

# Romeo takes offense, storms past Utica 70-42 in playoff opener



Macomb Daily photo by Larry Campbell  
**Romeo running back Ryan Burkard looks for running room in the Bulldogs' 70-42 victory. Burkard rushed for 180 yards.**

**By Chuck Klonke**

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Maybe Romeo's football team was still a little angry about having to come to a 6:15 a.m. workout last Wednesday morning to make up for the practice it lost when school closed early on Tuesday because of severe weather predictions.

Whatever the reason, the Bulldogs took it out on Utica in the form of a 70-42 victory Friday in the opening round of the state Division 1 playoffs.

"The kids will say it messed them up because we made them get up at 6:15 and we had a double practice Wednesday morning and Wednesday afternoon," Romeo co-coach Jason Couch said with a smile. "We just had a walk-through in the morning to get familiar with the stunts and blitzes, nothing strenuous.

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## Division 1 Football

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"I was very proud of our guys. They kept after it. Offensively, we had a few things clicking today. The big guys up front were able to take care of things."

It was one of the biggest offensive explosions in quite a while for Romeo, which had a 42-14 halftime lead.

"I never thought we'd score 42 points and lose, but I also knew there was a strong possibility they could score a lot," said Utica coach Tony Smith. "We have to figure out a way to stop those guys because they ran right through us.

"We thought we had a decent game plan going in. We didn't execute it the way we should have, obviously, but offensively we

were able to move the football and get some points on the board."

Running back Ryan Burkard led the attack with five touchdowns. He rushed for 180 yards on 17 carries and didn't carry the ball again after he scored on a 13-yard run with seven minutes remaining in the third quarter.

"The O-line opened the holes," Burkard said. "It was wide open for me. If they keep doing that we can go far."

Burkard deserves a lot of the credit for a season in which he gained more than 1,000 yards. He missed most of last year with a hip flexor problem, but worked to make his senior year a memorable one.

"It's the last year. I have to make it count," he said.

"He lived in the weight room," Couch said. "He'd come in at 4:30 in the morning before practice to

work out."

Romeo scored on six of its first seven possessions in the first half. Nathan Fraeyman got the Bulldogs rolling when he returned the opening kickoff 55 yards to the Utica 35. Three plays later, Burkard scored the first of his touchdowns on a 31-yard run.

Burkard had a four-yard touchdown run the next time Romeo had the ball. An interception by Zachary Bellas set up the Bulldogs' third touchdown -- a 20-yard scoring strike from Blake Laurain to Taylor Brynaert, who outleaped a Utica defender to haul in the pass.

"I thought we needed to be able to run the ball and then get to the passing game after that," Couch said. "Utica has some really good corners. No. 2 (Da'Vontae Kirk) and No. 33 (Wes Rasmussen)

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played really well, but Blake was on today. Two of his incomplete passes were drops that hit our kids in the hands."

Laurain completed seven of 13 passes for 142 yards and two touchdowns.

Utica scored with just under two minutes remaining in the first quarter on a 13-yard pass from Connor Hinebaugh to Sedrick Jones.

Romeo made it 28-7 on a 35-yard pass from Laurain to Brian Roth, who looked like he was walking a tightrope as he stayed in bounds for the final 10 yards. Utica came right back to score on a 20-yard pass from Hinebaugh to Shane VanFleteren.

The Bulldogs, however, answered with two more touchdowns before the first half ended. Burkard scored on a four-yard run that was set up by his 38-yard scamper and a 22-yard pass from Laurain to Brynaert.

Romeo's final touchdown of the half, a six-yard run by Burkard with 2:38 remaining, came after an interception by Fraeyman.

The touchdown parade didn't slow down after the halftime break. Utica needed only two plays to score at the start of the second half - a 45-yard halfback option pass from Jones to VanFleteren and a 17-yard touchdown pass from Hinebaugh to Jones.

Romeo scored the next two touchdowns, both coming as the result of turnovers. Burkard scored from 13 yards out on the first play after an interception by Justin Medley. Then Fraeyman returned an interception 60 yards for a touchdown to make it 56-21.

Zach Williams scored Romeo's last two touchdowns on runs of four and 55 yards.

Hinebaugh had touchdown runs of 21 and seven yards for Utica and he closed out the scor-

ing with a 41-yard pass to VanFleteren, his fourth touchdown pass of the game.

Smith guided Utica to its first Macomb Area Conference White Division championship in 10 years and its first playoff appearance in five seasons. He'd like the Chieftains to follow the blueprint Romeo has used to become one of the powers in the MAC Red.

"I'm not totally disappointed with my team," Smith said. "Our kids played hard. They just got outplayed by a very good football team. That program has been on the way up for a number of years. They're going to get to that final game and they'll realize their goals. That should be our goal, to build ourselves like Romeo has done, going from the Blue to the White to the Red and becoming MAC Red champions."

Smith was sorry to see the season end for his senior-laden squad.

"Our seniors have done a great

job this year," he said. "Those kids worked so hard in the off-season. We had a three-year starting quarterback. Shane VanFleteren had a heck of a game. I think he showed everyone why he's the MAC White player of the year.

"I told the kids not to hang their heads getting on the bus. We accomplished a lot this season. I just wish we could have competed in the playoffs a little bit and see how that would go."

Romeo's next opponent is Eisenhower, a team it beat 14-0 the third week of the season.

"It's been our focus for a while to just come out and play our game," Couch said. "Since game seven or eight we've been clicking a little more and hopefully, we can keep it up. Eisenhower is a heck of a team, but it's not about Eisenhower. We have to come out and compete and play. We have to play hard, we have to play fast and let everything else take care of itself."