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## Acalanes football captures its first state championship

By Jon Kingdon

On May 15, the Acalanes football team began preparation for the 2023 season; 208 days later, the Dons were christened state champions for the first time with a 35-23 victory over Birmingham (Lake Balboa) High School in front of a number of parents, students, friends, alumni in the area and even some former players of head coach Floyd Burnsed.

It proved to be a tale of two halves. Birmingham, with three touchdown passes was leading late in the first half by a score of 21-7 when the Dons took over on their own 48-yard line with less than a minute to go. Judiciously using their three timeouts, Acalanes scored on the last play of the half on a one-yard run by RB/LB Jack Giorgianni who was coming off a sprained ankle suffered the week prior.

Acalanes football state champions Photo  
Acalanes Boosters

quarterback, Kingston Tisdell, threw the ball really well, particularly to Peyton Waters who will be playing for Washington next year," Burnsed said. "Our key linebackers, Giorgianni and Collin Malmquist, may lack some size, but they are tough, smart kids and were key in stopping their running game."

Coming into the game, Burnsed was very concerned about stopping Birmingham's running game. "Their

There was a concern about the size difference between the teams. "Going into the game, I didn't think we could run between the tackles because of the size of their tackles," Burnsed said. "Our plan was to run outside and felt that if we could protect our quarterback, Sully Bailey, we would have a chance."

OL and DL Drew McKenzie did not see that as an issue once the game started. "They were bigger than us, but not as big as they looked on film," McKenzie said. "After we made the late score in the first half, and we knew that we were going to get the ball first to start the second half and we were pretty calm. We changed our pass protection a little due to their rushers and it worked out as we protected Sully well, particularly after he hurt his knee after a scramble and our backs did a good job in picking up their blitzing linebackers."

At halftime, the defense also made the appropriate adjustments. "In the first half, we blitzed a lot but in the second half, Coach (David) Ortega simplified things and we went back to basics, and we did not allow their offense to score," McKenzie said.

"Everybody, especially the seniors were really locked in, and it ended up being a really senior led game, especially by (DL) Aiden Yates who came up with two big plays in the second half," WR/CB Trevor Rogers said.

The adjustments worked on both sides of the ball with Acalanes outscoring Birmingham 21-2 in the second half. "We may have been a little jittery and nervous in the first half, not playing to our full potential," WR/CB Paul Kuhner said. "From my perspective in the defensive backfield, I felt like our defensive line was getting to the quarterback so fast, it made my job a lot easier. We were running a cover three zone where we left eight guys in the box to stop the run and just the three of us to stop the pass and it really worked." Kuhner would go on to get the first interception that Tisdell, under pressure, threw this season in the fourth quarter.

Once again, the offense was led by quarterback Sully Bailey who completed 24 of 37 passes for 296 yards and four touchdowns. "They were playing man coverage and as the game progressed, we spread out to ball more," Rogers said.

There were six different receivers for Acalanes: Rogers-7/146/2 TD Niko White 7/63, Giorgianni 4/46, Kuhner 3/22/1 TD, Henry Souza 2/14/1 TD, Brady Morrow 1/5.

When Birmingham tried covering Rogers with Waters, Rogers went to Burnsed and told him that he could beat him. "I trusted in myself and thought if I was in one-on-one coverage and I got a good pass, I could make the play," Rogers said.

Burnsed was not one to dispute Rogers and put it simply: "Rogers said that he could beat him, and we threw it up to him and he beat the guy and scored."

Once again, the time of possession favored Acalanes' opponent, 29 minutes to 19 minutes. Despite his

defense being on the field for so long, it was not a concern for Burnsed: "We have a great strength and conditioning program led by Tim Silvera who does a great job and we felt like we were as fresh in the fourth quarter as we were the first quarter."

With Acalanes up by eight points, they scored once more in the last 30 seconds on a 10-yard pass to Kuhner. "On that last drive, we ran and forced them to use up their timeouts so on fourth down, only being up by one score, we wanted to score to clinch the win," Burnsed said. "We saw they were playing zero coverage (no safeties) with no one there to take the slant away, so we called for that pattern to Kuhner and with a little fake to the running back, freezing their linebackers, it was wide open."

It was a particularly special play for Kuhner. "Coach Burnsed and my position coach, Coach Blue (Joel Issac), just told me to run away from my man and Sully put it right on me to seal the game," Kuhner said. "For Coach Blue to tell me that I'm going to catch the pass to seal the game, it showed how much, over my four years at Acalanes, the type of relationship I had formed with my teammates and coaches who were willing to put our biggest game ever on the line, in my hands. That totally meant the world to me."

Always one for understatement, when asked how it felt to hold up the trophy, Burnsed shared the moment: "It's the first time I've been to a state championship. It's pretty nice. For our players, the school, and the community, it's pretty awesome."

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[back](#)

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