

4A champs

Rams' title happens after a lot of plays go their way

By Bruce Smith
Matchup

The scene at Rice-Eccles Stadium on the night of Saturday, Nov. 20 is one every Ram player will remember.

Ben Johnson's jarring tackle of Mountain Crest running back Nate Rigby short of the goal line was the play that won the championship game. However, it was just the last of many big plays that allowed the Rams to win the school's fourth state football title and first since 1986.

"It broke a 25-year jinx," said coach **Brody Benson**, who celebrated with his players on the Rice-Eccles Stadium field. "It was surreal. The game went back-and-forth and, when we won it, there was a delayed reaction on the sideline.

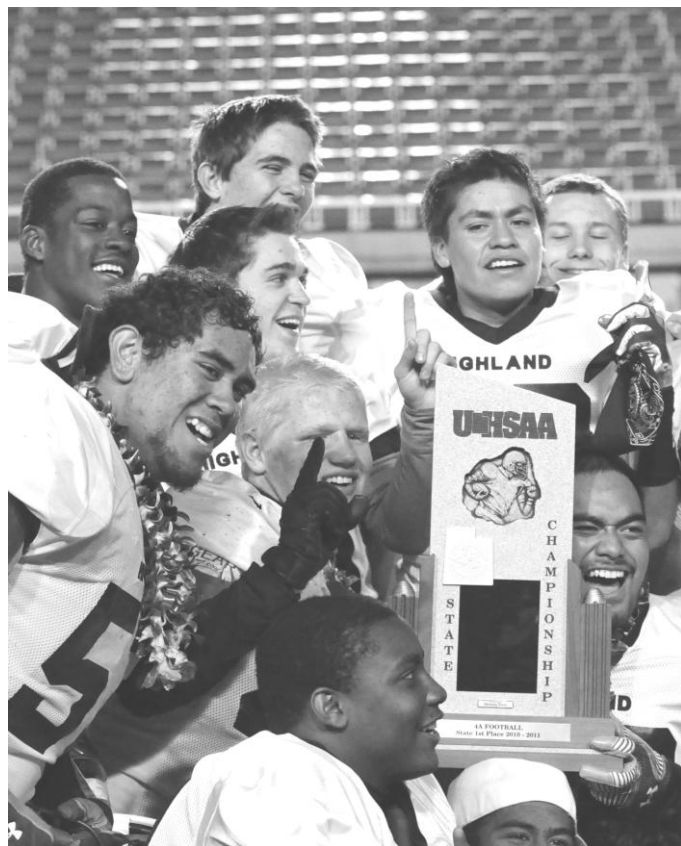
"We saw Ben hit the kid and we knew right away he was stopped, but we didn't react right away."

It didn't take long, however, for the Rams to rush the field. Johnson left the stadium with a big grin on his face, knowing his play will be the one teammate's and fans will talk about forever.

"It was a dream come true," said Johnson, a senior linebacker. "I had always hoped to be part of the first Highland team to go undefeated, but it's just as great to go through all the battles we had to as a team and come out on top. It all clicked at the end and it was perfect.

"After the game, (Mountain Crest quarterback) Alex Kuresa gave me a hug and said all of his records were there, but that play was better than all of them."

Johnson never would have had the opportunity to be part of Highland history if it wasn't for guys like **Nate Fakahafua**, **Anthony (Fish) Smithson**, **Colby Earl**, **Sione Houma**, **Reagan**



Highland players celebrated the 4A state championship, posing here with the trophy long after the title game ended.

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- **Ben Johnson**



category. His 25-yard reception of Smithson's pass in the first overtime against Mountain Crest was also one of the greatest plays in school history.

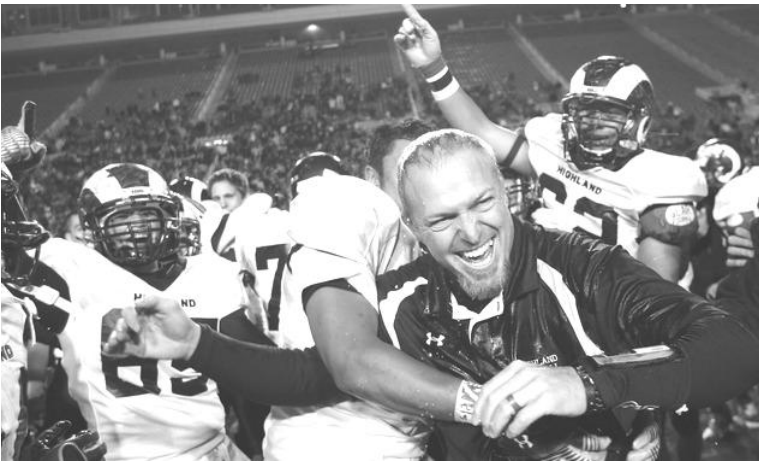
"Definitely the biggest catch of my life," said Fakahafua. "Fourth down, state championship game ... it doesn't get much better than that."

The play also pretty much clinched his selection as 4A's MVP by both newspapers.

On defense, Fakahafua teamed with **Desmond Collins** to put up huge stats. The two defensive ends combined for 24 sacks. On the down side, the Rams gave up 308 points, which was the most in school history (but hey, they

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played 14 games) and didn't record a shutout for the first time in four years.

"It was like this team was bi-polar or something," said Benson. "Once we beat Lone Peak, I didn't think we'd lose again, but he still had ups and downs."

While Highland's defense wasn't always great, it was opportunistic. The defense had big efforts at key times, starting with a 14-12 win over 5A power Lone Peak. The Rams also dominated East and had great efforts all through the playoffs.

The Rams' offense also made great strides. Earl had been scheduled to be the quarterback, but missed the first two games. When he was allowed to play, he immediately got the Rams on the winning track. He was hurt against Tooele, however, and was replaced by Smithson, who became a sensation.

"When he got better, I asked Colby about quarterback and he said, 'coach, we're a better team with Fish (Smithson) in there.'"

It became a good fit for everybody. Smithson's athletic ability was a huge addition to his offense. Once he adjusted to his role, he became the top quarterback in Region 6 and one of the best in the state. Smithson ended up throwing for 1,739 yards and 19 touchdowns – to just four interceptions. He also was the Rams' second-leading rusher.

Smithson was helped by a huge offensive line and a talented back. **Toi Taufa** had been the Rams' leading rusher the year before, but injuries plagued him during his senior season, so Houma came on with huge performances near the end of the year.

Houma rushed for over 1,000 yards and made the all-region and all-state teams because he rushed for 873 of his 1,064 yards in the last five games, including 157 in the title contest.

"It was a surprising season," said Johnson "We had a lot of turning points that could have gone either way. We really didn't really start to click until near the end, but you couldn't have asked for a better season."



Rams do it again

Highland's state championship was the fourth in school history. Those special seasons were:

<u>Year</u>	<u>Record</u>	<u>Coach</u>
2010	10-4	Brody Benson
1986	12-1	Tom Kingsford
1963	11-1	Bill Fickinger
1959	8-1	Larry Palmer

TOP LEFT: Coach **Brody Benson** is surrounded by Highland players as the Rams celebrate their championship victory.

TOP RIGHT: The Rams had great fan support all season, led by the student support group – the Highland Hecklers.

MIDDLE RIGHT: **Reagan Hackett** walks off the Rice-Eccles Stadium turf a champion.