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## TW stops Magnolia's upset bid, clinches playoffs

By: Howard Roden , Assistant Sports Editor



The Woodlands High School's Clay Latimer (42), Jordan Osborne (41) and James Warren (9) rise up to defend against a Magnolia ball carrier Friday night at Bulldog Stadium. (Courier photo)

**MAGNOLIA - The Woodlands head coach Mark Schmid said his players talked all week about adding to their string of playoff appearances.**

They upheld that "tradition" Friday night, but it was far from easy.

The Highlanders erupted for three touchdowns in the fourth quarter - including two in the final 31/2 minutes - for a hard-fought, 31-20 victory over the stubborn Magnolia Bulldogs in the District 15-5A finale for both teams.

Junior Logan Rowe put The Woodlands in front, 24-20, on a 3-yard run with 2:22 to play. A minute later, he put the game out of reach of the Bulldogs with a 35-yard interception return.

With the win, the Highlanders secured District 15-5A's fourth playoff berth. And while they enter the Class 5A Division I playoffs next Friday night against Spring Westfield with a 3-7 season record, neither Schmid nor his players were making apologies for how they reached the postseason for the 13th consecutive year.

"This was a big thing for our kids to have the opportunity to make the playoffs and keep our streak alive," Schmid said. "My hat's off to them. A lot of teams could have quit in the situation we found ourselves in."

The host Bulldogs (2-8, 1-4) were just as determined to end their playoff dry spell dating back to 2002. Relying on their wishbone attack, they strung together a trio of impressive drives that quarterback Josh Smith capped on keepers of 1, 1 and 7 yards.

The senior's final touchdown came with 3:24 left to play and put the Bulldogs ahead 20-17. Smith finished the 12-play, eight-minute drive by faking a dive to the fullback and scooting around right tackle.

"We were just minutes away from the playoffs," Magnolia head coach Andy Sexton said. "Our kids fought hard. We were are a point in the game that I felt we could win it."

But the Highlanders struck back quickly. They benefited from excellent field position when Ryan Cusimano recovered Magnolia's onside kickoff attempt at midfield.

Rowe, who finished with 130 yards on 17 carries, got the call on all four plays. His 17-yard sweep around the left end set up the Highlanders at the Magnolia three. He plowed through the middle of the Bulldogs' defense for the score and Daniel Weimer tacked on the extra-point with 2:22 to play.

Although the Highlanders' starting tailback the past two weeks because of injuries to senior Tracy Milo, Rowe locked up the victory when he picked off Smith's passing attempt to Chase Weir at the Magnolia 35 and ran untouched to the end zone with 1:21 remaining.

"At first I thought they might throw deep, but then I saw their quarterback (Smith) looking toward that receiver," Rowe said. "This group didn't want to be the first one not to make it back to the playoffs."

Magnolia recovered an onside kick to open the game, but had to punt. The Highlanders then march 80 yards for a 7-0 lead. They converted three third downs along the way, including a draw up the middle to Rowe for 14 yards and the touchdown with 5:02 left in the opening quarter.

But the Bulldogs refused to surrender. They put together a textbook 17-play, 80-yard march that ate up 8:49 of the second quarter clock. Smith kindled the Bulldogs' enthusiasm by running 25 yards on the second play of the drive.

From there, the Bulldogs ground their way to the end zone, converting three third-down and one fourth-down scenarios. Smith leapt over from the one with 1:56 before halftime. Ned Thomas' extra-point not only tied the score, it gave Magnolia players a belief they could win.

"At the beginning of the game most people probably thought we didn't have a chance," Sexton said. "But our kids came into the locker room with confidence. That drive convinced them they could play with The Woodlands."

But the Highlanders made some adjustments, particularly on defense. Displaying a more aggressive approach, the Highlanders forced Smith to fumble on the first play of the second half. Junior lineman Cameron Knight recovered at the Magnolia 41, which led to Daniel Weimer's 26-yard field goal with 6:48 left in the quarter.

The Bulldogs came right back, however, with another ponderous drive. Smith completed the 11-play possession on a sneak at 0:02 of the quarter.

But that 14-10 lead was short lived. Elevated from the freshman squad just two weeks ago, Daniel Lasko electrified the Highlanders with his 53-yard touchdown sprint on the second play of the final quarter.

Turning upfield, he eluded one would-be tackler, and then outraced another before diving into the end zone with 11:20 to play.

"His run was huge," Schmid said. "It gave us a big lift on the sideline."

"All I could see was the end zone," said Lasko, who finished with 95 yards on 11 carries. "I'm looking forward to the playoffs."

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