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The Woodlands falls to defending state champs North Shore

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HOUSTON — North Shore and The Woodlands hadn't met on the football field since 2007, just four years after the Mustangs defeated the Highlanders to claim their first state crown. So when the two programs scheduled a nondistrict contest to kick off the 2022 campaign, the billing came with plenty of hype and excitement.

No. 2 state-ranked North Shore quickly extinguished any hopes for a competitive game, however, launching their Class 6A Division I state title defense with a dominant 49-21 victory at Galena Park ISD Stadium.

"It's a great way to start the year," North Shore coach Jon Kay said. "These kids have worked their tails off, and so has The Woodlands, I promise you that. And that's going to be a good football team. They're going to fix some things, and everybody learns from Game 1. We've got some things we need to fix, but I liked our energy, I liked our explosiveness, and I thought we did some good things on special teams. But in any game, I think you're going to find some holes in the boat, and it's our job to fix it."

The Mustangs (1-0) improved their all-time record against The Woodlands to 6-2 in the process and have won six straight games in the series. North Shore has won 14 consecutive games overall dating back to a Week 3 loss against Westfield last season. The Woodlands' last victory against North Shore came during the 1985 season.

"First and foremost, we talked about this game - it wasn't a be-all, end-all to our season," The Woodlands coach Jim Rapp said. "It's a measuring stick of where we are right now, and what that tells me is we can't play with the defending state champion right now. But that doesn't mean we're a bad football team. ... We are going to be just fine. But there are a lot of things we

can learn from a coaching standpoint to the players' standpoint in how we practice and take care of our business. To me, that's the biggest takeaway."

North Shore reached paydirt early and often on its way to a commanding 42-7 halftime advantage. The Mustangs had scored on offense, defense and special teams before the clock hit the seven-minute mark of the second quarter.

North Shore sophomore quarterback Kaleb Bailey looked sharp, accounting for three touchdowns - two on the ground and one through the air. He completed 12-of-14 passes for 225 yards and added 34 yards on the ground. The defense collected a pair of first-half interceptions, and receiver Evan Jackson provided the fireworks on special teams with an 84-yard punt return for a touchdown.

The Woodlands (0-1), ranked No. 18 in the state, struggled to consistently move the ball against a North Shore defense that graduated several talented players from its front seven. On the flip side, the Mustangs' offense set the tone out of the gates when running back Rashaad Johnson, who finished with nine carries for 69 yards, scored on a 1-yard plunge up the middle to cap the team's opening drive.

The Woodlands knotted the game with a 1-yard run from Jacoby Mitchell, but that was all the Highlanders could muster in the opening half.

North Shore re-took the lead with a 65-yard touchdown pass from Bailey to Christopher Barnes, and Jacoby Davis made it 21-7 with a 53-yard pick-6. Bailey sandwiched a pair of 4-yard touchdown runs around the big play from Jackson, the second of which was set up by Jaylon Joseph's interception. Johnson, a bruising 5-foot-10, 215-pound back, added a 3-yard scoring run midway through the third quarter.

"We've been talking all along about the potential to be pretty explosive," Kay said of his offense. "I think you can see that with guys like David Amador, who we knew about, but also Chris Barnes and Terrence Guillory and Caleb Kaleb Thomas and their ability to take a routine play and turn it into a big play. That's going to be critical. I thought they did a good job of just taking advantage of their opportunities, but at the same time, if we're this good next week, it's going to be a short year, so we've just got to keep getting better."

The Woodlands finally busted its scoring drought early in the fourth quarter with a 1-yard keeper by junior quarterback Mabrey Mettauer, the four-star recruit who is hoping to lead the Highlanders to a second consecutive district title.

It was too little, too late, however, as North Shore pulled its starters on the ensuing drive and coasted to the victory. The Woodlands' backup signal-caller Patrick Miller scrambled for a 20-yard touchdown to cap the scoring with 56 seconds remaining.