

# OV passes tough test to get to semis

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Mill River's Kaleb Spencer (86) tries to tackle Otter Valley's Brady Diaz (4) during Saturday's Division III quarterfinal at Markowski Field in Brandon.

Photo by Brenna Jepson



Otter Valley's Caleb Whitney (3) tries to escape pressure from Mill River's Zachary Furman (88) during Saturday's Division III quarterfinal at Markowski Field in Brandon.

Photo by Brenna Jepson

BRANDON — There were not the offensive fireworks set off by Otter Valley in its 37-6 victory over Mill River during the regular season, Saturday's Division III quarterfinal football game was about hard-nosed defense but the result was the same: Otter Valley 12, Mill River 6.

The signal was given early that this would be about a defensive head knocker with neither team scoring in the opening quarter.

The Otters took the lead they would never surrender into halftime.

It came 8:29 before the half when OV quarterback Caleb Whitney hooked up with Brady Diaz on a 16-yard scoring pass.

It was a play that looked ill-fated from the start. Whitney was in the shotgun and juggled a high snap. But he coolly gained his hold on the ball and rifled the ball to Diaz for the score.

The Otters went for the two points but failed to convert.

The hookup between Whitney and Diaz was one of the few offensive highlights of the half but there were plenty of big plays by the guys on the defensive side of the ball.

OV's Isaac Whitney recovered a fumble and his teammate Richard Lafontaine pulled in an interception.

The Otters' Keevon Parks was getting penetration into the backfield and had a couple of tackles for a loss.

"I started to recognize the formations and that allowed me to be there," Parks said. "I was able to get in there in full drive."

Mill River's Zach Furman added to the defensive feel of the day with a couple of big sacks.

"Zach was plagued with shoulder issues all season. He was cleared to play and his play was a wild card for us today," Mill River coach Greg Lewis said.

The Otters added to their lead with 1:46 remaining in the third quarter when Diaz sprinted to the outside, made a couple of defenders miss and then sped to the end zone, the play covering 25 yards.

Things got interesting when Ross Badgley got loose for a 44-yard touchdown run. Once he got to the second level, nobody had a chance to catch him.

The kick for the point was wide left.

There was still 6:59 left, giving the No. 6 Minutemen time in their attempt to pull off the upset.

The Minutemen got the ball back with 4:13 still remaining on the Otter Valley 48-yard line.

The Otter Valley defense stood tall, forcing a fourth-and six. When quarterback Anthony Cavalieri's pass fell incomplete, there was nothing to do but run out the clock and get ready for Saturday's trip for the semifinal game against No. 2 Fairfax/Lamoille.

Lafontaine had a second interception and Dylan Anderson had a key tackle for a loss in the fourth quarter to help spearhead the Otters' outstanding defensive effort.

Both teams had quarterbacks take over the position in mid-season and Cavalieri and Caleb Whitney each gave a spark to the respective offenses.

Cavalieri was 10-of-22 for 114 yards and Badgley and Adam Shum ran the ball hard for the Minutemen.

But their Achilles heel was bogging down in the red zone.

"Three times we got down there," Lewis said.

Lewis was elated with the improvement shown by his team late in the season after getting whipped 37-6 at Otter Valley weeks earlier.

"Our schedule was a little easier at the end but we did get better," Lewis said.

"We had a chance to win this game at the end. I don't think a lot of the kids and parents thought we a chance to do that."

The high snaps from center sometimes threw off the timing of the Otters' offense but coach Kipp Denis said that will be fixed before the team heads to Fairfax.

"Caleb and Isaac Whitney and Keevon Parks had some big plays for us on defense. We move Isaac all over the field," Denis said.

"We played up at Fairfax two years ago when nobody gave us a chance and we won."

Part of having a chance to win in Fairfax will rest with cleaning up the penalties. Both Otter Valley and Mill River were flagged for an inordinate number of penalties.

Lewis attributed that to emotions stemming from the rivalry.

"It is always an emotional game when we play Otter Valley," Lewis said.

"I am very proud of these guys. There are only four teams left," Denis said.

"Every year at the start, our goal is to get to the championship," Parks said. "In August, we looked at each other and we knew we could get there."