

OPINION: Wildcats overcome adversity for special season



Seniors on the Louisburg High School football team huddle up one final time to hold the Class 4A Division I sectional runner-up plaque. The Wildcats overcame a lot of adversity and came together for a special season.

Thinking about what to write about following Friday's playoff loss to Bishop Miege, I had several different options from which to choose.

There is ol' "private schools have an unfair advantage" mantra and how hard it is for public schools to compete against them. All true – but don't want to go there today.

Or what about how broken the classification system is in the Kansas State High School Activities Association? Again, very true. However, there is something else that deserves top billing.

Instead of griping how it is unfair for teams like Louisburg to have to compete against teams like Bishop Miege on the Class 4A level, it is important to recognize the Wildcat football team and all it has accomplished this season.

The Wildcats were faced with an uphill battle from the start of the season, and just like Friday in facing the best team in Class 4A, they took the challenge head on and didn't back

down.

Imagine being a player on the football team. You worked hard all summer, put in the time to get better and you realize this season has a chance to be something special. A group of 16 seniors and coaches did everything they could to put the team in the right spot to succeed.

Then a week before the season, head coach Kyle Littrell resigned his post and the Wildcats were left wondering who their leader was going to be. It was a difficult situation for everyone.

However, the players didn't sulk about it. They weren't going to let it affect their season and they got some help along the way.

Former head coach, and current assistant, Gary Griffin and assistant Jeff Lohse took on the head coaching responsibilities. Robert Ebenstein watched over the special teams, while coaches Jason Spradling, Joel McGhee and Zach Livingston all filled in where they were needed.

Those guys took the players under their wing and kept them focused on the task at hand and it was a difficult one – one that featured a tough schedule and lots of distractions.

All the Wildcats did was win five straight games to start the season and crept their way into the state rankings. They could have let a close road loss to Spring Hill, or a district playoff loss to Ottawa get them down – but they didn't.

The players bounced back in each instance and were stronger for it. Following the Ottawa loss, the Wildcats were faced with a must-win situation in the final game of the season on the road at rival Paola – a team they haven't beaten since 2010.

It was an important game in more ways than one. The Paola game

was one the Wildcats had circled since before the season started and it was a contest Littrell wanted his players to get.

Even though he wasn't pacing on the sideline, the players still heeded Littrell's words and went out and downed the Panthers 35-7. The Wildcats also secured a playoff berth at the same time.

Following the game, all the senior players tracked down Littrell to get a picture with their former coach and made he sure got to enjoy the victory, a win that had been a long time coming.

Louisburg wasn't done celebrating, though.

The next week, the Wildcats ventured to Independence for the regional playoffs and earned a 20-0 shutout to get their first playoff win since 2012. It was an amazing night for these group of players as they reveled in what it felt like to get a victory in the playoffs.

They also made sure their former coach got to touch the regional championship plaque as the entire team ran to the opposite end of the field to track down Littrell and they all celebrated around him.

You see, this team has been a family since day one. They have stuck by each other through the good times and bad, and they wanted to achieve that ultimate prize.

To get there, the Wildcats knew they would have to conquer the highest mountain of all in defending state champion Bishop Miege. Louisburg was unable to reach the top, and to be honest, no other team in Class 4A will get close – the Stags are just that much better than everyone else.

When Friday's game was done, the 16 Louisburg seniors had to contemplate life without football. No more Friday night

lights, no more pregame meals, film sessions are done and grueling practices are only a memory.

Despite the loss, these players should not hang their heads. They should be proud of what they accomplished and look forward to what is ahead – whatever it may be.

All that stuff seems cliché, I know. But it's true.

It is a team that made a community proud in some of the most difficult circumstances. They showed tremendous character, worked hard and never backed down.

In the end, that is all you can ask.