

# Defense, special teams power Eisenhower

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For The Macomb Daily

**SHELBY TOWNSHIP** — On a cool night at Swinehart Field Friday, the Eisenhower Eagles relied on stingy defense and a tremendous special teams unit to defeat the Rochester Falcons, 24-14 in a Division 1 district semifinal.

## Division 1 Football

“I think all three aspects of (our) team came through today,” Eisenhower coach Bob Lantz said. “The offense answering early in the first quarter. ... The special teams with the two kickoff returns and consistent punting under pressure, and our defense coming through in the third quarter and holding them deep in the hole.”

Lantz described it as “a crazy game” in which there was “a lot of doubt” after Rochester racked up the offensive yards in the first half. Both teams were going at each other back and forth to begin the game, exchanging touchdown after touchdown until the Eagles took over in the third quarter.

“We say that everybody’s gonna give us a punch,” Lantz said. “We’re not very big physically, so we’ve got to sustain that early punch and try to let our speed and quickness catch up as the game goes on.

“(Rochester) gave us a good punch. The first half was theirs, the second half was ours,” Lantz added.

Eisenhower’s special teams play was the biggest catalyst in the Eagles’ victory. Even though Eisenhower had a lowly six minutes in terms of time of possession in the first half, it really didn’t matter.

The Eagles did their damage with timely plays, especially before and after halftime.

Alfonzo Vultaggio’s momentum-swinging 74-yard kickoff return for a touchdown with two seconds remaining in the first half occurred only 12 seconds after a Rochester touchdown. Yousseff Bujaidar opened the second half with a monstrous return all the way to Rochester’s 21-yard line, which set up a field goal.

“When it comes to playoff time, you’ve got to be good in all phases, and today, unfortunately, special

teams didn’t come through for us,” said Rochester coach Erik Vernon. “We had a hard time with field position. ... We missed some tackles and we didn’t bring them down.

“Give them credit, they did a good job of setting up the return,” Vernon said.

Vultaggio was the best player on the field for either team, changing the game with his long touchdown return. He also intercepted a pass by Rochester quarterback Nicholas Bradley with less than five minutes remaining in the contest, basically icing the game and assuring the Eagles victory.

“Answering their second touchdown with a kickoff return. ... Alfonzo has just made big plays for us all year,” Lantz said. “(Alfonzo’s) some competitor.”

It looked as if the Eagles made plenty of adjustments following the first half, none more apparent than those in their defense.

After the Falcons statistically dominated the first half, rushing for 126 yards and outgaining the Eagles in terms of total offense, 230-85, they

were held scoreless in the second half.

“We tried to rally at halftime, but (Eisenhower) got the kick return to start the second half,” Vernon said.

“Obviously, we didn’t quite respond. They’re a good team, well-coached.

“I’m proud of our kids, though. I told (the players) it hurts right now and it will hurt for a little bit, but don’t lose sight of what you’ve accomplished this year and I’m proud of them and they should be proud of themselves,” Vernon concluded about his 6-4 season.

Eisenhower will move on to play Romeo. As the Eagles are trying to make up for an early playoff exit last season, Lantz expects a great game with whoever his team plays next week.

“Whatever you saw here will be even better,” Lantz said. “It’s going to be a very good team with very quality players, good coaching. These programs are so identical right now, have been fighting it out the last two-three years.

“We’ve lost the last two and are ready to turn the tide,” Lantz said



Macomb Daily photo by David Dalton  
Eisenhower’s Yousseff Bujaidar (84) catches a pass in front of Rochester’s Michael Kmiec in the third quarter of the Eagles’ 24-14 victory.