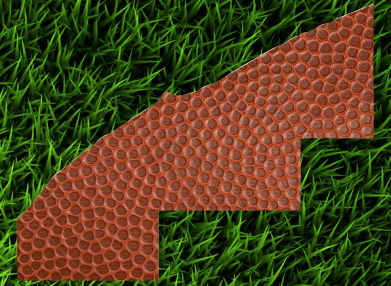


LAKE COUNTY GOLD RUSH 2023



Perry Pirates
Division V state champion

Kirtland Hornets
Division VI state champion

Inside: Regular-season meeting was a springboard | Coaches, players reflect on the season | Beyond the box score

HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL

Early season meeting served as springboard

By John Kampf

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It didn't take long for Brayden Richards to answer the question of when did he know the Perry football team had something special going this season.

Only a handful of minutes had passed since Richards and the Perry Pirates had defeated Liberty Center, 21-14, in the Division V state championship game Dec. 2 when Richards was asked when he saw this state championship run coming.

"The Kirtland game," Richards quipped.

No, not the one a day earlier when the Hornets defeated Versailles, 32-15, for the Division VI state title. Richards was referring to the game way back on Sept. 1 when Perry went on the road and defeated Kirtland, 24-6.

Richards' postgame thoughts echoed those of his words earlier in the week when he said, "After we beat Kirtland I was like, 'Wow, we're legit.' That's when I thought, 'Hey, we might have a chance.'"

As ironic as it might sound, Perry's a-ha moment was also the watershed moment for Coach Tiger LaVerde's Hornets. Having their 57-game regular-season winning streak snapped — on their home



BRIAN FISHER — FOR THE NEWS-HERALD

Perry coach Bob Gecewich celebrates with senior Brayden Richards during a Sept. 1 win over Kirtland. Both the Pirates and Hornets used that game as a springboard to the rest of the season,

field nonetheless — was the proverbial slap in the face that redirected the Hornets and put them on a winning streak that they'll take into the 2024 season.

"Without that loss, I don't think we win this state championship," LaVerde told The News-Herald not long after Kirtland sealed its seventh state championship. "Many times, you learn more from a loss than

you do a win."

Back on Sept. 1, the Pirates hung a 24-6 loss on the Hornets, outgaining LaVerde's team, 387-312, and hitting Kirtland with a few long touchdown passes to go with a trio of red-zone stops against Kirtland's vaunted rushing attack.

While Kirtland got 103 rushing yards from Willie Beers that day to go with 91 from Rocco Alfieri, Walter

Moses threw for 249 yards and two touchdowns, including a 93-yarder to Richards on a screen pass immediately after a red-zone stop.

To be sure, it was a marquee win for Perry. But it was also an important loss for the Hornets, as much as it stung them. Much like back in 2015 when Grand Valley defeated Kirtland, 30-21, to snap the Hornets'

56-game winning streak, the Hornets used the rare regular-season loss as a catalyst to a state championship.

In 2015, Kirtland ran off 13 wins a row after the loss to Grand Valley, capping things with a 22-20 win over Marion Local in the Division VI state title game. Fast forward to this year, and another 13-game winning streak followed a rare regular-season loss and ended with the gold trophy being raised.

The Sept. 1 game not only forced the Hornets to find answers and get better, but it was also a teaching moment for Perry.

Said Coach Bob Gecewich after the win over Kirtland, "How do we continue to get better? How do we handle this success? This is a huge win for our program and our community. Now, what do we do from here?"

Ironically, Gecewich posed the same type of questions to himself and his program after the Pirates defeated Liberty Center for the state title Dec. 2.

"I hope we're able to continue the momentum and we don't get comfortable with where we're at," Gecewich said. "Somebody asked if we felt like we have a target on our backs. I hope so. That means that we're doing the right things and

we're getting better."

When asked what the state title means, Gecewich joked, "It means it's going to be harder to find a Week 1 and 2 (opponent) next year."

But everybody in Lake County knows what Week 3 is.

The rematch between Perry and Kirtland. A rare matchup between reigning state championship teams scheduled for Sept. 6 at Perry's Alumni Stadium.

The ascension of football in Lake County is well noted. Not only will Perry and Kirtland enter next season as reigning state champions, but Mentor returns a slew of talent from a 7-4 team this year, as does Lake Catholic from a 10-3 squad in 2023. Riverside has advanced to the third round of the playoffs the past two years, while Madison went 8-3 this season in a breakthrough campaign.

But rest assured, all eyes will be on the reigning state champions next Sept. 6 between Perry (which has only seven seniors this year) and Kirtland (which has only 11).

"That," LaVerde said, "is going to be neat. Two state champions squaring off against each other? That's going to be a special night."

And perhaps another springboard for long tournament runs, just like it was this year.

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HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL

LaVerde thankful for another memorable season

By Tiger LaVerde

I am once again astonished at the achievement of this team. It is truly amazing to see what hard work, grit, unselfishness, dedication, belief, confidence, character, leadership, kindness and unwavering love for each other can accomplish. I hope the boys realize these qualities that made them champions on the football field will also

make them very successful as adults in their communities.

I will look back fondly at all the fun we had along the way. The 7-on-7 trips, dodgeball games, volleyball games, cornhole tournaments, steak dinners, lineman challenges, whiffleball games, donuts on Saturday mornings and boat races. It is the long journey together that makes the accomplishment so special. It is touching to see the pic-

tures of these kids as they grew up playing together on the "C" team (first and second grades), "B" team (third and fourth grades), and "A" team (fifth and sixth grades), before they played for our middle school football team.

I am especially grateful and appreciative of all the youth coaches who continue to build into the kids in our community. We wouldn't be holding the "Gold" trophy this year

without all of their time and dedication throughout the years. This is a simple game of blocking and tackling. Learning those fundamental skills at such a young age has undoubtedly led to our success at the high school level.

It truly takes a village to raise a child, and Kirtland is not a normal village!!! Our principal, Mr. Victor Puskas, said it best in his speech at our banquet that, "These kids are

not normal." It is not normal to do what this team has done. It is not normal to work as hard as they do on a daily basis. It is not normal to play with such enjoyment and enthusiasm as they demonstrated in Canton last Friday morning in a high-stakes and very stressful environment.

Congratulations boys, I really couldn't be more proud of all of you!

Coach LaVerde



TIM PHILLIS —
FOR THE NEWS-HERALD

Coach Tiger LaVerde has led Kirtland to seven state titles in his 18 years at the helm.

HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL

Kirtland captains reflect on state championship season

Rocco Alfieri,
Sr., RB/LB

The 2023 football season was amazing, yet time went too fast. Ever since the summer, our team had a chip on its shoulder from losing states last year. Throughout the offseason, we worked hard every day and put in a lot of time to get better each day. The lifts were high energy and the conditioning was tough. Our coaches and players pushed each other every day no matter what. We were in a lot of 7-on-7s competing with bigger schools to make us better.

We were having a lot of success throughout these games and we knew we

could be very special this year. It was a big matchup going against a very good Perry team early on in the season. We lost that game but after that, we all got together and the coach told us we are not losing another freaking game, and we all believed in that and we showed that to everyone.

Throughout the season we stayed focused and put our heads down and worked. For us to be good, we knew we didn't have to do anything special. Leading up to the playoffs we dominated everyone until the final four where we came across a tough Garaway team. That was a dogfight and we went to

war in that game. Leading up to the states we had a big week of getting prepared for Versailles. Going into that game we were all pumped up. This was the biggest game of my life.

Winning states is definitely the best memory from my high school career. Winning states with my guys is a big accomplishment because we know we deserved it, we put in countless hours of hard work and never turned our backs on each other. Celebrating with friends, family and coaches was very exciting, and even the community came out and supported us.

What I took away from this season is if you want

something you have to put in the time and effort to achieve it, and don't let anyone think they can stop you from that. I am very thankful for everything Kirtland has taught me throughout these past four years. It has given me the life lessons needed to be a successful person in my life. I want to thank everyone for making these past four years the best four years of my life. I love these guys and I'm blessed to say that we are "STATE CHAMPIONS."

Gino Blasini,
Sr., WR/DB

The countdown to the senior football season began

on Dec. 4, 2022, igniting a wave of anticipation and excitement among the team. As the days came closer to the season, the friendship among the players became more like a brotherhood. The weight room sessions, the competitive games of dodgeball and wiffle ball, and the filling Chipotle trips after each practice became rituals that formed indelible bonds among teammates. It wasn't just a team; it was a brotherhood forged through shared goals and commitment.

From the beginning of the season, there was an unspoken understanding that this team was something special. Every prac-

tice, every game became a crucial stepping stone toward a collective goal. The journey through the regular season and playoffs was not just a series of matches. It was a tapestry knitted with moments of intense joy and shared success. For us to be successful, we did not have to do anything special but play Kirtland football.

We gave up an average of 8.1 points per game, scored 40 points per game, while having zero turnovers through the whole playoffs. Coach LaVerde said on the news, "This might have been our best defense ever." Obviously, we are biased, but we believe it, too.

KIRTLAND » PAGE 4

CONGRATULATIONS TO THE KIRTLAND HORNETS!



OHSAA DIVISION VI STATE CHAMPIONS



Kirtland

FROM PAGE 3

One of the standout memories was the overnight trip to Oil City, Pa. The trip was a perfect blend of competition and camaraderie. A 7-on-7 match, whiffle ball tournament, a refreshing swim, and the creative challenge of crafting makeshift boats from Coach LaVerde's mom's garage made the trip unforgettable. However, the meals provided had to have been the best part.

Football camp, those four days preceding Aug. 1, was not just a preseason routine but an opportunity to pass on the legacy. Assisting middle school and youth football players, passing on skills, and setting examples for future Hornets. Yet, in the season, a favorite in-season memory made an appearance. Post-game rituals took the team into the locker room, where Rocco's connection to the speaker brought everyone together to celebrate our victories. The locker room was bumping just before heading to Swensons.

Finally, what I'm going to take from this season and team, is how believing in trust, determination, and confidence can lead a team to victory. At the end of our junior year, we would always talk about how we are going to be state champs this year and it was determined to happen if we stuck to our commitment. It was such an amazing sea-



TIM PHILLIS — FOR THE NEWS-HERALD

Kirtland's captains this season were, from left, Will Beers, Will Sayle, Macguire Boyd, Rocco Alfieri, Will Bates and Gino Blasini.

son, and it went by so fast. I'm blessed to be able to be a part of this program. Each one of our seven coaches have their own unique things about themselves. Combined, they create the best coaching staff anyone could ask for. I could not be happier and more grateful than I am for our team this season. These guys are my brothers.

Will Beers, Sr., RB/DB

The most special moments for me were team dinners every Thursday led by the seniors. Pep rallies

also were very special to me because we knew that we had support from everyone in our city. Losing the last couple of years made this year special because we were determined to get the win considering how we fell short against Marion Local last year.

Playing the game you love with your friends is always special especially when you make it to states. There is no better feeling than winning the state championship in your senior year. Ever since I was a little kid, I would play football with

the boys on my team. We all grew up together playing in little league.

It is cool to have a bond with your friends since you are little, especially grow up and play football with them. It is also nice to be backed up by all the football moms supporting us and getting us food after every game. It is great to know that all the alumni come to our games and support us, it truly shows how the community is always supporting us.

Holding the state championship trophy with all my friends feels great because

we know we worked so hard since we were little. I am truly blessed to have such a great coaching staff and a great community

Will Sayle, Sr., RB/DB

The 2023 season was filled with countless memories that will be shared with each player for the rest of our lives. From the 7-on-7s on hot summer days to having breakfast with the team before states, my senior season was nothing short of the best time ever. Right from the beginning, we knew it was going to be a special year. We competed in a bunch of different 7-on-7 tournaments, including ones at the University of Pittsburgh. Our offense was slicing up opponents' defenses and proving how good we were for being the smallest school there.

Our first game (Dalton) came almost too soon; I wasn't ready for my last season to begin. It was a long game, and it came down to a Hail Mary on the final play (we won 14-7). Although we weren't very happy with our performance, we were excited because we got to play in a high-pressure close game. We love close games, because we don't get them very often.

Even though we lost, it was really fun to play against Perry. As some people don't know, I went to school at Perry before switching to Kirtland. So, I got to play against all my old friends that I grew up with.

Another pretty memora-

ble game was in the state semifinal against Sugar-creek Garaway. We had high hopes going into this game, not only because we thought we had a good chance, but also because we knew it could have been really close. Fortunately for us, we got the best of both worlds. It was a close game in the beginning, and we ended up scoreless at half. After some halftime adjustments and a speech from Gino Blasini, we were able to come out with more energy and put up 17 unanswered points. That was pretty sick.

Last but not least, my final game of football, the state championship. Our team already had chips on our shoulders coming into this game because we had lost the title to this team in previous years. Knowing that, we worked hard in practice the whole week to make sure we were prepared for Versailles. Once we scored on our first drive of the game, our team felt something; the taste of victory.

The whole stadium knew that we were gashing them on every play, and that it was going to be a long day for Versailles' defense. Once we smelled that blood in the water, we went in for the kill. After a bunch of K-Town touchdowns, it was like 32-7 in the final minutes of the game. I will never forget the looks on all my friends' faces when we finally got to raise the trophy on our final game together.

HORNETS » PAGE 5



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Hornets

FROM PAGE 4

Will Bates, Sr., DE

I'm not even sure where to start. I can't believe our senior season has already come to an end. This season was everything we could have imagined it to be and more. It feels like just yesterday we were working out in the gym in January getting ready for our final season at Kirtland. All of us seniors wanted to go the best way possible, and we knew that if we were going to accomplish our goal of being state champions, then we were going to have to work extremely hard and be so dedicated that people think we were crazy because of our drive. We have talked about this season ever since we were kids, and it has been very special to each and every one of us.

I feel like the one thing that separates us from other teams is that we love to spend time with each other and enjoy hanging out together. We all looked forward to going to practice and getting better each day. We all wanted to improve and loved going to those early-morning film sessions and those late-night lifts. We were just so determined and driven to have a different result this year that we were willing to push ourselves past our limits and work as hard as we possibly could to achieve our goal. Some of my personal favorite memories were go-



TIM PHILLIS — FOR THE NEWS-HERALD

Gino Blasini put a ring on it for the seventh time when they won the Division VI state championship Dec. 1.

ing to Chipotle after practice almost every day and the team dinners we had every Thursday before our games.

The culture and relationships I've made with people over my football career at Kirtland are what I'm going to remember the most. I know for a fact I am going to be texting and staying in touch with all these guys for

years to come. Some of us are even going to still be playing together in college for the next couple of years. After losing the past two years, we were so motivated to win it all and go all the way this year. After learning from guys in the past, we knew what it took to be great leaders and teammates. So, we as captains came together and decided that if

we wanted to accomplish our goal of winning the state championship. Then we were going to have to be great leaders and role models for the underclassmen. These coaches have also made such a special and important impact on my life that is going to last a lifetime. The lessons we learned and things they have taught us are deeper than just football. They

have not just shown us how to be better football players. They have shown us how to become better men and have taught us important life lessons.

To be able to accomplish our goals and win the state championship is something that we are going to remember for the rest of our lives. This season has been nothing short of amazing and I am glad I can call these

guys family and have made memories that are going to last a lifetime.

#2023 State Champs

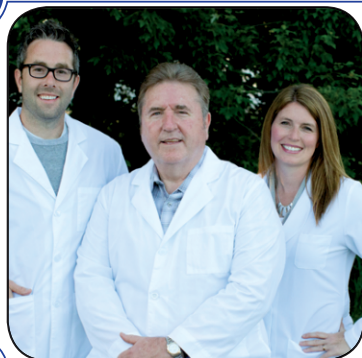
Macguire Boyd, Sr., FB/LB

This season was one like no other. Our first four regular-season games were really good teams. And two of them made it to the state championship with us this season.

When we lost to Perry, it lit a spark and pissed us off because we hated that feeling of losing. It was something none of them wanted to feel for the rest of the season. I can remember the next day when we had film in the morning, our head coach Tiger LaVerde said we will not lose another game. And we didn't.

I have so many great memories coming out of this program and the friends you make here will last a lifetime. One of my favorite memories here is the Monday before the state game, starters get together and go to the coach's house and we have breakfast together. (Tiger LaVerde's wife, Mary) made it for us and the coaches. And if there are any freshmen, they have to do a karaoke of a song, and it's really fun.

Overall, I couldn't have imagined playing for another team. I am just so happy the way this year ended and wish the best of luck to these underclassmen and hope they have fun next year.



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HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL

Kirtland's state title run: Game by game

By John Kampf

jkampf@news-herald.com

A game-by-game look at Kirtland's playoff run to the Division VI state championship.

Kirtland 49, Columbiana 6

This one was over early, as the host Pirates were out to a 42-0 lead at the half and cruised from there.

The starters didn't get much action. Will Beers ran for 73 yards and Rocco Alfieri for 32 — on a total of 10 combined carries. Max Paul threw for 128 yards, including touchdown passes to Gino Blasini and Evan Korprowski.

Kirtland outgained Columbiana, 349-128. Most of Columbiana's yardage game late in the game when the outcome had long been decided.

Kirtland 48, Canton Central Catholic 26

A game that was nowhere near as close as the score would indicate, as the Irish put 19 points on the board in the fourth quarter against the Hornets' backups.

Kirtland built a 41-7 lead at the half by running the ball prolifically — as usual. Will Beers ran for 169 yards on only 12 carries. Rocco Alfieri ran for a pair of scores, as did QB Jake LaVerde. LaVerde also hit Gino Blasini on a 50-yard score, Blasini's third TD reception in the first two weeks of the playoffs.

The Hornets won the yardage battle, 404-313, but Central Catholic had scoring plays of 36, 45 and 80 yards in the fourth quarter against Kirtland's



TIM PHILLIS — FOR THE NEWS-HERALD

Kirtland defensive coordinator Ryan Beeler dances following the Hornets' 32-15 win over Versailles in the Division VI state championship game.

reserves.

Kirtland 53, Cuyahoga Heights 19

In a rematch of a regular season game won by the Hornets, 35-0, the Red Wolves came a little closer but still couldn't get past the Hornets.

Kirtland led, 47-6, at the half and cruised from there. The Hornets' 267-yard rushing attack was led by Rocco Alfieri (86 yards, three TDs) and Will Beers (58 yards, one TD). Beers also had a 74-yard kickoff for a touchdown.

Max Paul threw a touchdown pass for the Hornets, who held a 295-147 yardage advantage.

Kirtland 42, Mogadore 0

For the second year in a row, Kirtland faced Mogadore for the regional title. For the second year in a row, the Hornets had all the answers.

Will Beers ran for 99 yards and two touchdowns, while Rocco Alfieri ran for 31 yards and two scores. Jake LaVerde completed both of his passes for 73 yards, with Gino Bla-

sini catching a 23-yard TD pass and Beers catching a 50-yard strike.

Not only did Kirtland outgain Mogadore, 299-97, but the Wildcats finished with zero yards passing. The win gave Kirtland its 13th straight win in a regional championship game and sent the Hornets to the state final four for the 12th time in the past 13 years.

Kirtland 17, Sugarcreek Garaway 0

In a matchup between the top-ranked (Kirtland) and second-ranked (Gar-

away) teams in the state in Division VI, the Hornets outgained the Pirates, 17-0, in the second half to clinch the state championship game berth.

Rocco Alfieri opened the scoring with a three-yard plunge in the third. Then after a Nick Barisic 20-yard field goal, Jake LaVerde ran in from 15 yards for the clincher. The final score was set up by yet another Kirtland defensive stop, which gave the Hornets a short field to work with. Garaway's fourth-and-24 pass fell incomplete to set up the Kirtland at point-blank

range.

Kirtland outgained Garaway, 290-55, with Alfieri running for 62, Will Beers for 62 and LaVerde for 50. Kirtland sacked Garaway's quarterback eight times, limiting the high-scoring Pirates to no points and negative-20 yards rushing for the game.

Kirtland 32, Versailles 15

The Hornets won their seventh state championship while also snapping a two-game losing streak in championship games and getting a measure of revenge for a 20-16 loss to Versailles in the 2021 title bout.

Kirtland scored first when Gino Blasini pounced on a fumble in the end zone. After a defensive stop, Kirtland scored again on a six-yard run by Will Beers.

While Versailles stemmed the tide briefly with a second-quarter touchdown pass, Beers took the ensuing kickoff 90 yards untouched to the house. Kirtland had a chance to score again before the half, but was stopped inches short of the goal line when time ran out.

Rocco Alfieri scored from two yards out in the third for a 25-7 lead, and then Will Sayle recovered a fumble in the end zone for a 32-7 lead, making Versailles' late touchdown nothing more than window dressing.

Kirtland outgained Versailles, 339-268. Jake LaVerde ran for 124 yards and threw for 28, Alfieri ran for 94 yards and a score, while Beers ran for 83 and a score to go with his touchdown return.

Defensively, Sayle and LaVerde had seven tackles each to lead the game, while Beers added six stops.

HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL

Perry's state title run: Game by game

By John Kampf

jkampf@news-herald.com

A game-by-game look at Perry's playoff run to the Division V state championship.

Perry 56, Crestwood 0

The Pirates wasted no time in laying waste to visiting Crestwood in their tournament opener. It was 28-0 after one quarter and 49-0 at the half.

Perry ran for 350 yards in the game, led by Jayden Studio's 103 yards and Dare'on Howard's 95. Howard also ran for a pair of scores. Walter Moses completed 4 of 5 passes for 66 yards and a TD pass to Luke Sivon.

The Perry defense limited Crestwood to 118 total yards, including two through the air. Many of those yards came well after the Pirates' starting defense had retired for the night.

Perry 34, Sandy Valley 7

Many wondered how the Pirates would defend Sandy Valley's dynamic dual threat quarterback. The answer? Very well.

Sandy Valley QB Nick Petro ran for 133 yards, but was held to 51 yards passing. Meanwhile, Perry's offense ran more than 300 yards for the second week in a row. Jayden Studio ran for 92, Brayden Richards for 70 and Owen McKoon for 64 as Perry chewed up 320 yards on the ground.

Walter Moses completed 12 of 15 passes for 146 yards, making him 16 of 19 through the first two weeks of the playoffs.

It was a 34-0 lead af-



PAUL DICICCO — FOR THE NEWS-HERALD

Perry players hoist the state championship trophy after a 21-14 win over Liberty Center.

ter three before Sandy Valley finally got on the board against the stingy Perry defense.

Perry 42, Garrettsville 14

The G-Men came into the game undefeated and state-ranked with their prolific

run offense. They exited with a 28-point loss to the Pirates.

The Pirates led, 28-0, before the G-Men got on the board, forcing a run-heavy team like Garrettsville to pass a lot more than they wanted to because of the early deficit. Jayden Studio had a career game with 17

carries for 201 yards and three touchdowns. He also caught a 12-yard touchdown pass from QB Water Moses.

Moses again was very precise. He completed 5 of 10 passes for 58 yards and two touchdowns — one to Owen McKoon and the other to Studio.

Perry 32, South Range 0

Revenge was on the minds of the Pirates in this one. A year after falling to the Raiders in the 2022 regional final, the Pirates hammered their foe to clinch the program's first stat final four berth since 2016.

The game was never particularly close. Perry led quickly on a 47-yard pass from Walter Moses to Brayden Richards, increased the lead to 12-0 on a Moses run. Three more scores in the second, including a 79-yard pass from Moses to Luke Sivon, made it 32-0 at the half.

Perry outgained South Range, 449-160, with Jayden Studio again having a monster game on the ground with 11 carries for 194 yards and a pair of touchdowns. Moses was 6-of-8 passing for 103 yards, making him 27-for-37 through four playoff games.

Perry 22, Harvest Prep 8

The Pirates clinched their first berth in a state championship game by jumping all over Harvest Prep from the get-go and once again riding their strong defense.

Perry scored first on a 58-yard touchdown pass from Walter Moses to Brayden Richards. After blocking a punt for a safety, the Pirates tallied again when Moses hit Owen McKoon for a 17-yard touchdown pass for a 16-0 lead after the first quarter.

Harvest Prep narrowed it to 16-8 in the third, but Perry put the game away with a 38-yard TD pass from Moses to Richards.

Moses finished with 145 yards passing. Three of his five receptions went to the house.

Harvest Prep outgained Perry, 262-261, but couldn't match Perry's big-play capabilities.

Perry 21, Liberty Center 14

The Pirates took home their first state championship with a comeback effort and a late defensive stop in a battle of two undefeated teams.

Perry got on the board first when Walter Moses hit Luke Sivon in stride for a 42-yard scoring strike in the first quarter. Liberty Center evened things up with a touchdown run in the second and then took the lead with a touchdown run in the third.

But then Perry moved Brayden Richards to quarterback and everything changed. Richards hit Sivon on a 37-yard pass for a touchdown to tie the game right after Liberty Center had taken the lead. Then Richards took a keeper around left end, broke a tackle and was off to the races for the go-ahead score.

Liberty Center had a chance to tie the game late, but four passes fell incomplete, including a key pass break-up by Vince Tomasic. One Walter Moses kneel-down, and the celebration began.

Perry outgained Liberty Center, 437-275. Richards ran for 124 yards, while Moses threw for 291 yards and ran for 19. Sivon had seven catches for 139 yards and two scores.

Defensively, Armani Chiappone had a team-high 12 stops, Owen McKoon had nine, Richards eight and Joey Baldree seven.

HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL



PAUL DICICCO — FOR THE NEWS-HERALD

Perry coach Bob Gecewich high-fives his way down the sideline near the end of the state title victory. Dec. 2.

Gecewich proud of way Pirates performed, led

By Bob Gecewich

The 2023 season was a special one for the Perry Pirate program and, more importantly, the community.

While each week starting from the end of our 2022 season through our last pregame lift on Dec. 2 was important, the commitment of our guys to their TEAM, their program, and those that came before and will come after was most impressive. This team exemplified selflessness and hard work every day. No one was concerned with who got the

credit as long as the job got done.

This was evident in our senior class of Gavin Nickerson, Brayden Richards, Jayden Studio, Jack Knisely, Dom LaMacchia, Hayden Norman and Tristan Sexton. They show up and show out every day, owning their roles and leading every step of the way. The way our seniors lead and the rest of the team followed suit was integral to a team that played bigger than the sum of its parts.

We are proud to play for each other and represent Perry every Friday and the last Saturday of the season.

HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL

Perry captains reflect on the season

Brayden Richards, Sr., RB/WR/DB/KR

I have been playing with most of these guys since second and third grade, and Coach (Marc) Schiano (the wide receivers coach) has been my coach since kindergarten. I remember being at Ritley Field for youth football practices, the coaches would tell us to work hard and be disciplined now because that is what it takes to win a state championship in high school. What incredible foreshadowing that was! Some of my favorite football memories are from youth football, and now I get to share the memory of winning a state championship with those same teammates and Coach Schiano.

Before the season started, people would ask me how good our team would be. I would tell them that we would be pretty good — maybe not the best team, but we would go the furthest. I knew that with South Range graduating a very large senior class, Cardinal Mooney moving up a division, and Garaway moving down a division, there was a clear pathway in the playoffs if we worked hard and played to the best of our abilities. Don't get me wrong, we are a very good team, but sometimes it is hard for me to consider

our team at the same level of the teams when Josh Petrucci, Jaylen Anderson, Drew Schiano, and Luke Farrell were playing because I looked up to those players and teams so much. It's crazy to think that we will be remembered as one of the greatest teams to come through Perry.

In my application to the Air Force Academy, I was asked what would make me an effective leader and team member as part of the U.S. military. I referenced how on this football team I had to be adaptable, versatile and be willing to play any role when asked and that I needed to accept whatever role was given to me without hesitation or complaining. I feel that I was able to do this as a member of this football team as I would be asked to play both sides of the ball as well as many positions on the offensive side. However, I was not alone in this regard; others did too. Walter Moses was asked to play some corner this year. Owen McKoon needed to become our punter, and after Gavin Nickerson got hurt, those on our line had to take on new roles. Both of our lines were feisty, and resilient, and played bigger than their size. Everyone did whatever it took to be successful. By being willing to

step up when needed, this is what helped make us a strong team.

We did have a lot of returning starters from last year. Walter Moses, Dom LaMacchia, Anthony Zagrocki, Owen McKoon, Joey Baldree, Drew Smith, Jayden Studio, me, etc. This group came back this year stronger, faster, and more confident. The young players like Taylor, Pike, and Bertone played like upperclassmen. Ashburn did a great job filling in when McKoon got hurt mid-season. Chiappone and Tomasic were exceptionally good this year, and having a healthy Luke Sivon was the X-factor that we needed to replace Hacking from last year's team.

Beating Kirtland was pivotal in our season. It really gave us confidence in how good of a team we could become, and it reinforced that our hard work was working. After the game, Coach LaVerde talked with me, and he said that he thought that we (Perry and Kirtland) could both win state titles. That was an impactful conversation. It was then that I thought a state title was a possibility!

Even after the win over Kirtland in Week 3, we still had a lot of work to do, and improvement was needed. Our kicking game was a lit-

tle weak at the beginning of the season. Aitor and Tristan worked hard to become consistent and reliable. By the end of the season, our kicking game was solid. In the state championship game, Aitor was perfect. Not one PAT was missed.

On the offensive side of the ball, our running game between Studio, McKoon, and Howard was just as strong as our passing game with Sivon and I as receivers. Because of that, teams really struggled to defend us. We had too many weapons. Having such great weather during the state championship game allowed us to be effective with both the running game and passing game. In the third quarter, when I was moved to QB, being able to pass or run really was a game-changer. This gave Liberty Center trouble.

Our defense was our strength this year. We really didn't have any holes or weaknesses, so teams had a tough time playing against it. Liberty was a really good team, and they were able to capitalize on a few mistakes that we made to score two TDs on us.

But over 15 previous games, I think our varsity only gave up five TDs all season.

PERRY » PAGE 9

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Perry

FROM PAGE 8

The defense had to play lights-out for the final three minutes of the game to win the state championship. Our corners and safeties played clean and prevented a late-game score. This ending fit the cliché, “Offense wins games, Defense wins championships!”

There will be a lot of memories that I will never forget from the state championship game. I have competed on big stages before as a track athlete, but this was something different. Seeing our community come together from elementary to our oldest alumni was special. There was a lot of enthusiasm and pride. I am happy that I was a small part of helping to bring the first team title home to Perry and that we did it with the same guys who have been grinding it out together since our youth practices at Ritley Field and middle school practices at Manchester West.

It truly was a storybook ending as we fulfilled Coach Ritley’s legacy of “Those Who Stay Will Be Champions!”

Jack Knisely, Sr., OL

State Champs! Still feels unreal!

One of my most vivid memories from the state championship game was the sound of our crowd after it ended. The sound coming from our side of the



PAUL DICICCO — FOR THE NEWS-HERALD

Perry’s captains — Jack Knisely, Dom LaMacchia, Jayden Studio and Brayden Richards — head out for the pregame coin toss before the Division V state final.

stadium, the crowd chanting “Perry, Perry,” over and over again. It was so loud and the thought of it still sends chills down my spine. We did it. We are state champions!

My next memory after we downed the ball for that final play, was seeing several Liberty Center players drop to the ground in tears. I knew exactly how they felt from our loss the year before against South Range. I walked over to the lineman who I had been blocking the whole game, helped him up and told him I would walk him over to the line to shake hands. I know he played his heart out and this was so

tough for him.

The journey to get here wasn’t easy. We spent hours in the weight room with Coach Crissinger, pushing us even when we could be doing other things. The summer workouts and practices in August all seem so far away, yet were so worth it. But it wasn’t just about the physical grind. It was about the bonds we built along the way. We became more than just teammates; we became brothers. As offensive linemen, we came into this season with a lot of new guys. Coach Bezeg preached how we had to learn how to communicate, what the guy next to

you would do in certain situations, and most importantly, how to work together. This wasn’t just about football. It was about learning to trust, rely on, and fight for each other.

I believe that the defining moment of this team came at Kirtland this year. We knew we were playing a great team and had to prepare ourselves for a battle. Coach G and Coach Niedzwicki prepared us well, and I think they knew this game would determine how far we could really go. I think we proved a lot to ourselves during that game, too. Everything clicked both offensively and defensively af-

ter. I know we played some good football teams during the regular and post-season, but I think that our coaches and players knew deep down that we could beat all of them if we played as well as we could.

The impact of this championship goes way beyond the field. Perry has had some good football teams. I remember watching my older brother’s team play in numerous playoff games as the ball boy. Many great players have come before us. I think the biggest difference was our sense of team. Perry is a small town with big dreams.

But now, everything has changed. This championship has brought a whole new level of pride to our community. I have seen alumni from many years ago wearing their letterman jackets. Everyone’s talking about it, from the little kids who look at us with hero worship in their eyes to the older folks who remember the years of longing for a win like this. And we owe a huge debt of gratitude to the people who believed in us and pushed us to be our best. Our families, our friends, our coaches — they were all there for us, cheering us on through every sweat-soaked practice and nerve-racking game. They believed in us even when we doubted ourselves, and they celebrated our victories as if they were their own.

But most importantly, this championship belongs to the whole town of Perry.

It’s a symbol of our resilience, our determination, and our unwavering belief in the power of community. We are the Pirates, and we are champions!

Jayden Studio, Sr., RB/LB

Our Pirates 2023 season started on an amazing foot and fortunately ended on one, too. Since the beginning of the summer, we all trained hard and made sure to build a strong bond. We had fairly high expectations and knew deep within ourselves we could be a very successful team. Starting from the first summer practice we knew we had something to prove this year so we made sure to all give everything we got to become better individually and as a team.

Despite having seven seniors, we had a handful of leaders whether it was vocally or by example, which goes to show you don’t need to be an upperclassman to lead. To be the team we wanted to be we had to work well together and play the way we knew we could play. The first game going into Madison, we knew we had to win. They were our rivals, and we knew starting on a good foot would give us a great edge over opponents. Going into Madison, to be honest, some of us were fairly surprised they were a better team than we expected, not having too much film and not knowing personnel kind of messed us up but we played through it.

PIRATES » PAGE 10

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Pirates

FROM PAGE 9

Going into our second game against Harvey, we knew we had to fight harder and play better which we did and came out successful. Next, was our biggest week by far throughout the regular season against Kirtland. Not too many people had confidence in us considering they've had such a long streak and have beat us previously which gave us more of a chip on our shoulders. We knew we had something to prove and we did so. After that amazing win, we were all stoked and our confidence was at an all-time high, we were so happy but then soon humbled by our coaches.

To stay a great team, you can't get over celebratory, especially about things that happened in the past, we had to look in front of us and focus on what was next. This then came the hardest week of practice yet. Going into Jefferson our practices were torturous, we had conditioning throughout practice on top of live scrimmage over and over. Although those practices were bad they made us better and made us closer as a team which benefited us going forward in the season.

Going into the playoffs, we'd have multiple meetings and film sessions where we'd explain we need to play at 110% every

single game to get what we wanted. Our game against Garrettsville Garfield was a game we all knew we could lose and we had to play sound defense to come out on top. After winning that game our confidence was raised and we knew as a team we could trust each other more especially defensively.

Going into a bigger week though, we had to face the team that kicked us out of the playoffs last year and eventually won the state final game. We were ultra-focused that week and played amazing football during our practices. Walking out on the field we all felt something in us that gave us the strength and confidence to win that game, and by a large sum, too. It felt great winning that game, but similar to Kirtland we had to move onto the next week.

Harvest Prep looked very good on film, very athletic, and very talented. We knew we had to play our best football, offensively and defensively to come out on top. We did. Unfortunately, I was out on offense after the second quarter due to injury but with the depth of our running back core, we sustained and played well. Of course, we were excited going into Perry's first state final but we knew we weren't there to just be in it, we had to win it all.

We had a lot of preparation and watched a lot of films on them which fortunately paid off in the end and we were all able to ex-

perience a feeling nobody else in Perry has experienced before. It was the best moment in most of our lives and it was amazing for all that work to pay off.

Dom LaMacchia, Sr., LB

This year was special. The moment I saw my final season team I knew we were going to go places. We started practice in June and have been blessed to play all the way to the beginning of December. Our first scrimmages were significant proof that we were great. We were making flashy plays on offense, while also letting minimal plays on defense. However, I would say the most significant scrimmage was against Benedictine. When our future D-I athlete Jayden Studio trucked one of their players. We ended up winning that scrimmage with a commanding lead, but also set the tempo for where we would go.

Not only were we great on the field, but also off the field. We made sure to create a strong bond with many extracurricular activities, such as our beach day practice, and our paintball day. One of my favorite memories is hiding in the bushes during the paintball war and sniping Luke Sivon in the back of the head.

Then the season started. Our first competitor was Madison, our rivalry game. This game between us is the equivalent to "The

Game" between Ohio State and Michigan. We started off the season strong with a dominant win against them, 32-7. This set the tone for the season and we got to dominate our rivals. One of my favorite memories from the game was the second play of the game when I got my first sack of the season. It was the start of many this season, compared to last year.

Our biggest game of the regular season was week 3 against the Kirtland Hornets. This was an exhilarating game that showed just how good we were going to be. We were able to conquer the D-VI state champs not only the year prior, but this year as well. This shows that we played tough competition and came out victorious in a 24-6 win. My favorite memory from this game was another big sack that led them to a turnover on downs.

Another hard game that we encountered in the regular season was against Geneva. This was also a close game for us due to their physicality and their strong line. However, we came out with more grit and toughness than ever before and got the job done in a 36-20 win. Another great memory from this game was my strip fumble I had on their running back to end the half. After getting the strip and going into the locker room, they must've felt defeated.

Throughout every week, we practiced like it was our last, always pushing each

other to do better than we thought we could, doing conditioning, and striving to be the best versions of ourselves. This is what we put ourselves through every game in the preseason, regular season and postseason.

The playoffs were no easy task, we had tough competition throughout, starting with Crestwood and Sandy Valley, but the real challenge started once he hit Garfield. Every team from this point on, are schemes that we have been training for since Week 3 against Kirtland. We know how to be physically tough in our gaps, become great tackles, and play with tremendous effort. That is how we won, 42-14, against them. I feel the scoreboard does not show how tough the game felt. They were all hard hitters and very qualified to be a playoff team.

In the regional finals, we had to face South Range. The team that knocked us out of our playoff run last year. But now we were different. We have been preparing for their schemes all season. We were focused, and the energy at practice was different, sharper than ever and we all felt that we wanted a chance to prove how much we have improved. We knew our assignments very well and were able to execute at an elite level, causing us to win 32-0.

We now made it to the elite four, tied for the furthest we have made it in school history, the only

team that had made it this far was in 2016. Harvest Prep was our competitor. We had to play at our highest level to achieve our goal, which we did. They ran similarly to other teams that we've faced, such as Kirtland, Geneva, and Garfield. We were very prepared coming into the game and played at our highest level. Which is how we made it to the state championship game, beating Harvest Prep, 22-8.

The state championship had an electric atmosphere. It was the first time seeing fans that excited, cheering us on. I have a wrestling background, and throughout all of these games, I was not very nervous, but all of the fans and fanfare that transpired before the game made me nervous. Liberty Center, our opponent, was more or less very similar to all of these other Wing-T teams we have faced before, but they had a fantastic O-line. It was a well-fought battle on both sides of the ball but by both of us, but in the end we etched our name in school history by beating the Tigers, 21-14.

This emotion is nothing I've experienced before. So much joy and excitement is genuinely a blessing to experience. I couldn't have done it without my teammates, coaches, parents and fans. This has truly been an outstanding four years of high school football. Thank you all for supporting me and my team. Go Pirates!

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HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL

Going beyond the box scores of state title wins

By John Kampf

jkampf@news-herald.com

The sun wasn't even close to coming up the morning of Dec. 1 when Tiger LaVerde walked into the gymnasium at Kirtland High School.

It was 5:30 a.m. Not only was Kirtland's Division VI state championship game against Versailles five hours away, but the buses that would be taking the Hornets to Tom Benson Hall of Fame Stadium were hours away from being warmed up for the long drive.

LaVerde wanted to clear his mind. He did so as he usually does on Friday morning — by playing basketball with his buddies.

"A group of us played — best of three games," girls basketball coach Matt Ridgeway said. "We lost the first but won the next two. No way we were letting Tiger lose before he went to play for a state championship."

Similarly to LaVerde playing basketball to clear his mind before Kirtland's state title game, Perry coach Bob Gecewich cleared his mind how he usually does by putting in earbuds and walking multiple laps around the periphery of the field on which his team will play. He said he started that tradition after seeing Springfield coach Mo Douglass do so.

The box scores, the game



TIM PHILLIS — FOR THE NEWS-HERALD

Kirtland football coach Tiger LaVerde started his state championship game morning with a best-of-three basketball series in the gym at 5:30 a.m.

stories, the postgame interviews tell a lot about what happened this past weekend when Kirtland defeated Versailles, 32-15, in the Division VI state championship on Friday morning followed by Perry defeating Liberty Center, 21-14, for the Division V title on Saturday afternoon.

Yes, the box scores, game stories and postgame interviews tell a lot. But they don't tell everything. Here are some things that might have gone unnoticed en route to Kirtland and Perry giving Lake County its first two state championships in the same season.

▪ Perry went 0-for-6 in pregame coin tosses in the

postseason. Said senior Brayden Richards, "It's OK we were 0-for-6 in the coin toss if that means being 6-0 and being state champs."

▪ The Pirates fumbled — and recovered — the ball on their second offensive play for the second week in a row. But for two straight weeks put a rough early play behind them to win on the biggest stage.

▪ Kirtland's Max Paul came into the game cold in the third quarter when starting quarterback Jake LaVerde was shaken up on a 72-yard run down to the 3-yard line. Paul came in for a very important play and handed the ball to Rocco Alfieri for a touchdown



PAUL DICICCO — FOR THE NEWS-HERALD

Vince Tomasic's pass breakups were a huge key to Perry's ability to defend the pass against Liberty Center.

when he hadn't taken an offensive snap all day.

▪ Liberty Center had trouble beating Perry in the passing game, and a big reason is the performance by junior defensive back Vince Tomasic, who had three diving pass break-ups. Tomasic led Perry with six interceptions this year, but those three PBUs might be his biggest three biggest plays of the year.

▪ Everybody will remember Willie Beers' 90-yard kickoff return for a touchdown for Kirtland, which set a Division VI state title game record. Few will remember the blocks by Jack Lessick and Noah Runyan that sprung Beers to go untouched for the 90-yard jaunt.

▪ Perry's nose guard Drew Smith's performance

went way beyond his six-tackle performance against Liberty Center. At a generously measured 5-foot-6, 160 pounds, Smith got so low in his stance that Liberty's Center's 6-4 center had no chance of getting beneath Smith to drive him off the ball — hence Smith was able to hold the line and control the middle of the field.

▪ Run-oriented Versailles looked to have Kirtland's defense out-leveraged on a sweep to the right that could have gone for a touchdown if Danny Alfieri hadn't taken on THREE defenders to allow his teammates to flock to the ball for the tackle.

▪ Nico Samac had two of the biggest plays for Kirtland that go unnoticed. He was the one who hustled

down on a punt and wrestled the ball away from a Versailles player when the punt was botched. The call originally went Versailles' way, but was reversed to Kirtland upon review.

Another big play for Samac came on his shoe-string tackle on the kickoff following Beers' 90-yard kickoff return. If not for that trip-up, there would have been back-to-back kickoff returns for touchdowns.

▪ We can't help but to think back to Armani Chiappone being a 135-pound freshman who was so undersized that he couldn't have imagined being a star for the Perry football team. But his 12-tackle performance led everyone in the Division V state championship game.

▪ Both LaVerde and Gecewich lauded the work of their scout teams all season long. Perry captain Jack Knisely accentuated that in a postgame interview — particularly the work of scout team running back Chris Bezzeg.

"He's just getting obliterated on scout offense at running back, but he's running hard every play," Knisely said. "He gets knocked down completely. Jayden will lay him out, and he gets back up and runs the ball again for five yards, making us do up-downs."



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