First-round shutout keeps team in playoffs

COZAD—Gothenburg's defense allowed Cozad little room to breathe Thursday night as the Swedes shut down Haymaker stand-out Jake Paulsen and the rest of the No. 4-seeded road opponent for a first-round Class C-1 state playoff victory.

A pair of goal line stands in the third quarter were key stops for the Swedes as Gothenburg earned the 23-0 shutout upset.

"I wouldn't say we played super-human football," said Swede coach Craig Haake, "but our boys pretty much exploded and the ball game was one-sided from the opening kickoff."

There was an unparalleled intensity in the Swedes every play, Haake said, and unlike last time the teams met when the Haymakers won 42-7, Cozad had no answer.

No. 13-seeded Gothenburg opened the game with a time-consuming drive that ended with a 35-yard field goal attempt by junior kicker Trenton Long.

The ball sailed wide left, though, giving Cozad its first shot.

The Swedes ended the Haymaker threat quickly as junior defensive back Skyler Kottwitz intercepted a Nate Bubak pass, giving the Swedes the ball on their own 42 yard line.

Gothenburg drove to the Cozad 5 yard line but again had to settle for a field goal attempt, which this time flew wide right.

“I got that thought in the back of my head,” Haake said. “Seems like we’ve played this record before.”

Haake said he worried a bit about Gothenburg’s season-long struggle to score after collecting plenty of yards but the Swedes didn’t have long to dwell on it.

They held Cozad on the next series and Connor Schwanz returned the Haymaker punt to the 36 yard line, setting up the first touchdown.

With 10 minutes left in the second quarter, Franzen scored on a 6-yard run. The PAT failed, giving Gothenburg a 6-0 lead.

At the same time, the Swedes held Cozad out of the red zone throughout the first half.

Gothenburg put three more points on the board before halftime with a 35-yard field goal by Long.

“Trent’s a great kicker,” Haake said. “We have faith in him and we’ll keep going back to him time and time again.”

With a 9-0 advantage at the half, Haake said he figured his team would need to keep the pressure on.

He was right.

“We played responsible football in the first half and we made tackles,” the coach said. “It was important for us to continue that.”

After a 22-yard kickoff return into Gothenburg territory, Cozad used Paulsen to push to the Swede 5 yard line.

On fourth-and-goal, Paulsen was stopped short on the 1 yard line.

Cozad seemed to build a little momentum as the Haymakers forced the Swedes to punt and took possession with a short field.

Cozad drove again inside the 5 yard line but the Swede defensive line came up huge, stopping Paulsen at the 3.

“Cozad had a nice sized hole for him to run through too,” Haake said, “but Blake (Ristine) and Logan (Sheets) closed it immediately and the play was over. We made two goal line stands in a matter of about four minutes.”

And as if that wasn’t enough to deflate the Haymakers, Gothenburg put together another 97-yard drive using eight plays to march the length of the field.

Franzen set up the touchdown with a 35-yard run and a face mask penalty tacked on.

Sheets finished it off with a 15-yard scoring run. The Long PAT put Gothenburg up 16-0 at the end of the third period.

Midway through the fourth quarter, Gothenburg tacked on the final touchdown with a 42-yard quarterback keeper by Ristine and a Long PAT.

After that, it was a matter of running time off the clock, Haake said.

Franzen finished with 138 yards rushing to lead the Swedes offensively with Ristine completing three passes, all to sophomore Zach Wolf, for 44 yards.

Sheets came up big defensively with three solo tackles and 16 assists. Long added 13 tackles with Ristine and Kottwitz getting 11 each and Franzen and Adam Speck pitching in 10 each.

“This was big,” Haake said. “We not only wanted to get into the playoffs but we want to advance.”

At 5-4, Gothenburg will travel to Chadron on Wednesday (today) for the second round of the the Class C-1 state playoffs.

The 12th seeded Cardinals are 6-3, coming off a 35-13 upset victory over Valentine last week.

Gothenburg last played at Chadron in 2008 when the Swedes lost 35-21 in the state quarter-finals.

“These guys are probably as good as we’ve seen,” Haake said of the Cardinals. “They’re not concerned with running the ball either. They’ll throw it all over the place. That’s OK, though. We’d like them to be one-dimensional.”

Chadron quarterback T.D. Stein has several receivers to choose from, Haake said, and he’s patient in the pocket.

“Our DBs will have to stay locked on him,” the coach said. “We need to put him on the ground often.”

This is the eighth time the Swedes have advanced to the second round of the playoffs since 1979. They’ve gotten to the third round four times.

Kickoff of the second-round playoff game at Chadron High School is set for 2 p.m. MT.

Should the Swedes win, they would face the winner of the other second-round game in the west bracket with No. 9 Chase County (6-3) hosting No. 1 Boone Central/Newman Grove (8-1) on Tuesday.