

ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Crean Lutheran rally falls short in semifinals

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If at first you don't succeed, try, try again.

The overused cliché is simple, but the message was clear Friday night for first-year coach Brendan Chambers' Saddleback Valley Christian football team.

After losing in last year's CIF-Southern Section East Valley Division semifinals, top-seeded SVC needed little motivational reinforcement to outlast Crean Lutheran, 20-14, in Friday's semifinal at San Juan Hills High.

"We played well offensively early on," Chambers said. "A couple of key injuries hurt us, especially there in the second half, but we stayed tough and learned from it."

The Warriors move on to face Brethren Christian in this week's final.

To punch their finals ticket, the Warriors (13-0), who lost to St. Margaret's, 28-7, in last year's semifinals, had to play gritty in every sense. The game was played with a bank of stadium lights out due to a reported blown fuse. The outage blanketed half of the far sideline in darkness.

As if that wasn't enough, quarterback Cade Henjum was nursing an injured leg. Chambers elected to start running back David Molina under center, and the senior finished with eight carries for 66 yards. He added a 28-yard scoring toss to Dalton Lohman on the Warriors' first drive, capping a meticulous 12-play, 91-yard march.

After Crean was forced to punt on its ensuing possession, Molina came up limping following SVC's fourth play of the drive.

Henjum was quickly forced into action, and on his first snap, he connected with Savai'i Cravens, who made a spectacular catch over his defender near the Crean 20 and ran into the end zone. After a blocked extra-point attempt, the Warriors led 13-0 with 40 seconds left in the first quarter.

Crean Lutheran (9-4), competing in the program's first semifinal, was held to just 27 yards in the first half. However, the Saints forced five turnovers in the second half, and made a key fourth-and-15 stop at their 17. The ensuing drive culminated in Daniel Albright's 10-yard scoring run, cutting the deficit to 20-7 with 9:41 left.

An SVC fumble at the Warriors' 22 set up Crean's other score, a 1-yard push by Albright with 1:05 remaining.

"Although we were disappointed with how the game turned out, we were blessed to have a wonderful season and this team accomplished some great things by winning a share of the league championship and making it to the CIF semis," said Crean coach Brett Mertens on Tuesday.

"As a coach, this team did everything I asked of them, and these are some of the finest young men I have ever known," Mertens said.