

The Woodlands pulls away from Willis

By Jon Poorman, Staff Writer
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WILLIS — The Woodlands is aiming for its 26th consecutive playoff appearance this season. The Highlanders took the first step toward accomplishing that goal Friday evening at Yates Stadium. The Woodlands opened District 13-6A play with a 43-15 road victory over Willis in the first-ever meeting between the two programs.

The Highlanders (2-2, 1-0) only played three non-district games this season, but quality opponents like Pearland and Fort Bend Hightower allowed the team to prepare for the league schedule. The Woodlands trailed early against Willis, but finished the game with 26 unanswered points.

“They’re a quality football team,” The Woodlands coach Jim Rapp said. “A lot of people don’t give them credit, but they really are. Coach (Michael) Wall does a great job with his kids. ... They had a lot of fire to start off with, but so did we, and they were able to hang in there. But it never really stopped what we were doing. We were able to catch back up, and once we were able to get that two-touchdown, three-touchdown lead, it ended up being what it was.”

Willis (0-5, 0-1), making its Class 6A district debut, also stacked its non-district slate with tough competition, including No. 1 state-ranked North Shore. That strategy seemed to pay dividends early on against the Highlanders, but the visitors were eventually able to pull away.

“Our guys are always excited, and I felt like we had a good plan,” Wall said. “We were hitting a few passes and getting some breaks here and there (early on). We hung right with them. ... You’ve got to be able to match a good team like that. Those teams don’t go into panic mode by any means, and you just have to match them for all four quarters.”

The Woodlands took an early lead on its opening drive as Lane O’Brien scored on a 32-yard run. Willis answered right back on the ensuing possession, however, as Steele Bardwell connected with Jamarious Wells for a 70-yard score on the Wildkats’ first play from scrimmage.

Willis went ahead a short time later after a punt from Bardwell left the Highlanders pinned at their own 1-yard line. The Wildkats made a tackle in the end zone on second down for the safety.

Jack Calhoun was the standout for The Woodlands in the first half with 153 yards of total offense. The senior receiver handed his team the 17-8 lead on a 9-yard run with 11 seconds to play in the opening quarter. He finished the contest with three catches for 75 yards and six carries for 83.

“We have some kids that are pretty dang explosive, so we come up with different ways to get them the ball,” Rapp said. “Jack is one of those kids. Scheming up some opportunities for him was big.” Willis once again found a way to fire back early in the second period as Bardwell tossed a jump ball to Ja’Kobe McCoy from 18 yards out to cut into the deficit.

Those would be the last points the Wildkats would score as The Woodlands finished the half strong. Parker McGill scored on a 6-yard run, and Trey Harrison booted a pair of field goals, the second of which came as the clock expired. Harrison had three field goals in the opening half altogether, hitting from 27, 30 and 24 yards out, respectively.

The Woodlands scored 14 unanswered points in the third quarter as Teddy Knox raced home on a 26-yard score and quarterback Connor Dechiro reached paydirt on a 1-yard sneak. That gave the Highlanders a commanding 43-15 lead just before the end of the period. The fourth quarter was a scoreless one as The Woodlands held on for the victory.

Knox finished with 105 total yards on just six touches. O’Brien added 64 yards on the ground, and Dechiro completed 11 of 17 passes for 200 yards.

Willis had a standout performance from Wells, who had 12 catches for 140 yards. Bardwell completed 23 of 35 passes for 241 yards.

“They’ve got some really good players and do some really good things formation-wise,” Rapp said. “You’ve really got to be on the ball (on defense). We see it all week in practice, but we don’t see it like that - how quick they are and how crisp they are running their plays. Once we adjusted to the normal in-game stuff, our kids did a good job.”

The Woodlands returns to action at 7 p.m. next Friday with a matchup against Oak Ridge at Woodforest Bank Stadium. The Highlanders have never lost to the War Eagles. Willis, meanwhile, will play host to College Park at the same time that night.