton Hawks** fell to the **LeRoy Panthers** 30-6 in the quarterfinals of the IHSA Class 1A Playoffs. The Panthers (9-3) will face the Arcola Purple Raiders (12-0) next Saturday at 2 p.m. in Arcola in the one of the Class 1A semifinal games. LeRoy avenged a 69-16 second round loss to Carrollton from last year.

“They (LeRoy) did a nice job of controlling the line of scrimmage and the ball and they kept it away from us for sure,” **Carrollton head coach Nick Flowers** said. “We knew we had our hands full with their line.

The story of the game was Carrollton managed 98 yards of total offense. The Panthers had 305 for the game and have now only allowed 13 points in games of the playoffs.

For Carrollton this is the third time in four years they’ve made it as far the quarterfinals and it’s gotten to the point where it’s simply expected.

“At this point now it’s about high expectations,” Flowers said. “Once you’ve been at this level like we have, we just want to get back, we want to do better. We were close to better back there (to state), but also what we’ve learned at this level is that it’s great football.”

“They’re a very good team,” Brannan said. “They get after it from the git-go, they never stop. I think they can go as far as they want to go.”

The Panthers controlled the game from the git-go. They forced the Hawks to go three-and-out and then drove 65-yards in 6 minutes and 41 seconds. A nine-yard touchdown pass from Trae Moberly to Ethan Bryant capped the drive.

Carrollton got going a bit on the ensuing drive, but on fourth down and two, Brannan, in at quarterback, was stuffed at the line of scrimmage and the Panthers took over. They then proceeded to convert on a fourth down of their own when Dooley picked up a 21-yard gain and then three plays later he scored on a quarterback naked bootleg from 23 yards out to make it 16-0. He would finish with 180 yards on the ground.

Two possessions later the Hawks caught a break when Wade Prough completed a pass to Tyler Frye for a first down, but was stripped from behind, however a couple of Panthers missed the loose ball and Brannan scooped it up, but he fumbled as well. Fortunately, Frye got back up from his initial hit and fell on the ball at the LeRoy 30. However it was all for naught as the Hawks failed to advance any further and turned the ball over on downs.

LeRoy then used up another long drive, and scored with 42.6 seconds left in the first half when Dooley hooked up with Bryant on a 26-yard play-action pass.

Flowers gave a ton of credit to the Panthers offensive and defensive line and said they haven't fared with much like there's in quite some time.

"LeRoy's got a great team," Flowers said. "That's about as good as a line as we've seen a long, long time. They have height and it gives them a lot of leverage."

It was 22-0 at halftime, but the Hawks received another break when they recovered a Panther fumble on their kickoff return to start the third quarter, but once again Carrollton went three-and-out.

With 2:35 left in the third quarter, Dooley converted on another fourth and short and almost scored on the 14-yard run. Moberly finished the job on a 1-yard touchdown run to give the Panthers a 30-0 lead.

Carrollton would not be shut out though. With 5:15 to play, **Nate Shanks** scooped up a fumble by a LeRoy second string running back, made a couple of cutbacks and found the end zone from 50 yards out. It was his first touchdown of his career.

Even in defeat, Flowers is already excited about next season's prospects as the Hawk's return several starters and key players including the likes of Jerrett Smith, Alex Bowker, Wade Prough, and most of the offensive and defensive line.

"We definitely bring back a lot of talent and our goal is to start hitting the weights and got to stronger in a lot of positions... Our goal is to be right back playing in this position again next season," Flowers said.

As for **Brannan** he concludes his Carrollton career as one the best to ever strap on the green and white. He recorded **3,449 total yards with 45 total touchdowns**.

"It's been a blast," Brannan said. "I never got any injuries, it's a great fan base, great program, and I'm proud to be a part of it."

The Hawks enjoyed yet another successful season in 2015. WIVC South Champions for four years running, 10-2 record, IHSA Class 1A quarterfinalists, and a season full of great memories including Jerrett Smith's heroic Hail-Mary catch to beat Unity and the 80-yard fake punt pass from Smith to Brannan to beat Pawnee.

“Hard work pays off because coming into the year nobody thought we’d do anything,” Brannan said. We made it to the quarterfinals and we never gave up.

Brannan is part of a senior class that has participated in the most games in Carrollton football history, 49. This has been during the greatest period in school history.

“All good things come to an end as they say,” Brannan said. I didn’t want it to come to an end just quite yet, but stuff happens and I’m not going to let it affect me for the rest of my life... I was extremely blessed to be a Carrollton Hawk.”