

Dons driven to distraction

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VENTURA — There's no comparison between losing home field advantage in a late season high school football showdown and the dreadful prospect of actually losing one's home.

Many members of the Santa Barbara football team had to face evacuations and other inconveniences caused by the Tea Fire that has devastated parts of Santa Barbara and Montecito. And though the myriad of distractions hanging over the Dons players and coaches weren't solely responsible for the 52-28 loss to Ventura Saturday night, the fire and its affect couldn't be entirely discounted.

"It's just a shame. It didn't seem that we were ready to come play, but with everything that's been going on, who could blame them?" said Santa Barbara head coach Will Gonzales after his team gave up three fourth quarter touchdowns to fall to 4-6 on the season, 3-2 in the Channel League.

With both teams having already secured reservations to the CIF Northern Division playoffs that begin Friday, the matchup would determine the order by which Ventura and Santa Barbara would go to the playoffs. The game had originally been scheduled for Friday night as the Dons' regular season home finale at Peabody Stadium, but with city resources dedicated to fighting the fire, different arrangements were made.

Santa Barbara showcased its prolific spread offense from its first snap, driving 81 yards in nine plays. Quarterback John Uribe completed seven of nine passes on the drive, the last

throw glancing off the hands of Andrew Mendoza and into the waiting arms of Peter Garcia for a 19-yard score.

The early results seemed promising for the Dons, who forced Ventura to punt on its first drive. But two incomplete passes and a holding play drove Santa Barbara backward, and on a third-and-25 play, Uribe fired a long pass that was intercepted by Cougars defensive back Parker Peterson. Five plays later, Ventura was in the end zone courtesy of a one-yard score by Matt Melnar.

After the Dons went three-and-out, Melnar, who finished the day with 176 rushing yards, scored on a 34-yard run to put Ventura ahead 14-7. But Santa Barbara knotted the score on the first quarter's final play, as Roberto Nelson outjumped a Ventura defender for a 12-yard score.

But while Santa Barbara has been proficient at putting up big numbers on offense, the Dons defense has been just as deficient in allowing them. Ventura exploited its opportunity, as receiver E.J. Turner took and end around handoff and raced 70 yards to put the Cougars back on top 21-14. The son of the late Ventura great Eric Turner ran the end around to great effect, totaling 130 yards on only six attempts on the night.

Uribe connected with Nelson again for a 21-yard scoring strike to tie the score at 21-21, but Ventura ran a two-minute drill to perfection. After a Ventura touchdown pass was negated by an illegal procedure penalty, the Cougars went right back to work as

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quarterback Keihan Gibbs lofted a 23-yard touchdown pass to Melnar with only seven seconds left for a 28-21 lead.

The Cougars extended their lead to 31-21 on a 23-yard field goal by Benn Mann, and Uribe scrambled to find Freddy Maldonado for his fourth touchdown of the day to close to within 31-28.

But Ventura continued to feed Melnar the ball and put the game out of reach with a fourth quarter surge. Gibbs ran for one touchdown and threw for another, and Melnar, who finished with 176 yards, scored on a one-yard run with 1:49 to play.

Santa Barbara got yet another big day out of Uribe, who added one more record to his collection. His 55 pass attempts broke the record of 53 set by J.T. Stone of Dos Pueblos in 1994, and while his 382 yards and four touchdowns added to his county single-season records for passing yards (3,698) and touchdown passes (40), he threw four interceptions on the day, all to Parker Peterson.

So dedicated were the Dons to the pass that they did not attempt a dedicated running play until their final drive.

"When you put up the ball 55 times, you're going to take some chances and there were bound to be turnovers. I wish I could say that that was the problem, but we were playing from behind," Gonzales said.

Injuries have taken a heavy toll on the Dons. Tight end Bryson Lloyd, who Gonzales noted has been struggling with a nagging knee injury all season, had another huge day with 13 receptions for 173 yards, while Roberto Nelson (seven receptions, 68 yards) had two more touchdown catches to increase his county-leading total to 18.

Defensively, the Dons had to play without starting linebacker Ian Echnernacht, who tore his medial collateral ligament against San Marcos and is done for the season.

Santa Barbara will be on the road for the first round of the CIF Northern Division playoffs Friday. Brackets will be announced this morning by the CIF Southern Section office.

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