

Kildonan East caps perfect campaign

Blank Dryden to claim Division 3 football crown

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THE Kildonan East Collegiate varsity football team displayed excellence on a night they sought perfection.

The Reivers blanked Dryden High School 30-0 to capture the Winnipeg High School Football League Division 3 provincial crown on Wednesday night at IG Field, ending their 2022 campaign a perfect 8-0, including playoffs.

It's Kildonan East's first varsity football title since 2016 when they bested the league's 25th-31st seeds in a floating playoff format.

"It's really surreal," said Grade 11 linebacker Darius Totin. "We worked hard all off-season, all season, an entire year of preparing. This group of guys is special. There's so much team chemistry, we really do feel like a family. We pick each other up. When one's down, we're there for them.

"And this meant a lot not just for the team but for the community around us. It was really great to see everyone come together, and to have that undefeated season felt even better."

Totin led a stingy Reivers defensive unit that allowed just 26 points in five games during the regular season. It was more of the same against the Eagles' run-heavy attack, which they held to a measly seven points in the regular season finale, preventing the out-of-towners from crossing midfield for much of the night and sacking them four times.

"It felt amazing," Totin said. "I never had a play where I didn't think I could trust someone for us. I think we're a special group. We have great guys at all positions and everyone can make plays. It's really great to have that much trust in a team and to be that collective together, where we're all there for each other."

The Eagles, who surprised some by making the championship game in the first place as the fourth seed in the eight-team playoff, struggled mightily on special teams throughout the game, especially when punting. The Reivers had three possessions in the first half that started deep in Dryden territory due to miscues in the third phase.

Kildonan East's Declyn Walby fielded a short pop-up punt in the first quarter and returned it

inside Dryden's one-yard line. Two plays later, running back Jesse Andrews received a direct snap and outran the Eagles' contain to open the scoring with a five-yard major late in the first quarter.

The Reivers set up shop inside the Eagles' 20yard line after another short punt in the second quarter, eventually punching in a one-yard rushing touchdown to extend their lead, courtesy of quarterback Colm Balez.

To the Eagles' credit, their defence, which allowed just 66 points during the regular season and 15 points through its first two playoff matchups, shouldered the massive burden placed by the offence and special teams admirably. Despite the constantly favourable field position, the Reivers, who also feature a run-oriented offence, slugged through much of the first half.

With the defence keeping Dryden in the game, it wasn't until Kildonan East running back Gavin Buckmaster scampered for a five-yard major as the third quarter closed that the Reivers built a comfortable 21-point lead.

"(The defence) helped us so much, the whole season," said Buckmaster, who handled most of the workload out of the backfield for Kildonan East and was honoured as the match's offensive player of the game. "They're the reason we won this game."

"We had our ups and downs during the season. When I saw that clock hit zero, I was so happy. So happy for my teammates."

The play of the night came in the final frame as returner Ayden Walby scooped a punt off the turf and outran the field to the end zone, stamping the Reivers' long-awaited title.

"The K.E. community, I've been a part of that community for a long time and it's just a special thing," said Kildonan East head coach Jason Hawkins, who's headed the program since 2012. "The guys bought in. We didn't have a team since 2019 and they bought into everything we were doing: offseason training, working hard, getting better. All those pieces. It's huge."

"We talked about the idea of just buying in and trusting each other. Our message today was, 'Trust. Just trust the person around you. We're turning it over to you. We've done everything

we can do as coaches. We're trusting you to take this to the final step,' and they did."

In the second game of Wednesday's back-to-back, Sturgeon Heights Collegiate Huskies and Vincent Massey Collegiate (Brandon) Vikings collided in a thriller with the WHSFL Division 2 provincial crown on the line.

The battle-of-undefeateds saw the Vikings knock off the Huskies in overtime 20-14 to cap their 8-0 season.

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Above: The Kildonan East Collegiate Reivers celebrate their Winnipeg High School Football League Division 3 championship after beating Dryden High School Eagles, Wednesday night at IG Field.

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Left: Kildonan East's Gavin Buckmaster (centre) earned offensive player of the game honours.

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