

# Mustangs top Bulldogs for AAA championship

By Brad Peters

It was the only acceptable conclusion to the Saint Michael Mustangs' senior football season.

From the opening kickoff of the first game of the season, the team had one goal in mind: Hoisting the Niagara Regional High School Athletic Association's 'AAA' trophy.

Thursday afternoon, on a cold day and a damp field, the Mustangs rode over the Sir Winston Churchill Bulldogs 31-13 to secure the trophy and bragging rights heading into next season.

Mustangs' head coach Dominic Scozzafava praised his entire team after the game, saying: "Our boys came out hard right from the start. Every one of them played really well today."

Saint Mike's victory was clearly a team effort, but three Mustangs really elevated their play in the championship game: Quarterback Tanner Cranford, Dylan Smythe and Chris Groves.

"This was Chris Groves' last high school football game. Nobody wanted this more than Groves," said the Mustangs coach. "He just ran over or through everybody out there today.

"He played a great, great game."

The seniors from both schools were obviously a little edgy to start the game, as they both exchanged quick possessions with little to show for it, except for their settled nerves. Once each team found its comfort zone, the first half turned into an entertaining battle of back-and-forth football that ended after two quarters almost even, with the Mustangs taking a one-point lead, 8-7, into the second half.

The Mustangs' first successful scoring drive came almost eight minutes into the first quarter. With the Bulldogs pinned deep in their end, they were forced to punt into the wind. The kick was out of bounds at their own 22-yard line, giving the Mustangs prime field position. The second play of the drive saw Cranford find Jordan Provenzano with a pass that he carried to the three-yard line. Smythe got his team on the board with a major on the next play and Provenzano made it 7-0 with the kick.

Both of the Bulldogs touchdowns were good plays, but their first was highlight reel material.

With the Mustangs marching down the field, Cranford threw a pass just through the hands of his receiver. Churchill's Jordan Pollock quickly changed direction, got under the ball and tore down the field, evading several Mustangs on his way to a 55-yard run for the major.

With the half winding down, Provenzano was called on for a field-goal attempt. His kick sailed wide to the left and was picked up by a Bulldog who had nowhere to go in his endzone, so he took the knee, giving the Mustangs an extra point.

The majority of the second half was dominated by the Mustangs. Touchdowns from Groves, Adam Evans and Cranford padded the lead. Tackling a Bulldog in the endzone gave Saint Michael a 31-7 lead heading into the final minutes.

Both teams were playing as hard as they could until the final whistle. The Bulldogs notched another touchdown on a lengthy run from Josh Harris. The Mustangs weren't content just to let the clock wind down and executed a perfect block of the extra-point attempt to cap the scoring at 31-13.

To say that the Bulldogs left it all on the field isn't just a sports cliché this time. They were forced to leave one of their players, Hy Cho, on the field for quite some time as medical personnel treated him.

After the game, Bulldogs' head coach Peter Partridge confirmed that Cho broke his leg on the play.

"I was told that he had his foot planted and the ball carrier was pushed down onto him," said the coach, and one of the medical responders confirmed a lower leg break.

Despite the loss, Partridge was pleased with his team's performance.

"Our guys were in every play, at no point during the game did we get badly outplayed," said the coach. "There was no reason to think that we wouldn't be right there with them throughout the game and we were.

"I couldn't ask any more of our team, they did everything that we asked of them and more today, but Saint Mike's just controlled the line of scrimmage area today."

With the championship game capping the AAA season, Scozzafava is already looking forward to next year.

"We've got such a young team, most of our guys will be back for next year," he said. "I think that we are only losing five guys. With the amount of Grade 11s that we have returning, we should be in good shape for next year."