

By Joe Sager

Derrick/News-Herald stringer

Eight is great for Tiger LaVerde.

The 1991 Oil City graduate guided Kirtland High School to its eighth Ohio state championship over the weekend. The Hornets, in the title game for the 14th time in the last 15 years, prevailed in style, too, with a 41-6 shellacking of Hopewell-Loudon for the Division VI championship at Tom Benson Hall of Fame Stadium in Canton.

“I am just so thrilled for the kids and how they performed,” he said. “The seniors, especially the ones that didn’t get to play a lot last year, every single one of them got their chance and played really, really well and that’s cool to see. This year’s senior class, there were only 10 of them when we usually have 15 or 16. They all played major roles and all played really well. It was a celebration of what they accomplished.”

Kirtland opened its season with a 30-7 win at Central Clarion. That turned out to be one of the Hornets’ closest games as they rolled to a 15-0 campaign and outscored foes by an average score of 40.3 to 7.9 along the way.

“The fact they did what they did — a lot of people doubted them,” LaVerde said. “One game, we had 21 penalties for over 200 yards. I had never had an experience like that. I knew we were never going to be able to win if we kept making mental mistakes like that. They pulled it together, though, and played really well. Our last three games, we played as close to perfect as possible. We didn’t punt in five playoff games. That’s pretty good.”

This win was even sweeter since LaVerde's son, Jake, led the way. The senior became the first quarterback in OHSAA history to start in four straight state championship games. He ran for 112 yards and a touchdown Saturday. Also a free safety, he had a team-best 10 tackles.

"It was definitely a wonderful four years being able to coach him," Tiger said.

Jake finished his career with 3,167 passing and 3,174 rushing yards — the first player in program history to join the 3,000-3,000 club. He passed for 43 touchdowns and scored 40 on the ground, also the first player in Kirtland history to be part of the 40-40 club. He was named the co-Division VI Offensive Player of the Year. He finished with a 49-3 mark. All of those numbers would be higher, except he missed seven games last year with arm surgery and ankle surgery this fall sidelined him for four games.

"It's been a hard two years for him. He broke his arm in two places last year, but was able to come back. He had surgery on his ankle this year, but was able to come back and play in all five of our playoff games," Tiger said. "It was super hard on him because he wanted to be healthy. To finish out the way we did, winning 41-6 was just an awesome finish for him. These kids are going to be smiling ear to ear for a few weeks."

The Hornets had three rushers eclipse the 1,000-yard mark. One of them — John Silvestro — went even higher. He set a program mark with 2,345 yards and 37 touchdowns.

"He actually got better as the year went on. He improved week to week to week," Tiger said. "He had 920 yards in five playoff games. That's when we're playing teams that are

13-1 and 12-1. To have those kind of numbers against all those teams is really special. He had a great end to his career also.”

Senior Ty Bledsoe finished with 1,397 yards and 16 scores. Jake LaVerde ran for 1,042 yards and passed for 684.

“That’s what makes our offense so dynamic. Those three guys were really tremendous. They all averaged over eight yards per carry,” Tiger said. “A lot of the credit goes up front to our linemen and to our tight ends, who were brilliant all year. Our offensive line was pretty special, for sure.”

The state title adds to Tiger’s legacy. He is the third football coach in Ohio history to win at least eight state championships. Only Marion Local’s Tim Goodwin (15) and St. Ignatius legend Chuck Kyle (11) have more.

“Anytime you win a state championship, it’s amazing,” Tiger said. “We’ve been on the other end of that game six times, too. Last year, we went 15-1 and got beat bad in the last game. That really leaves a sour taste in everyone’s mouth. These kids care so much. When you win that last game, it makes the rest of the school year so much better. The kids are so proud of themselves. To see these kids come into high school as freshmen, not very confident and not sure of themselves, and then to see them walk out with their heads held high is the best part of this. They are very proud to accomplish something like this with their best friends they grew up. It’s very satisfying.”

The unbeaten season pushed Tiger’s record at Kirtland to 259-21 (.925). Overall, he is 279-30 (.900) as he spent three years (2001-03) as Franklin’s head coach. He is 75-13 in the postseason, too, with the Hornets (2006-present).

“I think that speaks to all the youth coaches we have here. We have a great youth program and our middle school coaches do a good job,” he said. “Our weight room program is a big reason why we’ve been able to have continued success, too.”

There was not much time for Tiger to rest. As Kirtland’s junior varsity boys basketball coach, he went right to work in the gym Monday night coaching the Hornets on the hardwood.

“It’s fun,” he said. “Our first game is Saturday and we’re looking forward to it.”