

# **Bixby Overcomes Bulldogs, Meets Owasso in Championship**

**By Ron Holt**

CLAREMORE – Adversity and a stout opponent failed to derail Bixby Spartans' plans of playing in their 11<sup>th</sup> straight state championship football game.

A solid defensive performance and complimentary offensive effort lifted the Spartans to a 29-8 victory over surging Edmond Memorial in a Class 6A-1 state semifinal game in front of a large, chilly crowd at Claremore High's Lantow Field here last Friday night.

In an earlier state semifinal game here last Friday afternoon, unbeaten Owasso defeated Jenks 30-27 in two overtimes in advancing to the state championship game for the fifth time in the last eight seasons. Bixby (10-2) and Owasso (12-0) play for the Class 6A-I gold ball at 7 p.m. Friday (Dec. 6) at the University of Central Oklahoma's Chad Richison Stadium in Edmond. For Bixby, it's the Spartans' 11<sup>th</sup> straight appearance in the state title game – eight in Class 6A-II and third straight in 6A-1. Bixby will be the home team and the underdog.

Four turnovers – three in the first half – hampered Bixby's offensive consistency in the first half but fortunately Edmond Memorial (9-3) was only able to convert one of the turnovers into first half points as the Spartans held a 14-8 lead at intermission.

Bixby's defense limited the damage with a strong showing throughout against a potent Bulldog offense led by senior quarterback David McComb, a University of Kansas commitment.

Edmond Memorial, which played turnover-free, was held to eight first downs, 142 yards of total offense and lost the time of possession, 23:29 to 16:16. The Bulldogs were 0-for-12 on third down and 1-for-3 on fourth down attempts.

Despite three lost fumbles and an intercepted pass, Bixby's offense ended with 23 first downs, 396 total offensive yards – 206 rushing and 186 passing - and were successful nine out of 14 times converting on third down.

“Our defense played really well,” Bixby head coach Loren Montgomery said afterward. “David McCombs is a Division I quarterback, and we had him on the run most of the night. We got some critical stops after we turned the ball over. The defense bowed their necks and did a good job all night.

“They have one of the best defensive lines we've seen. They're super sound in what they do. Coach (Tyler) Schneider did a great job of being creative in our run looks and trying to get some leverage situations. We maintained our blocks and kept the ball in the hands of our playmakers,” he added.

Bixby's offense went to work after receiving the game's opening kickoff. Driving 80 yards in five plays, the Spartans found the end zone as junior quarterback Carson Kirby passed to junior Braeden Presley, who found an opening down the visitors' sideline and followed a final block by senior Blake Hogshooter to complete a 54-yard touchdown.

Senior Bradey Tao's conversion kick gave Bixby an early 7-0 lead. A 19-yard run by Cooper Parker on third down kept the drive alive.

Edmond Memorial later intercepted a pass by receiver Presley at the Bixby 38-yard line, but Bixby's defense stopped the Bulldogs on fourth-and-nine when Parker and Trey McGlothlin sacked McComb to set up the Spartans' next scoring drive.

The Spartans went on a 52-yard, nine-play drive to extend their lead to 14-0 after Parker scored on a one-yard plunge with 2:22 left in the first stanza. Tao kicked the conversion. The drive featured an 11-yard run by Kirby, a four-yard run by Kirby followed by a face mask penalty on the Bulldogs and a 20-yard pass from Kirby to junior Nathan Gonzalez.

Early in the second quarter, Kirby passed to Gonzalez who ran for three yards before fumbling. The Bulldogs recovered at the Bixby 32-yard line. Edmond Memorial faced fourth-and-13 from the Spartan 30-yard line during the ensuing drive when McComb scrambled before completing a 20-yard pass to sophomore Isaac Woodard to the Bixby 10.

Three plays later, McComb hit senior Billy McDown for a six-yard touchdown. Junior Nick Booker ran for the two-point conversion narrowing the Spartan lead to 14-8 with 6:58 left before halftime and inspiring the Bulldogs and their fans.

Bixby's final possession of the first half ended as Kirby fumbled after a 13-yard run and the Bulldogs recovered deep in their own territory.

After forcing an Edmond Memorial punt on the Bulldogs first possession of the second half, Bixby's offense extended its lead.

Bixby drove 74 yards in 10 plays with Kirby finding an opening down the Spartan sideline and broke away from the Bulldog defense in racing 22 yards for the TD at the 5:37 mark of the third quarter. Parker ran for the two-point conversion and 22-8 Spartan lead.

The scoring drive was highlighted by Kirby passes of 11 and 13 yards to Tyler Wright and Cord Nolan, respectively. Parker amassed 21 yards on three rush attempts before Kirby ran for the TD.

The next BHS possession resulted in a 52-yard, five-play scoring drive as Kirby connected with Presley for a 29-yard TD pass and Tao kicked the extra point for a 29-8 lead with 2:27 left in the third frame.

"He's getting better each and every week," Montgomery said of Presley, who ended with six pass receptions for 92 yards and two TDs while also being credited with five tackles, four unassisted, as a defensive back. "Last year he was injured, but in the spring, he got better and each week this season his role has increased ... he's gotten better on both sides of the ball."

Bixby's fourth turnover, a fourth quarter lost fumble, gave EMHS the ball at the Spartans' 45-yard line. The Spartans' defense again rose to the occasions, limiting the Bulldogs to eight yards in seven plays before forcing a punt.

Against a talented defensive front, Bixby's offense ended with 206 yards rushing on 44 carries for an average of 4.7 yards per carry.

"We knew we needed to run it, that was the main thing we needed to work on because their D-line was the best part of their defense," said Bixby's 6-6, 303-pound senior offensive tackle Broderick Shull. "We knew if we did our blocking correctly and executed, we could get to the second level ... that's what we were mainly focusing on was getting past their D-line."

"We did struggle with turnovers, but we pushed through. The way we overcame adversity and the way we wanted to win that game gave me hope for us in the state championship game," he added.

Parker, Bixby's 5-11, 205-pound two-way standout, led the Spartans defensively with 14 total tackles, 12 unassisted, three tackles for loss and one sack while junior linebacker Cord Nolan was credited with 11 total tackles, 10 solo stops and one tackle for loss.

Senior defensive back Brooks Dixon had eight tackles, four unassisted and one tackle for loss while McGlothlin ended with six tackles, two unassisted and one sack. Wright had five tackles, four unassisted, and junior Dawson Madden had four tackles, one solo. Sophomore lineman Kaeden Penny had one sack.

"Usually if you have four turnovers it's not going to turn out well for you, but I was proud of the way we overcame it ... the defense did a good job stopping them," said Parker, who also ended with 88 yards rushing on 19 carries and one touchdown.

"Coach Schneider told me before the game to be ready for anything, it just depended on how the game goes," Parker noted. "We did really good running the ball ... the O-line did a good job blocking up front, they all had great games tonight."

**CHAMPIONSHIP OUTLOOK** – Owasso, Bixby's Class 6A-1 state championship game opponent, is very familiar to the Spartans, especially in recent years. The Spartans and Rams have played six times in the past three years since Bixby moved to the state's largest classification.

Veteran head coach Bill Blankenship led the Rams in the earlier meetings while his assistant Antonio Graham is Owasso's head coach this season.

OHS defeated Bixby, 40-21, in the Battle of the Burbs at Owasso to open this season. This was the third edition of the Battle of the Burbs with the other two games played at the University of Tulsa's stadium.

Last season, Bixby topped the Rams, 42-16, in the Battle of the Burbs at TU before defeating OHS 56-14 in the state semifinals. In 2022, Bixby topped Owasso, 49-14, in the first Battle of the Burbs and handed the Rams a 69-6 loss in the Class 6A-1 semifinals.

Owasso is a problem for every defense with their collection of speedy skill players, an improving young quarterback and a veteran, talented offensive line.

In Owasso's 40-21 home win over the inexperienced Spartans during the Zero Week, Bixby stayed with the Rams, trailing 13-7 at halftime. The Spartans trimmed the deficit to 26-21 midway through the fourth quarter before the Rams coasted home with the win, scoring the final 14 points.

OHS sophomore quarterback Drew Frankenfield was 12-of-16 passing for 233 yards and two touchdowns while being intercepted once. He rushed six times for 60 yards. Talented Tah'Kari Bethel caught five passes for 146 yards and two touchdowns while returning a kickoff 99 yards for a TD.

Jayson Moll rushed for one score while senior wide receiver Noah Hill kicked all the Rams' extra points. Owasso's offensive line is led by senior Blake Cherry (6-6, 295 pounds), an Oklahoma commitment, and Ryker Haff (6-6, 305 pounds), an Oklahoma State commit. Hudson Hodges and senior Jaydon Moll recorded pass interceptions for the Rams.

In the first meeting, OHS ended with 467 total yards while Bixby had 397 offensive yards. The Spartans had three turnovers while the Rams had two.

"It's an opportunity for us to, hopefully, see how much we've improved from Zero Week," Coach Montgomery said. "We had a lot of new faces out on the field, a lot of young guys so hopefully we've matured a little bit."

Parker, a senior co-captain, said of the finals' test, "We've got to have our best game ... it's the last game of the season."

**NOTABLES** – Incredibly, Bixby has won nine of its last 10 appearances in the state championship game, has won 84 of its last 87 games and increased its playoff record to 31-1 since 2014. ... Bixby led Edmond Memorial 14-8 in the first half while dominating the statistics. In the opening half, Bixby had 225 total yards, 11 first downs and 13:29 in time of possession. The Bulldogs had 89 total yards, four first downs and 8:90 time of possession. ... This season, first-year kicker Bradley Tao has kicked 62-of-63 extra point attempts and was successful kicking field goals three times in four tries. ... BHS quarterback Carson Kirby was 20-of-24 passing for 186 yards and two touchdowns against Edmond Memorial. He also rushed 18 times for 101 yards and one TD. Following Presley in the receiving department were Nathan Gonzalez with five catches for 33 yards and Cord Nolan with four catches for 29 yards. ... As a team this season, Bixby has 2,859 yards passing and 33 TDs while rushing for 2,800 yards and 38 TDs. The Spartans average 46.4 points per game while allowing 19 points per game. The last time Bixby played at Claremore was Sept. 25, 2015, when the Spartans upended the host Zebras, 47-27. ... Spartan captains in the state semifinal were Parker, Nolan, Presley and Bode Cairl.

**BHS SCOREBOARD (10-2)** – Spartan 2024 scores (at home except when noted): at Owasso (L, 40-21), vs. Sand Springs (W, 50-10), at Choctaw (W, 55-27), vs. Jenks (W, 21-7), at Moore (W, 49-7), vs. Edmond North (W, 85-24), at Enid (W, 56-14), vs. Mustang (W, 64-35), at Deer Creek (W, 48-10), vs. Norman (L, 31-20), vs. Norman North (W, 59-14, state quarterfinals), vs. Edmond Memorial (W, 29-8, state semifinals at Claremore).

**OHS SCOREBOARD (12-0)** – Ram 2024 scores (at home except when noted): vs. Bixby (W, 40-21), at Jenks (W, 42-24), at Sand Springs (W, 48-17), vs. Broken Arrow (W, 49-21), at Tulsa Union (W, 48-14), vs. Westmoore (W, 55-0), at Edmond Memorial (W, 46-14), vs. Edmond Santa Fe (31-27), at Norman North (W, 64-54), vs. Yukon (W, 50-14), vs. Deer Creek (40-26, state quarterfinals), vs. Jenks (W, 30-27, 2 OT, state semifinals at Claremore).

### **Bixby 29, Edmond Memorial 8**

#### **First Quarter**

BHS - Braeden Presley 54 pass from Carson Kirby (Bradley Tao kick)

BHS – Cooper Parker 1 run (Tao kick)

#### **Second Quarter**

EMHS – Billy McDown 6 pass from David McComb (Nick Booker run)

#### **Third Quarter**

BHS – Kirby 22 run (Parker run)

BHS – Presley 29 pass from Kirby (Tao kick)