

THE COURIER

OF MONTGOMERY COUNTY



North Shore rolls past The Woodlands to open season

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Aug. 26, 2023

SHENANDOAH — Kaleb Bailey returned, the North Shore offense was strong, the defense didn't allow much and new head coach Willie Gaston is a winner of his first game in his new role.

The Chronicle's Class 6A No. 1 North Shore handed No. 5 The Woodlands a 38-17 loss Friday night in a nondistrict game at Woodforest Bank Stadium to begin the 2023 season.

Bailey missed the Mustangs' run to the Class 6A Division I state title game last year after tearing his ACL in September. He went 20-for-29 against the Highlanders for 266 yards, three touchdown passes and one touchdown run.

"I thought he looked good," Gaston said. "You could see a little bit of rust and stuff like that. But I think he looked good."

North Shore (1-0), which is ranked No. 2 in the Class 6A state poll, runs its record to 7-2 all-time against The Woodlands (0-1), which hasn't defeated the Mustangs since 1985. The Highlanders, ranked No. 12 in the state poll, dropped their season opener for the seventh time in eight years, the product of an always-challenging nondistrict slate.

Highlights

North Shore went up 7-0 on just three plays to start the game. Senior Terrence Guillory caught a 64-yard pass from junior Bailey, who returned after a knee injury in September 2022. Bailey then connected with Cameron Smith — two plays later — from 8 yards out.

The teams exchanged possessions until North Shore went up 14-0 at the 6:31 mark of the second quarter. Bailey finished off an eight-play drive with a 2-yard touchdown.

The Woodlands struck back just over 90 seconds later as four-star quarterback Mabrey Mettaufer, a Wisconsin commit, hit Shane Walker, who slid into the end zone on his backside, for a 32-yard score.

Junior D'Andre Hardeman scored from 6 yards out with 2:31 left before halftime. North Shore quickly got the ball back and Jonathan Soto booted through a 21-yard field goal as time expired for halftime.

“Our defense made a good stop there right before halftime,” Gaston said. “It let us work a little two-minute situation and get points on the board.”

On the opening drive of the second half, Bailey found Kaleb Thomas for a 10-yard score.

Scott Starzyk boomed a 44-yard field goal with 4:31 left in the third quarter for The Woodlands.

Smith added his second touchdown of the night with 7:09 left to play as Bailey tossed to him from 11 yards out.

“I’ve been doing this all my life,” Bailey said of his return. “A little injury ain’t stopping nothing.”

The Woodlands added its second touchdown of the night with 4:46 to play as backup quarterback Patrick Miller connected with Quaneel X Farrakhan Jr. for a 49-yard score.

What it means

The win was a great sign for new head coach Gaston, a North Shore alum who previously served as offensive coordinator. Gaston took over in the spring as Jon Kay departed for the coaching staff at Rice.

“It means the world to me,” Gaston said. “To have the opportunity to come here where you graduated from. Give back to this community. I just love the Eastside of Houston so much. (The support) is always like this. They come and travel with us. I’m proud of our community and our fans that come and support these kids.”

North Shore rattled off 15 straight wins last season — starting with a victory over The Woodlands — en route to the Class 6A Division I title game.

For the Highlanders, it was the same start last season. But a fairly raw defense stood pretty well in the first half as it forced a couple punts.

“There were some big plays that the defense gave up that we have to correct,” Rapp said. “But at large, I thought they played really well. Marked improvement from last week playing Atascocita. I’m proud of the improvement they made, but I’m not proud of the overall outcome. I was happy with the way they improved.”

The Mustangs totaled 508 yards of total offense and didn’t turn it over.

Quotable

“This is a measuring stick for us,” Rapp said of what’s to come after a tough Week 1 opponent. “A barometer. We’ll find where we are. Those guys are expected to play Duncanville in the state championship game. We know where we are with one of the best football teams in the state of Texas. Those guys will only continue to get better and so will we.”

Game balls

Bailey looked great in his return to action. He also rushed four times and was elusive in the pocket.

“It’s been amazing,” Bailey said. “First game. I can say there were some things we messed up on. But we will go back and watch film tomorrow and take care of the little things so we can get better in the long run.”

Hardeman rushed for 152 yards on 16 touchdowns and two scores.

Walker returned a couple long kicks for the Highlanders while also totaling 57 yards on four catches.

Mettauer finished with 163 yards passing.