

Panthers hang on  
Lufkin edges The Woodlands, 18-15

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Eric Johnson caught seven passes for 151 yards and a touchdown, and the Lufkin Panthers overcame some sloppy play to escape with an 18-15 win over The Woodlands Highlanders at Abe Martin Stadium Friday night.

Lufkin came into the game as a heavy favorite against a Highlander team that had been drilled by Conroe the previous week, 35-14. But Lufkin's offense never could find its rhythm, and the Highlanders managed to stay in the game until the final minutes.

The Woodlands closed to within 18-15 on a 4-yard touchdown pass from Tyler Eckenrode to Alex Tweedy with 1:30 remaining in the game. The Highlanders then made things really interesting when they recovered the following onside kick.

But Lufkin's defense came up with a stop on The Woodlands' final drive to preserve a closer-than-expected district win.

"That's just the kind of football team we've got," Lufkin head coach John Outlaw said. "We just make things harder on ourselves when they really shouldn't be. But I guess when you play bad and win, you can't be too upset with yourselves."

Lufkin's Johnson was stellar from the beginning. He started the game with an impressive 82-yard touchdown completion on Lufkin's third offensive play.

He continued to torture The Woodlands' secondary for the rest of the night as he came up with his biggest performance of the year.

"Eric was probably our one shining star tonight," Outlaw said. "Actually, I thought with the exception of Jeffrey Claybon's last pass, he was pretty good tonight, and Tre'von (Lewis) had some good runs too."

Claybon finished the game with 215 yards and a touchdown on 14-of-24 passing with one touchdown and one interception. Lewis, after being held to 18 yards in the first half, finished with 116 yards and a 40-yard touchdown on 15 carries.

The Panthers' defense gave up some yards to the Highlanders for three quarters but still had a shutout going. The Highlanders finally took advantage of some big plays to score a pair of fourth-quarter touchdowns and make things interesting.

"Really our defense shouldn't have given up any points tonight," Outlaw said. "We'll learn from this and go on. But at

this point in week eight, you really want to be sharper than what we played tonight."

To their credit, the Highlanders had a much better showing than last week when they were manhandled by Conroe. Tyler Eckenrode completed 11-of-23 passes for 168 yards and a touchdown, and Alex Tweedy caught three passes for 80 yards and a touchdown.

"Those kids played their hearts out," Outlaw said. "You have to give them a lot of credit for the way they played."

In the early going, Lufkin looked like it may be able to have an easier win, much like the previous week against Oak Ridge.

The Woodlands drove the length of the field on its first offensive possession, but a field goal try bounced off of the upright leaving the game scoreless.

Three plays later, Johnson came through with his long touchdown completion and Claybon hit James Davis for a two-point conversion to make the score 8-0.

However, Lufkin's offense stalled on the next three possessions, and a 43-yard field goal attempt at the end of the first half fell short, leaving the score at 8-0.

The Panthers were on the doorstep of extending the lead on the opening drive of the third quarter, but a bad snap forced the Panthers to punt.

Lufkin later drove to The Woodlands 2, but another bad snap forced the Panthers to settle for a 27-yard field goal and an 11-0 lead with 11:48 remaining.

With The Woodlands struggling on offense, that looked like it may be enough. However, the Highlanders finally showed some life as Tweedy caught a 47-yard pass, and Logan Rowe scored on a 27-yard run. A two-point conversion pass was caught by Erick Wolfe to cut the deficit to 11-8.

The Panthers had the answer less than two minutes later when Claybon faked a pass and handed the ball to Lewis, who ran untouched for a 40-yard touchdown and an 18-8 lead.

However, the Highlanders still would not go away. After a Claybon interception, the Highlanders drove 92 yards on 13 plays with Tweedy catching a 4-yard touchdown pass to cut the deficit to 18-15.

The Highlanders then executed an onside kick to get a chance to tie or take the lead. But Lufkin's defense rose to the occasion on the final drive, forcing a sack and three incompletions to preserve the narrow win.