

Lawrence Academy hangs on to win a nail-biter in the Hugh Caldera Bowl *By*

Sam Feeley

EASTHAMPTON — On the scoreboard, it came down to one point. But if you ask Paul Zukauskas what amounted to the difference between his Lawrence Academy Spartans and the Williston Northampton School Wildcats on Saturday, it was simple — love.

“They love the game of football,” Zukauskas said of his Hugh Caldera Bowl champion Spartans, who defeated the Wildcats in a nail-biter, 35-34, to claim the 2014 New England Preparatory School Athletic Council Hugh Caldera Bowl championship at Sawyer Field on Saturday afternoon. “They wanted to win and they cared about each other. You can win football games that way.”

It was the eighth consecutive victory for the Spartans after dropping the season opener to Governor’s.

After falling behind 27-0 at halftime, the Wildcats — specifically, running back Max Chipouras — came out of the locker room on a mission. Chipouras rushed for four touchdowns and 91 yards in the third quarter alone to give the Wildcats a 28-27 lead. During the furious rally, the Wildcats mixed in a successful onside kick, a diving catch in double coverage by Marshall Rizzuto (two catches, 51 yards) and a firm denial of Lawrence running back AJ Dillon, who was held to just 49 rushing yards in the second half after notching 110 yards in the first half.

After being hit with Chipouras’s haymakers, the Spartans answered the proverbial bell in the fourth quarter and regained the lead. The defense forced a Williston three-and-out, then Jake Cassidy (11-of-22, 160 yards) found Timothy Preston (four catches, 118 yards) for their third touchdown hookup of the game. Cassidy found Preston again on the ensuing 2-point conversion, and the Spartans led 35-28 with just under 11 minutes to go in the fourth.

The Wildcats found the end zone one more time on another Chipouras touchdown. They went for the two-point conversion and the lead, but the Spartan defense stopped Chipouras (265 all-purpose yards) in the backfield, preserving a one-point edge.

“Give credit to both teams,” Zukauskas said. “Both teams came out and played a great football game. [Williston] did an outstanding job in the second half, but our kids responded nonetheless.”

After a Lawrence punt, the teams traded turnovers on the next four possessions, including a bizarre sequence for the Lawrence offense. Trying to run out the clock, Williston took their final timeout after a run up the middle on first down. The Spartans took two knees before realizing that they would have to snap it on fourth down. Cassidy took the snap and tried to run out the clock, but the Williston defense stopped him for a huge loss at the Lawrence 36-yard line with four seconds left, enabling the Wildcats to get one last shot at a game-winning touchdown.

However, the Spartan defense held up, as Williston quarterback John Aywayrd (5-for-18, 91 yards; nine carries, 81 yards) threw his fifth and final interception of the game, and the second into the hands of Christian Garrison, setting off the celebration for the Spartans.

“We had a lot of high hopes,” Zukauskas said. “This was the expectation for the team. We didn’t have a

great season last year. They knew it, and there was a feeling that we could have a great season. We lost the opener, but we never looked back. It's such a strong group of kids, and they really care for each other. They really respond to one another; they have a great time together. It was fun to coach them."

In the first half, Cassidy and Dillon each scored a rushing touchdown, and Preston had two receiving touchdowns.

"Williston put in an amazing effort. But to see the work that our kids put in, to see the way they responded in pressure — that's a well-coached team and that's a well-led team," Head of School Dan Scheibe said, who traversed Massachusetts to watch the Spartans win. "It's a big tribute to the seniors and a huge tribute to the coaching staff, particularly Coach Zukauskas."

In the end, though, the head coach said it was the players themselves who should garner the most praise.

"Anytime you win a league and win a bowl game, you need leadership — from the players' perspective; it's more important than the coaches' perspective," said Zukauskas, who moments before had told his players, "I love you guys. Thank you for what you've given this school. Thank you for what you've given this team."