

THE COURIER

OF MONTGOMERY  COUNTY

Highlanders break Lufkin jinx, earn 14-5A crown



The Woodlands' Kyle Cusimano (30) celebrates a victory over the Lufkin Panthers with teammates Friday at Abe Martin Stadium in Lufkin.

By Howard Roden

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LUFKIN – “It’s history!” yelled members of The Woodlands football team as they sprinted up the ramp to their cramped locker room at Abe Martin Stadium.

Credit the Highlanders for making history Friday night with their 31-21 District 14-5A triumph over the Lufkin Panther. Quarterback Trent Eckel threw for four touchdowns in the first half, then the Highlander defense held their hosts scoreless to all but assure TWHS its first outright league championship since 2003. They clinched at least tie for the title with the win.

The state’s No. 3-ranked Class 5A squad needs only to defeat New Caney next week to clinch a 10-0 season before heading into the state playoffs. At the same time, the Highlanders recorded their first victory over Lufkin in six tries ever since the East Texas school joined the Houston region.

“It’s a wonderful feeling for our team,” TWHS coach Mark Schmid said as his players celebrated following the game. “It’s awesome.” Lufkin has been a thorn in our side for years. This is where we wanted to be.”

The Highlanders prevailed with a deadly combination of wide-open offense in the first half and overwhelming defense in the second. Eckel threw touchdowns of 64 yards to Jonathan Wilcher, 40 to Randy Knust, 20 yards to Peter Falivene and 29 yards to Daniel Lasco. The latter two came inside the final 3:12 of the second quarter, enabling the Highlanders to retire to halftime with a 28-21 lead.

Standing in the pocket in the face of an intense Lufkin pass rush, Eckel finished 11 of 25 for 253 yards.

“My offensive line did a great job of giving me the time to find my receivers,” he said. “We were ready to face that defense.” “It’s awesome!” said guard Chad Lindsay of the win. “We practiced all week with intensity.”

If Lufkin’s game plan was to stop TWHS running back Daniel Lasco, they won the battle by holding the junior to 95 yards on 21 carries. But it was the Highlanders who captured the war.

Besides their offensive success in the first half, the Highlanders’ defense held Lufkin to only 91 total yards during the game’s final 16 minutes. TWHS turned back one threat in the third quarter with an interception by Ryan Clapsaddle. Then lineman Cody Davis stripped Lufkin quarterback Deauntre Smiley of the football a few minutes later that led to Ben Pruitt’s 38-yard field goal two plays into the fourth quarter.

To keep that defensive trend going, Davis and sophomore lineman Mitchell Meyers produced back-to-back sacks of Smiley on the Panthers’ next series. “We knew we could hold them in the second half,” TWHS linebacker Perry Cooper said. Lufkin had the football one more time – a three-and-out – before The Woodlands ran out the final 4:42 of the game. “Those defensive plays were huge,” Schmid said. “When the complexion of the game changed, so did our players’ mind-set. They did whatever was necessary.”

The Woodlands wins showdown with Lufkin 31-21

Highlanders beat Panthers for first time since becoming district foes

By SAM KHAN JR.

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Joel Andrews Lufkin Daily News

LUFKIN — As his players huddled around him on a cold, crisp — and ultimately historic — night for The Woodlands' football program, coach Mark Schmid smiled, held the game ball up and told his team, "You can beat anybody." After the Highlanders' performance against Lufkin, those words rung truer than ever.

With an explosive offensive effort in the first half and a stellar defensive performance in the second half, The Woodlands finally got its most troubling monkey off its back, defeating the Panthers for the first time in school history 31-21 before a capacity crowd Friday night at Abe Martin Stadium. "We played hard in the every phase of the game that we needed to," Schmid said.

The Woodlands (9-0, 4-0 District 14-5A) had lost their first five games against Lufkin since the Panthers (7-2, 3-1) joined the Highlanders' district in 2004. "It's been a long time coming," Woodlands junior running back Daniel Lasco said. "Nobody in this district has beaten them (since 2004) except (Conroe) last year."

The Highlanders, the third-ranked team in the state, got things going quickly attacking through the air instead of the ground. Senior quarterback Trent Eckel threw four first-half touchdown passes to spur The Woodlands' attack. That proved critical because the Panthers corralled star junior running back Daniel Lasco (22 carries, 95 yards), keeping his impact minimal until late in the first half.

Eckel (11-of-25 passing, 253 yards) hit Jonathan Wilcher and Randy Knust on 64- and 40-yard scoring tosses to lift the Highlanders to a 14-6 first-quarter lead.

Lufkin responded with a 9-yard touchdown run by quarterback DeAuntre Smiley to tie it and then added a 36-yard touchdown pass to Quinn Trimble in the second quarter to take a 21-14 lead.

The Highlanders answered with a 20-yard pass from Eckel to Peter Falivene and just before the end of the half Eckel found Lasco for a 29-yard TD to give The Woodlands a 28-21 lead.

But it was the defense that carried the load in the second half.

Ryan Clapsaddle came up with perhaps the biggest defensive play of the game, picking off a Smiley pass intended for Trimble in the end zone with 5:31 to go in the third quarter.

The Highlanders clinched at least a share of the 14-5A championship, and the players believe this victory could give them momentum that could spring them into a run deep into December.

"This gives us a great feeling going into the playoffs," Lasco said.

Lufkin falls: No. 3-ranked Highlanders down Panthers, 31-21

By **JOSH HAVARD**

The Lufkin Daily News

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Since joining the Houston-area district in 2004, the Lufkin Panthers were the team that had all the answers in finding a way to come out on top.

On Friday night, it was a gritty group of Highlanders that had all the answers. Trent Eckel threw for four first-half touchdowns, and the Highlanders capitalized on some key Lufkin mistakes in the second half as The Woodlands ended Lufkin's run of six straight district titles with a 31-21 decision at Abe Martin Stadium Friday night.



The Woodlands clinched the district title with the win, while Lufkin will need a win at Oak Ridge next week to secure Class 5A Division II's top seed.

"We didn't play very good football very consistently tonight," Lufkin head coach John Outlaw said. "But make no mistake about it. We got beat by a very good football team."

The Woodlands outgunned the Panthers in a shootout of a first half as the Highlanders held a 28-21 lead. The second half was much more defensive with the Highlanders getting their only score on a 32-yard Ben Pruitt field goal.

Joel Andrews/The Lufkin Daily News

Eckel led The Woodlands' offensive attack with 253 yards and four touchdowns on 11-of-25 passing.

Jonathan Wilcher led The Woodlands' receivers with three receptions for 102 yards and a touchdown.

For the most part, Lufkin was able to contain The Woodlands' top offensive threat, Daniel Lasco. He finished the night with 95 yards on 22 rushes and also caught a 29-yard touchdown pass.

"Lasco's a great player, but they've been throwing it pretty effectively all year," Outlaw said. "Their quarterback did a great job tonight."

Lufkin's Deauntre Smiley threw for 228 yards and two touchdowns on 16-of-34 passing.

His leading receiver was Quinn Trimble, who had seven receptions for 124 yards and two scores. Jamarcus Walker also had a strong night with 82 yards rushing on 11 attempts.

However, some critical mistakes, including a dropped touchdown pass and an interception in the end zone on a potential game-tying drive, proved costly for the Pack.

"We hadn't turned it over in the last few games and we did tonight," Outlaw said. "When you make those mistakes against good teams, they're going to make you pay for them."

A high-flying first half saw the teams combine for 49 points, 463 yards and just two punts.

Six of the seven scoring plays went for at least 20 yards and The Woodlands emerged with a 28-21 lead after 24 minutes of nonstop action.

The Woodlands got on the board first as Eckel hit Wilcher with a 64-yard touchdown. Eckel hit Wilcher with the pass and a gamble by a Lufkin defender left a wide open path for Wilcher for the 7-0 lead.

That lead did not last long as Lufkin scored on the first play of its second possession. Trimble hauled in a 50-yard pass from Smiley but the extra point was blocked, leaving the score at 7-6.

The Woodlands then took just two plays to answer the Panthers. Eckel hit Randy Knust for a 40-yard touchdown pass to make the score 14-6.

The Panthers responded with a touchdown on a long scoring drive. Smiley finished the drive with a 9-yard touchdown run then added a two-point conversion run to knot the game at 14.

Lufkin then forced a punt and took its first lead of the night as Smiley eluded a Highlander defender and found a wide open Trimble for a 36-yard score that gave the Panthers a 21-14 lead.

The Woodlands then tied the game as Eckel found Peter Falivene for a 20-yard touchdown pass to make it 21-21 with 3:12 left in the half.

The Woodlands took advantage of a late Lufkin turnover to take the lead into the half as Lasco got free behind the Lufkin defense and scored on a 29-yard screen pass from Eckel to make it 28-21.

Eckel finished the first half with 209 yards and four touchdowns on 8-of-17 passing. Wilcher was his top target with two receptions for 101 yards.

Meanwhile, Lufkin had strong halves from Smiley, who was 8-of-19 passing for 173 yards and two touchdowns, and Trimble, who had five receptions for 120 yards and two touchdowns.

Lufkin had a chance to tie the game in the third quarter but a dropped touchdown pass and an interception in the end zone kept Conroe with the lead.

The Woodlands then got some breathing room on a Pruitt field goal with 11:19 remaining and the Highlanders' defense took over from there.

Lufkin (7-2, 3-1) finishes the regular season against Oak Ridge at Woodforest Bank Stadium Friday night. The Woodlands (9-0, 4-0) finishes with a home game against New Caney Thursday.