

Healthy Spero a dangerous Bulldog

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It didn't take long for Gary Spero to make an impact in Friday's Varsity 1 football semifinal.

The Sir Winston Churchill running back, who has missed most of his final high school season with injuries, ran 43 yards for a major on the Bulldogs' first offensive play of the game.

"I kind of had an idea it was going to be big just by the formation they were in," Spero said. "That's pretty much our go-to hole and I had faith in our offensive line."

The 17-year-old would finish with 25 carries for 160 yards and two touchdowns, leading unbeaten Churchill to a 28-3 victory over visiting Holy Cross.

The 6-foot-2, 188-pounder separated his shoulder in his team's season-opening win over Beamsville and missed two games. He was getting ready for the fourth game of the season against Governor Simcoe when he sprained his ankle two days before the game. He ended up missing another three games before returning to action in the second half of last week's quarter-final victory over Beamsville.

"It was the same ankle I've done a number of times and I was kind of thinking it was getting close to the end of the line for my ankle."

A physiotherapist was able to help bring the ankle back to game shape and the Bulldogs coaching staff aided his recovery by refusing to let him play before he was fully healed.

"I thought I was ready to go a couple of games before, but the coaches wouldn't let me go in," Spero said. "I understand now it was the right decision, but at the time I just wanted to play."

Spero had hoped to play football at a Canadian university this fall, but his academics tripped him up.

"Last year, I was scouted pretty heavily, but I didn't get anywhere because I was lazy, I guess."

He returned to school this fall and, with the help of tutors, raised his marks enough to gain acceptance in a Canadian university. His motivation to hit the books came last summer.

"It was pretty much getting the rejection letters last year saying that your marks don't qualify you for this program. And then, I realized there was no next year. Either I do it now or go to Niagara College."

And while the Bulldogs had enough depth in their backfield to remain unbeaten without Spero, there's no question they're a better team with him.

"He turns it up a notch and you can double team him and triple team him, but we have other weapons," Churchill coach Peter Perron said.

Despite Spero's heroics, Holy Cross hung around in the semifinal until early in the fourth quarter. Trailing 14-3 and marching in Churchill territory, Jarod Cardas deflated the Raiders with a sack and a fumble recovery. The game was over from that point on as the Bulldogs added two late majors.

"They're a tough team and a senior team," Perron said. "We persevered and we still have a perfect game in us."

Holy Cross coach Jim Craig agreed the Cardas play was the TSN (The Standard Newspaper) turning point.

"We were in it and big plays sometimes turn the tide," he said. "And that happened today."

The loss did nothing to detract from a successful season for Holy Cross in its first year of Varsity football.

"The school was excited about football and we were excited about football," Craig said. "We think it was a good season for us."

Holy Cross will lose many key players, but return 15 next season.

"We competed well in this league. They (Churchill) are good a triple A school and we think we competed well as a double A school against them."

Holy Cross loved playing in the Varsity League, even if its arrival was contentious.

"We enjoyed this a lot," Craig said. "We enjoyed the local rivalries and the attention it brought to the players and to the school.

"This was excellent for us and we hope the league enjoyed having us because we believe it was a positive all-around."

Churchill's win sets up a battle of the unbeaten next week at Stamford. And if anyone is asking, the Bulldogs have no interest in playing under the lights on artificial turf in Niagara Falls instead of Stamford's field.

"They won a coin flip to get home-field advantage," Perron said. "Home field is Stamford."