

SPORTS

NAACP, LBJ file protest with UIL after penalty-plagued loss in state semifinals

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LBJ football coach Jahmal Fenner had trouble looking his players in the eyes after last week's 31-28 loss to Lindale in a Class 4A Division I state semifinal in Humble.

LBJ was hurting after a last-second field goal ended its season. Lindale advanced to the state championship game. The Jaguars went home feeling the game was taken from them, and their coach felt their pain.

The local chapter of the NAACP also took issue with the outcome. The group filed a complaint against the University Interscholastic League, claiming unfair officiating. President Nelson Linder joined forces with Fenner and asked whether the game should be replayed.

Linder, who did not attend the game, said he had received calls and letters from upset parents and fans.

"They're basically saying the same thing about how the game was called unfairly," Linder said Friday. "They said the referees turned against LBJ and they fixed the outcome of the game."

Their biggest gripe: LBJ was flagged for 18 penalties for 140 yards while Lindale was penalized twice for 10 yards.

"When our coaching staff went through the game film, we saw some penalties against us such as false starts that were uncharacteristic of our team," Fenner said. "We questioned why they weren't making calls against Lindale. They were holding our guys, tackling our (defensive) guys, doing things after the play was over."

On Friday, the UIL issued this statement regarding LBJ's claim:

"All officials are agreed upon by both parties in advance of a game and per the UIL Constitution and Contest Rules (in section 1204), a protest based on a game or contest official's decision will

not be considered.

“While the UIL will not be formally investigating this matter, the Texas Association of Sports Officials has a process for reporting rule misapplication by an official and investigating such reports.”

Representatives from the officials' association did not immediately return a phone call Friday afternoon to comment on the matter.

Perhaps no one felt the sting of losing more than LBJ's seniors, who were looking forward to playing in the school's first state title game. Senior linebacker Brendan Jones, who will play next season at Princeton, said the officials “robbed” the Jaguars.

“This is bigger than ruining the season,” Jones said. “A lot of our players are feeling like the world is against us and they don't want to see LBJ athletes succeed. It's deeper than football. We go through so much adversity as players and young minority men in America. The (football) field is where you're supposed to go to clear your whole mind, but you can't have that if you have officials who are against you.”

Linder said the seeds for an “unfair” game might have been planted when LBJ players kneeled for the national anthem. The Jaguars have kneeled during the anthem all season as “a peaceful protest against social injustice,” Fenner said, adding that they knew everyone would not agree with them.

Fenner said Lindale scored two touchdowns on plays the officials missed or got wrong.

A muffed punt by LBJ cornerback Andrew Mukuba appeared to roll out of the back of the end zone, a play that would have resulted in a safety for Lindale. Instead, the Eagles were awarded a touchdown when Evan Alford recovered the ball, even though it appeared he was out of bounds, Fenner said.

Fenner also took issue with a 69-yard kickoff return for a touchdown by Lindale senior receiver Airik Williams. The coach said another Eagle had signaled for a fair catch before Williams caught the ball, a gesture that should have ended the play.

Fenner said he never expected the game to be replayed or the outcome reversed. He said the officiating crew should face consequences if the UIL and the officials' association agree the game was called unfairly.

Lindale (13-2) was set to play Argyle (15-0) for the Class 4A DI state championship Friday night at AT&T Stadium in Arlington.

Jones, meanwhile, said the season came to an end before “the cake” was finished.

“You have all the layers of the cake ready but there’s no icing,” he said. “There’s no finish to what we started. I feel like we made it this far just to get stopped by officials.”