

Very little of the high school football experience is normal these days, starting with the 2020 fall season playing out in the spring.

The pandemic has jolted schedules and lives tenfold. With a limited amount of fans allowed, games canceled right and left and schools scrambling to fill vacancies, each week is a madhouse. The Holy Bowl will be contested this week but without all the build-up on each campus, nor will the event have any in-game trappings that have made it such a unique rivalry.

Friday marks the 50th Holy Bowl in thought only. Christian Brothers will host Jesuit on its campus, but student rooting sections, bands and thousands of fans and alumni will not be in attendance as they have been for decades at Hughes Stadium, often drawing 15,000 or more spectators.

Immediate families will be allowed, and due to the otherwise hollow nature of the region's most-spirited fan experience, both teams have agreed to *not* formally name this the 50th Holy Bowl.

"It's a Holy Bowl with an asterisk," CB athletic director Dale Milton explained recently.

Still, come kickoff, the game will matter. Ranked No. 16 by The Bee, Christian Brothers (1-1) seeks to carry over the spirited 30-27 win over Jesuit from the 2019 season at Hughes, which included CB fans storming the field to celebrate. Ace Saca rushed for three touchdowns for Jesuit and he returns for the No. 17 Marauders in what figures to be a nice duel of running backs. CB is led by junior running back D.J. Crowther, who is also a threat on special teams.

Jesuit tops Christian Brothers in OT classic

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Let's be clear: This was not the Holy Bowl. Christian Brothers and Jesuit didn't play football Friday at Hughes Stadium in front of 15,000 fans.

Just don't tell the players and coaches that it wasn't the Holy Bowl. Jesuit players howled in their postgame huddle, celebrating a 34-28 overtime win over Christian Brothers.

"We did it guys, we won Holy Bowl 49.5," one Marauder said.

"I played this out in my head when I was 6 years old," said another.

Do it without the pandemic next time, kid.

Coronavirus concerns led both schools to disavow the "Holy Bowl" name this year in order to keep crowds away from Christian Brothers' field. It worked. The stadium was maybe 20% full. Fans missed gummy performances, controversy and high emotions from both teams. In overtime, Jesuit quarterback Preston Vukovich plowed into the end zone on a quarterback keeper for a yard out to win it. Christian Brothers fans, coaches and players howled for a false-start penalty that never came. The Falcons' own overtime possession ended with the crowd pleading for a penalty call after a Jesuit defender held on to a Christian Brothers receiver's jersey, but to no avail.

Christian Brothers coach John Wiley beamed behind his mask Friday night when talking about his team's effort.

"I told our kids, this is the best Holy Bowl that nobody ever really saw," Wiley said. "For us to be down 21-7, come back, tie it and go to overtime, think if this was at Hughes."

Words won't do the game justice, but we'll try anyway.

Jesuit controlled the first half behind a sturdy offensive line, power running and precision passing. Vukovich hit tight end Kai Wallin for the first score, a 35-yard reception that ended

with Wallin dragging a gaggle of defenders into the end zone midway through the first quarter. Vukovich dove into the end zone from four yards out on the next drive to make it 14-0 Jesuit with 8:54 left in the second quarter.

Then Christian Brothers lit up. A long pass to Jet Wiley, the coach's sophomore son, set up a 14-yard touchdown run from D.J. Crowther as the Falcons cut the lead to 14-7 with 7:30 left in the second quarter.

Jesuit answered with a beautiful 48-yard chuck from Vukovich to Keleki Latu for a 21-7 halftime lead. Vukovich went 7-for-12 for 179 yards, two passing touchdowns and a rushing touchdown.

Marauders senior defensive back Jake Hall had two interceptions off tipped passes in the first half but went down with a shoulder injury in the third quarter. The loss hit the Marauders sideline hard, with players getting emotional as Hall left the field and, eventually, the campus.

"He's our best player," coach Marlon Blanton said.

The loss was felt as Christian Brothers roared back. Falcons quarterback Jake Elorduy hit Bryan Garrett for a 34-yard touchdown and Crowther nabbed a 10-yard touchdown run to make it 21-21 with 32 seconds left in the third quarter. Jet Wiley had seven receptions for 143 yards in helping lead the comeback.

In the fourth quarter, Jesuit running back Ace Saca dragged a CB defender into the end zone for a touchdown but Crowther again answered, this time with a 15-yard gallop to tie the game at 28 and set up the overtime session.

his body on the line. He's got shoulder injuries. His shoulders keep popping out and he just plays through it. When he went out, I wanted to win it for him and his dad. ... I was fearless after that."

Hall made a FaceTime call from home after the game to check in with his buddies after their big win.

Coach Blanton and Saca both credited the Jesuit offensive line with clearing the way to the win. Evan Mayers, Matthew Bettencourt, Nelson Hemmert, Blair Horan and John Paul Leatherby plowed the way. Hemmert, a 6-foot-2, 250-pound specimen, earned special kudos from both Blanton and Saca for leading the way.

"The O-line were balling," Saca said. "I'm nothing without my linemen and they did a great job. Jack Hemmert, No. 62. He's gotta be a D-I guy. He's fast, he's big, he opens up holes."

Blanton just shook his head after the win. Jesuit wore down. Playing during a pandemic will sometimes look like this.

"We're so out of shape. We were tired. Second half we were really tired. Coronavirus does that to you. Haven't had a lot of opportunity to play and train, things you normally do to prepare for a season," Blanton said.

Good news, coach. You still have another six months to prepare for the next game with Christian Brothers. Hopefully it's a real Holy Bowl, when many of Friday's standout players will be back on the field, at Hughes Stadium, with thousands of people there to see it for themselves.

FRIDAY NIGHT SCORES