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The Woodlands shuts down Klein to snap two-game skid

By Jon Poorman
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KLEIN — The running game was rolling. The defense was dominant. That was all The Woodlands needed on Saturday afternoon.

The Highlanders snapped a two-game losing streak with a 31-7 victory over Klein in District 15-6A action at Memorial Stadium. It was a much-needed boost for The Woodlands, which is seeking its 25th consecutive postseason appearance this year.

“This game was very important,” The Woodlands defensive lineman Caleb Fox said. “We came into the game knowing that we needed to basically win out the rest of the season. Coach (Jim) Rapp has been telling us that we have to stick together and work as a team.”

The Woodlands (4-3, 3-2) rushed for 345 yards and limited the Bearkats (2-4, 1-3) to less than 100 total yards until the waning seconds after the defensive starters had been removed from the game.

The Highlanders were led offensively by senior quarterback Ben Mills, who rushed for 234 yards and three touchdowns on 26 carries. The Woodlands averaged eight yards per attempt as a team. The Highlanders were coming off back-to-back losses against Klein Oak and Klein Cain, but they battled back on Saturday.

“The reality is, we’re playing for our lives from here on out,” Rapp said. “They have to understand the gravity, and they did. We talked about the urgency of what we’re trying to do, and those guys really responded well. They understand who we are as a football program. I think when you take a couple gut shots like we have, you kind of wonder. But we’ve got to remember who we are, and that was our message this week — we are The Woodlands High School football program, and we’re going to step up when the time comes.”

After an opening eight minutes that were mostly uneventful, the Highlanders went ahead 14-0 by scoring on back-to-back possessions. Brandon Wheeler got thing started with a 36-yard touchdown run, which was set up by a 41-yard jaunt from the senior tailback two plays earlier. Mills then got into the action on the next possession and he reached paydirt on a 20-yard scamper.

Wheeler and Mills accounted for 193 of The Woodlands’ 199 first-half rushing yardage. Wheeler walked into the locker room with 89 yards on just six carries, and Mills finished with 104 yards on 15 attempts.

“You can always rely on those big men up front,” Rapp said of his offensive line. “Those guys did a great job tonight, and I’m really proud of them. They played well and opened up some holes, and that was really good for us.”

The Woodlands also got a 32-yard field goal from Fabrizio Pinton in the second quarter and reached halftime with a 17-7 lead.

Klein finally got on the scoreboard early in the second quarter, capitalizing on a turnover by The Woodlands. Mills took a sack and fumbled the ball, which was then recovered by the Bearkats deep in Highlanders territory. Quarterback Bryce Corrison connected with Mason Tharp for a 19-yard touchdown pass on the very next play to cut the lead to single digits.

Aside from surrendering the short-field score, the Highlanders’ defense was lights out over the first two quarters. Klein managed just 35 yards of total offense, including minus-5 rushing on 12 attempts.

“This is Game 7 of our defense playing lights out,” Rapp said. “They’ve been awesome all year, and that’s the expectation. They talk about what their goals are and what they’re trying to do, and they’ve done a really good job all year long. I’m not surprised in the least bit that they shut (Klein) down. We’ve really played well against every opponent from a defensive standpoint this year.”

The Highlanders pitched a shutout in the second half, and Mills got into the end zone on a pair of touchdown runs — the first from 3 yards out, and the second on a 76-yard dagger up the middle of the field — to cap the scoring in the fourth quarter.

The Woodlands has another important matchup next week as the team plays host to Conroe on Friday night at Woodforest Bank Stadium. The Tigers (4-2, 3-1) have not defeated the Highlanders since 2007, but they are playing well this season under coach Cedric Hardeman.

“We know a lot about them,” Rapp said. “They’re one play away from being undefeated in district. Coach Hardeman has done a great job with those guys up there. They’re really doing great things offensively, and their defense is coming around and playing well. We’ll have to enjoy this one tonight and come back tomorrow and get ready to game plan for them.”