

## The Woodlands cruises to shutout of Spring in playoff opener

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SHENANDOAH — The Woodlands senior quarterback Mabrey Mettauier watched his team’s playoff opener from the sideline on Thursday evening.

The Woodlands would have loved to have had the services of Mettauier, a four-star recruit and Wisconsin commit who suffered a head injury late in the second quarter of the regular season finale loss to Willis on Oct. 28. The Highlanders, though, did not need him.

In place of Mettauier, senior Patrick Miller stepped in admirably in his first varsity start and do-it-all junior Quanell X Farrakhan Jr. electrified on a dour, rainy evening to help the Highlanders to a 35-0 win over Spring in their Class 6A-Division I bi-district playoff game at Woodforest Bank Stadium. The Woodlands is 8-3 overall. Spring ended its season at 5-6.

“I was proud of the kids and the way they got after it in the first half,” The Woodlands coach Jim Rapp said. “We weren’t great in the second half. The atmosphere was a little different, you know. Our band was gone; their band went home. So much of football is about the experience. We had to control what we can control, so I was proud of the outcome.”

Miller’s last start was two years ago on the junior varsity. He completed 16 of 22 passes for 307 yards, two touchdowns and an interception.

“Just try to keep the nerves calm and know that I trust every guy out there,” Miller said of his approach to a big night.

Farrakhan accounted for three touchdowns to spur the Highlanders to a 28-0 lead at the half. He scored on a 4-yard run, a 60-yard sweep toss from Miller and an 86-yard punt return. In leading by four touchdowns at the break, The Woodlands scored on three of five first-half offensive possessions.

The Highlanders were just as impressive defensively, holding Spring to 64 total yards on 2.1 yards per play in the first half.

The Woodlands got a scare late in the third quarter when Farrakhan went down following a 24-yard catch-and-run. He had to be helped off the field and did not return. Rapp was confident after the game that Farrakhan, who had an ankle injury, would be fine. He was not as certain of Mettauer’s status for next week. “I assume but I have no earthly idea,” Rapp said of Mettauer returning next week. “I’m not in the mix of the medical people. Whether he is or isn’t, I don’t know. We’ll adjust and do the things we need to do.”

## Highlights

In midst of a persistent rain in the first half, The Woodlands used a bevy of jet sweeps and screens to methodically generate points.

The Highlanders scored on their second play from scrimmage as junior receiver Jackson Bolender took a short pass for a 68-yard catch-and-run touchdown less than three minutes into the game.

That’s when Farrakhan took over. The dynamic athletic talent — Farrakhan also starts at cornerback — scored all three of his first-half touchdowns within nine minutes of game time spanning the first and second quarters.

“It’s just watching film,” Farrakhan said. “We’re a study-heavy team and we executed what we had to do.”

The Woodlands did not punt until 10 seconds remained in the third quarter. The only score in the second half was a 12-yard run by senior running back Joseph Canola with 1:16 left in the game. The Woodlands outgained Spring 426-146 in total yards. Spring completed just 2 of 13 passes for 11 yards.

# What it means

Making its 29th consecutive playoff appearance, The Woodlands secured its 14th eight-win season in the last 20 years.

The Highlanders improved to 3-2 all-time against Spring, which topped The Woodlands in the playoffs in 2021 (52-35) and 2020 (42-21). Spring qualified for the playoffs after missing out last season.

## Game balls

Farrakhan had four catches for 116 yards and a touchdown. He also had five runs for 12 yards. Junior receiver Shane Walker added five catches for 79 yards for The Woodlands. Junior linebacker Zachary Wardle had a fumble recovery in the first half.

For Spring, senior Tre'Sean Cunningham had 51 yards on 14 carries. Senior Delonte Henderson had 46 yards on 17 carries.



## HS Football Playoffs: Shutout from the Highlanders Pushes them to Victory over Spring

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THE WOODLANDS, TX -- The Bi-District round of the UIL Football Playoffs got underway with The Woodlands Highlanders blanking the Spring Lions at Woodforest Bank Stadium, 35-0.

The Highlanders were without their usual starting quarterback, Mabrey Mettauer, who was still sidelined due to concussion protocol after his injury during the team's season-ending loss to the Willis Wildkats.

Heavy rain before kickoff added another hindrance to the game, as both offenses would face issues passing the ball for chunk yards.

In an exclusive interview with The Woodlands Online Sports, Highlander Head Coach Jim Rapp discussed the team's adjustments given the pregame hurdles. "We deal with the elements," said Rapp. "We knew Patrick [Miller] was going to play, we knew he was going to do a good job, and we weren't worried."

After Spring's first drive ended in a punt, The Woodlands offense took little time to get on the board. Two plays from scrimmage were all it took for receiver Jackson Bolander to break free on a 68-yard touchdown reception on a wide receiver screen.

Now up 7-0 and with Spring's offense struggling to find traction, the Highlanders had an open window to extend their lead throughout the rest of the first half. The Woodlands did so with a short-yardage rushing touchdown from Quanell X Farrakhan Jr., who extended the Highlanders lead to two possessions with no signs of stopping the production.

Spring did catch a break in the face of The Woodlands' early onslaught when Clourid Johnson Jr. intercepted a pass just inside Highlander territory. The pick gave the Lion offense its best shot at reaching the endzone in the first quarter, but the effort was stopped in its place by the Woodlands defense.

Caleb Phillips, Luke Johnson, and the rest of the Highlander defenders kept the Spring offense from posting any points during the second half. A forced fumble, sack, and a turnover on downs ensured that the Lions would remain in check throughout the first half.

"Those guys have done nothing but get better all year," said Rapp about his defense. "I am proud of them and their development and the way they are playing right now."

With the defense keeping the shutout intact, the Woodlands offense remained on the gas pedal as the second quarter got underway. An explosive play from Farrakhan Jr. breached the Spring defense and got into the endzone for a 21-0 lead with 9:40 left in the second quarter.

Another stop from The Woodlands' defense necessitated a punt from the Lions from just inside Highlander territory. Back deep to return was Farrakhan Jr., who already had two scores in the first half. The stud receiver proved his usefulness in the return game by returning the kick 96 yards for the score, making the order taller for the Lions if they wanted to mount a comeback.

"Quanell is a heck of a football player," said Rapp. "He works his tail off to be good, and he is definitely one of our cogs in what we do."

The third quarter saw both teams take a step back in offensive performance, as Spring still could not get going, and The Woodlands coughed up the football on their first drive.

The ineffective production lasted the entire quarter due to another lost fumble from the Highlanders and the Lions emphasizing the run game. Any runs against The Woodlands' defense were swallowed up near the line of scrimmage, and passes remained ineffective despite the rain having stopped.

An injury to Farrakhan Jr. of the Highlanders added another degree of difficulty to the offense for the Woodlands as the fourth quarter began. Luckily, the run-heavy strategy for the Lions, paired with the continued shutout pitched by the defense, allowed The Woodlands to remain in front with their commanding lead.

Strong pushes from the Highlander offensive line propelled the team down the field to run the ball and eat the clock to try and end the game faster. Joseph Canola was the primary ball carrier for these rushes, attempting to march his team down the field for an insurance score. His effort fell short due to a turnover on downs on a fourth-and-one inside the Lions' 30-yard line.

The turnover provided an opportunity for Spring to get on the board, but the window closed as quickly as it had opened. A fumble on a mishandled snap put the ball on the ground, where it was covered up by The Woodlands' Martin Schofield.

With the ball and game in hand, the Highlanders added the insurance score with a rushing touchdown from Joseph Canola in the late fourth quarter, making the final 35-0 for The Woodlands.

The blanking of the Lions gives the Highlanders and their coaches fuel going into the Area Round of the playoffs while also providing the team a chance to keep the season alive.

"The hardest game to win in the playoffs is the first because they don't fully understand the finality of playoff football," said Rapp. "This time of year is all about having the opportunity to play one more, and we gave ourselves an opportunity to play one more."

