

MIKE NIETO: Spartans determined to get back to playoffs

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CHICAGO HEIGHTS | One game does not make a season, but what I saw Friday night were Marian Catholic football players that had the fire in their eyes during the Spartans' 34-18 win over rival Homewood-Flossmoor.

This is a team determined to show last year was a fluke.

You could see it on the sidelines as Nolan Berens kept firing up his teammates.

"I wanted a shutout my senior year," Berens said after Homewood-Flossmoor scored its first touchdown. "No more scores. Come on guys."

The Vikings did add two more touchdowns, long after the game was out of reach.

Berens is just one of several leaders coach Dave Mattio is looking to for leadership. They went through injuries in suffering through a 1-8 mark last year.

"This one, we needed to set the tone for our season," Berens said after the game. "We know what we went through last year and we needed to come out and have a big game."

The Spartans host city rival Bloom Twp. next Friday in the "Battle of Chicago Heights." Bloom Twp. beat the Spartans last year at Sarff Field and to start the season with two big wins over your rivals, it could be a good character builder for the tough East Suburban Catholic League slate.

Mattio had one of his most frustrating years as a coach -- not because of the 1-8 mark -- but because of the various injuries the team had. He went through three quarterbacks last year. A lot of kids gained experience and grew up quickly.

"It's painful," Mattio said of going 1-8. "I felt very bad for the kids. The kids worked extremely hard and I know they want to have a good season."

He said in preseason the Spartans needed to develop "a chip on their shoulder attitude." Like they have something to prove, which they do. Two years ago Marian made it to the Class 8A playoffs.

A big win over a program like Homewood-Flossmoor is great if it is a springboard. Tony Palombi's Blazing Trojans will be coming down Joe Orr Road looking to make it two in a row.

"We know Bloom is a big game just like this one," Marian's Mike Toliver said. "To start the season like this, it is big."

For Homewood-Flossmoor, the Vikings are not as bad as they looked in the first half, falling behind 28-0. They made some mistakes and they are a young team. Coach Kenneth Smith knows his team has its work cut out for it as it plays Hillcrest next Friday, then opens SouthWest Suburban Blue action with Sandburg.

The Vikings were 4-5 last year after coming within one game in 2007 of playing for the Class 8A state title.

"We'll work to get better," Smith said. "Those mistakes, we work on those things in practice so we don't make mistakes in the game. We work on crossing all the 'T's' and dotting all of our 'I's.' We just have to go back to work and get ready for Hillcrest."