By Pastor Vince Carrig
Sports Writer

Quarterback Michael York ran for two touchdowns, defensive back Nick Turner recovered two fumbles, kicker Jeremy Hagan boomed a monster field goal and the Plainsmen defensive line stifled North Platte St. Pats' potent running game and upset the Irish 16-13 in an NSAA C2 playoff opener Saturday afternoon in Grant.

York simply followed his blockers for his first touchdown, but dazzled the defense on the game-winning score. From the Irish 30-yard line, York evaded lineman Brendan Lines' blitz, slipped through the hands of defensive backs Thatcher Vap and Shane O'Connor, and outran cornerback Jeff Cox to the right corner of the end zone. York's winding quarterback keeper put Perkins County ahead 16-6 with 14:06 left to play.

"Nick and I both made the pre-snap read to cut it inside and the line gave me a good block and he [Vap] didn't wrap me up—it wasn't like I made him miss, he just didn't wrap me up—and bounced me outside and after that I was off to the races," York later said of his elusive run.

St. Pat's featured Cox at running back; he followed blockers into the end zone with 11:36 remaining to draw his Irish to within three points at 16-13.

But Riley Kosmicki and the Plainsmen defensive line slammed the door on any comeback St. Pat's designed in their minds.

With the Irish poised for a game-winning drive, Kosmicki blew up Cox's run right where it started to force a fourth-and-three at midfield. The Plainsmen junior lineman reached quarterback O'Connor on the next play and dragged him into the mud. O'Connor pitched the ball sooner than he wanted, and two yards short of a first down.

"Because he played his technique perfect—he came up big. On a couple of fourth down plays, he fought through blocks and made great tackles; when the chips were down, he came through, and that says a lot about Riley," Head Coach Chip Kay said.

The Plainsmen then took over possession with 2:41 left. Not done yet, however, blitzing linebacker Andrew Vinton extracted a fumble on the next play and gave St. Pat's another opportunity to win.

But Perkins County would not need all of the 2:35 left to end the Irish's season. After an incomplete pass, the Plainsmen stuffed Vinton first then Cox next and defensive back Kyle Schulze made sure an O'Connor pass to tight end Taylor Hoeft fell harmlessly to the ground.

The Plainsmen won by three points, the value of a field goal. Jeremy Hagan blasted a 38-yarder after a Turner fumble recovery gained Perkins County its second possession. Hagan kicked the ball high, straight, and plenty far to put the Plainsmen on the board with 5:58 elapsed.

"I've been working on [long field goals] in practice and when coach said 'field goal,' I figured if he had confidence for me to kick it I would be able to make it; I didn't look how far it was, I just went out there and kicked it," Hagan said after the game.

Turner picked up two balls O'Connor left laying around; the first after Plainsmen corners

crunched the St. Pat's quarterback's keeper run, and the second after a fumbled snap. Turner pounced on the second ball at the Irish 26, and Perkins County converted the first quarter opportunity.

Turner turned around and rushed for 12 of those yards, and quarterback York covered the other 12 to give the Plainsmen the lead for good at 10-6 with 7:53 left in the third quarter.

The Plainsmen defensive line played physical football, and kept offensive threats O'Connor, Cox, and Vinton where they could reach them. Those three accounted for most of the Irish's offense in St. Pats' 49-14, September 18 win on the very same field.

Cox picked up 93 yards and a touchdown by running to his right most of the afternoon. He gained no more than 12 on one play, and St. Pat's gained no more than 28 yards on any play from scrimmage.

The Plainsmen game plan pinned the responsibility of limiting O'Connor's damage on freshman linebacker Alex Johnston.

"We asked a freshman to 'spy' on one of the better quarterbacks in C2 and obviously he got the job done," Coach Kay said.

Johnston also electrified the home crowd with a 50-yard kickoff return, with complete success spoiled only by punter Sean Ryan's tackling of him.

York found success early by throwing to receivers Schulze, Jeremy Hagan and Austin Gaston for 11 yards apiece. When not gaining the rest of his 44 yards by keeping the ball, he handed to Turner, who hit holes and exploded into tacklers for 76 yards.

North Platte St. Pat's moved the ball on the ground, with Cox's associates Vinton and O'Connor collecting 62 and 55 yards respectively. They even outgained Perkins County in yardage 221-165. But the Plainsmen defense stiffened at critical times, crushing five Irish fourth-down attempts into turnovers.

Johnston met Cox and the handoff to stop the Irish and end the first quarter. Schulze broke up a pass to dangerous receiver Hoeft in the last seconds of the first half. Linebacker Chad Fosbinder dropped Vinton two yards short with 5:10 left in the third quarter, and, of course, the defense made consecutive four-down stands at the end of the game.

Senior lineman Max Jones returned from injury to play on offense for the playoff game. One week earlier, EMTs carried Jones off the same field after a severe ankle sprain. Jones valiantly battled through severe pain to help his Plainsmen win.

Snowfall had delayed the game for two days. The game moved to Grant after the Irish, determined that the sheer volume of snow made clearing Knights of Columbus field impossible.

The NSAA considered St. Pat's the "home" team, and they accordingly wore their green jerseys and green trunks trimmed in gold. The Plainsmen wore their "road" white uniforms, which one could hardly consider "white" after mud covered mostly every starter in almost every spot.

The Plainsmen made no objection to the venue change.

"When our crowd got into it in the second half and we got a little momentum, our guys fed off the energy. We had our 12th man on Saturday and wherever we have it, it's huge. That made a huge difference; our crowd was great for us in the second half," Coach Kay said of the support.

The 6-3 Plainsmen can look forward to more home crowd support as the 6-3 Cambridge Trojans must come to Grant today (Thursday) for the second round game of the playoffs.

In terms of common opponents, Cambridge shredded Dundy County-Stratton and lost to North Platte St. Pat's as the Plainsmen did, but the Trojans took a win out of Imperial from the Chase County Longhorns early in the regular season.

The western bracket's sixth-ranked Trojans smoked Chase County in Cambridge, 44-8, to

qualify for a game with the 14th-ranked Plainsmen. The game kicks off at 5 p.m.

Score by Quarter

Plainsmen	0	3	13	0	—16
Irish	6	0	0	7	—13

Scoring Summary

Team/Quarter/Time/Play

NPSP, 1, 2:49, Cox 4 run (conversion failed).

PC, 2, 6:15, Hagan, J. 38 FG.

PC, 3, 7:53, York 1 run (Hagan, J. kick).

PC, 3, 2:06, York 30 run (kick blocked).

Rushing—PC: Turner 21-76 (14) 0; York 19-44 (30) 2. NPSP: Cox 25-93 (12) 2; Vinton 13-62 (17) 0; O'Connor 14-55 (28) 0.

Passing— PC York 5-9-44-0-2; NPSP: O'Connor 3-8-11-0-0.

Receiving—PC: Schulze 2-17 (11) 0; Gaston 1-11 (11) 0; Hagan, J. 1-11 (11) 0; NPSP: Vinton 2-6 (5) 0; Cox 1-5 (5) 0.

Tackles—PC: Turner 8 (8); Fosbinder 8 (6); Johnston 8 (6); Kosmicki 6.5 (3); Schulze 5 (2); Ross 4.5 (3): York 4 (2); Brott 3 (4); for loss Kosmicki 2, Brott 1.5, Ross 1, Johnston 0.5.