

Romeo again knocked off in playoffs by Lake Orion

By Keith Dunlap

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LAKE ORION — Usually when a coaching staff presides over a team facing a sizable deficit at halftime, one of the following options are in play for an address to the players:

H.S. Football District Championship

A) A fire-and-brimstone speech where voices go hoarse because of constant yelling, and chalkboards or chairs are casualties of abuse.

B) A strategic adjustment or two that will magically alter the course of the game in the second half.

C) A calm, reassuring approach that ensures that everything

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will be OK despite what seem like bleak circumstances.

Trailing by 13 points to Romeo at half-time on Friday, Lake Orion football coach Chris Bell and his staff chose "C," which was appropriate because it ultimately stood for "comeback."

Seeming as good as eliminated at halftime, the Dragons roared back in the second half, shutting out the Bulldogs and scoring two touchdowns to earn a thrilling, 24-23 comeback win in a Division 1 district final.

Lake Orion advanced to the regional final for the third time in the last four years, although unlike last year and in 2005, the Dragons won't have to travel to Dakota.

Instead, Lake Orion (10-1) will play at Sterling Heights Stevenson (10-1) for the right to go to the state semifinals.

Stevenson won at Dakota, 31-28, and because the Titans have 0.89 more playoff points than Lake Orion, the game will be played at Stevenson.

However, the Dragons won't complain, particularly with how dire the situation seemed at half-time against Romeo.

"At halftime, we just said 'Don't panic,'" Bell said. "As a program, that's something we talk about all the time. Just keep playing. Play for 48 minutes."

It was the third time in four years Lake Orion eliminated Romeo from the state playoffs.

For the Bulldogs (8-3), moving the ball against the Lake Orion defense wasn't a big problem all game long. Finishing drives was a big problem.

Romeo had four drives inside Lake Orion territory which resulted in no points. One of those drives ended on a fumble inside the Lake Orion 10 in the first half, another stalled on downs at the Lake Orion 26 in the third quarter and another ended at the Lake Orion 16 with more than five minutes left in the game

after a missed 33-yard field goal.

"We moved the ball, but obviously we weren't able to put consecutive things together," Romeo co-coach Jason Couch said. "We obviously didn't get the ball in the end zone."

Trailing 23-10, Lake Orion closed to within a touchdown, 23-17, on the first drive of the second half, scoring on a 35-yard pass from freshman Sean Charette to senior wideout Jeff Heath on fourth-and-5.

After halting Romeo's next drive on their own 26, the Dragons dialed up another gutsy fourth-down call to take the lead.

Facing a fourth-and-8 inside the Romeo red zone, Charette rolled to his right and hit senior Charles Fleck for a 19-yard touchdown pass that gave the Dragons a 24-23 lead with 33.9 seconds left in the third quarter.

"Based on the coverage, we thought we could get something," Bell said. "They actually covered it pretty well. But I put in a senior wide receiver in Charles Fleck, and he saw he was covered. He just hooked up his route and Sean saw him right there."

Romeo then drove deep into Lake Orion territory, but the Bulldogs were stopped for no gain on a third-and-1 play at the Lake Orion 16. Facing fourth-and-1, Romeo elected to go for what would've been a go-ahead field goal with more than five minutes to go, but missed.

Following a couple of first downs by Lake Orion on its next drive, Romeo forced a punt, but only had 1:05 remaining and the ball at its own 28 when it got the ball back.

The Bulldogs were stopped there on downs, sending the Lake Orion sideline into a wild celebration and into another regional final chance. Lake Orion lost to Dakota both in 2005 and last year, and the route to its first trip to the semifinals since 1998 will once again go through Macomb County when it plays at Stevenson.