

Solid Second Half helps Aitkin Sink Agates

By John Sandstrom

Head football coach Coach Tom Nelson has given the same message each time we have visited this season:

- We are a young team. We do a lot of things right, but we have lots to learn.
- We have a stretch of three incredibly difficult games in our schedule with Aitkin, Mora, and Esko.
- If we can stay healthy and don't make a ton of mistakes, we can play with anyone.

Most observers and fans would say his message is accurate. The Agates are young, but players believe they are learning each week. Coaches and players all believe that they are improving and, although they make mistakes, they never quit.

Last Friday night, the Agates hosted Aitkin and the Gobblers left with a 28-14 victory. Nelson said, "When you play a team like

Aitkin, you have to play mistake free. We did not do that. We had penalties, a fumble, and some mistakes that came at a costly time. We played very tough on defense to begin the game."

The Agates had an early lead behind Isaiah Hietala's 60-yard punt return. Hietala also scored on a 6-yard run late in the fourth quarter.

In the second half, the powerful Aitkin defensive line was the difference. "They have sixteen seniors, and on defense their interior linemen were 250 to 275 pounds. I don't want to take anything away from them. They are solid. I told our guys that we have proved to ourselves that we can play with a good team, but we cannot make mistakes."

Senior Ethan Bopp says the season is going well. "The players get along well and I think we are meshing. We only have five or six seniors so we are young. The highlight of the year was being down 12-0 to Rock Ridge and

coming back to win. That was fun."

Cash Williams is a junior at William Kelley High School. "Aitkin had some big boys. It was a good football game. I think we have a good defense though, and we are getting better. I am excited to play Esko and Mora. It will be a good test."

On offense, Kyler Pitkanen led the Agates with 58 yards rushing, followed by Zack Libal with 22 and Jacob Carpenter with 21 yards.

Defensively, Cash Williams led the Agates with 12 tackles and a recovered fumble, while Zach Bentler had 10 tackles, including three for a loss. Tate Nelson added 10 tackles.

The Agates travel to Mora Friday. Mora might be the best 0-3 team in the state. They lost to Esko, Grand Rapids, and North Branch, and played these three quality teams tough.

As Coach Nelson says, "If we can stay healthy and don't make a ton of mistakes, we can play with anyone."

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