

By: Josie Lynn

15 seconds. 10 seconds. 5 seconds. 3 seconds.

Junior linebacker Justyce Bett's eyes were glued to the clock as the final seconds of the St. Thomas Aquinas football game ticked by. Finally, the clock hit zero. The Stags had won not only the game, but also the opportunity to advance to the state championship.

"That was huge for me because I've never been to state before," Betts said. "It just didn't feel real."

The team had played against Aquinas a few weeks before, losing 26 to 29 after a big comeback from the Saints in the second half. In the playoff game, Miego claimed their victory with a score of 38 to 28.

Betts said he was glad the team was able to come back and show Aquinas what it was made of.

"They came into the game with confidence, but we beat them when it meant the most," Betts said.

The team faced Wamego at the state tournament on Nov. 26, where it won 35 to 14.

It was a much different end to the season than the previous one, when the team's record was 5-7 and the Stags were unable to advance to state after losing the semifinal game. There were many contributing factors to the team's improvement from the 2021 season, and according to junior Jalen Wilson, one of them was the experience that the juniors on the team gained in the previous season.

"We had a lot of sophomores last year that were able to come back as juniors with more experience and skill," Wilson said. "I felt more confident in myself and my teammates this year."

The players were not only more experienced, but, according to senior Daegan Jensen, they were also sharper.

"We all got smarter about our plays and knowing what we're doing," Jensen said. "When we were on the field, everyone was ready to be out there."

Jensen said that there was palpable excitement and enthusiasm among the players due to the improvement of the team as well as the bond that had formed between the players.

"We were a lot closer this year," Jensen said. "It made a big difference in the bond of the team, and we had better connections on and off the field."

Jensen described that while friendships between players had sometimes been divided by positions or grades in the past, this year there were friendships among all of the players despite the labels that separate them. After many of the games, a large number of players got together at The Peanut to eat and spend time with one another.

"Everyone would be talking to each other, and we weren't separated by grade or by position," Jensen said. "We were just one team, one family."

This season was senior quarterback McClure Armstrong's second and last season at Miego. Armstrong said that this year was different because there was a new bond the players shared with one another, and it was this bond that ultimately led the team to claim the state title.

"Everyone was playing for more than themselves," Armstrong said. "You wanted to win for the guy next to you."