

Willis takes down The Woodlands in thriller for share of District 13-6A title

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SHENANDOAH — Undefeated Willis' latest conquest on the football field is perhaps its most impressive in what has been a historic season so far.

It took everything the Wildkats had.

No. 15 state-ranked Willis eluded No. 25 The Woodlands 60-52 in a thrilling clash of power Saturday afternoon at Woodforest Bank Stadium to secure at least a share of the District 13-6A title.

It is Willis' first district title since 2002 and prevented an outright district title for The Woodlands. The Highlanders' seven-game win streak was snapped in the process.

"I couldn't be happier for our kids and how we responded," Willis coach Trent Miller said. "The Woodlands is incredible, man. Give them credit. But we took care of business today."

In improving to 9-0 overall, 7-0 in district play, Willis, enjoying its finest season since 1962, scored on 10 of 13 drives.

In a battle of two elite quarterback prospects in the Class of 2024, Willis senior and Florida commit D.J. Lagway was brilliant.

Lagway was surgical in completing 31 of 36 passes for 384 yards and four touchdowns to one interception, and rushing for 211 yards and three touchdowns on 17 carries.

The Woodlands senior and Wisconsin commit Mabrey Mettauer was having a great game of his own before leaving with 1:11 left in the first half on a stretcher following a hard hit toward the sideline on the end of a 13-yard run.

Until that point, when The Woodlands trailed 29-21, Mettauer had completed 10 of 12 passes for 164 yards and a touchdown and rushed nine times for 48 yards and a score.

Willis controlled the rest of the way.

“It was a great test,” Lagway said. “We needed it. I thought we responded well. We still have a lot to work on.”

Highlights

Willis outgained The Woodlands in total yards, 680-302, in an offensive spectacle that featured 15 touchdowns.

But penalties, many of the unsportsmanlike variety, plagued an otherwise fun game.

Willis was whistled for 23 penalties for 235 yards. The Woodlands had 14 penalties for 150 yards.

When the ball was in play, heroics were aplenty.

The Woodlands led 7-3 after the first quarter. Willis took momentum with a 29-point second quarter.

With nothing going in the passing game, Lagway turned to his legs. He scored on an 82-yard jaunt up the gut 47 seconds into the second quarter. On Willis' next play from scrimmage, he found the end zone again on a 72-yard spree.

The run opened up the pass for the Wildkats.

“That was the game plan before the game, to see if they were going to give us that look,” Lagway said. “It’s really hard to throw in that 4-0 box (four linemen, seven defensive backs). We had to come up with something to get them out of that, and that’s when things started to roll.”

Lagway connected with sophomore dynamo Jermaine Bishop Jr. on a pair of 66- and 36-yard touchdowns.

But even with the Wildkats’ offensive prowess — at one point, Willis scored on seven consecutive possessions spanning the second and third quarters — the Highlanders never quit.

It took a while for The Woodlands to find its groove once Mettaufer went out. But the Highlanders, trailing 32-24 at the half, got a big Joseph Canola run to answer a Willis score. And then junior receiver Quanell X Farrakhan Jr. got going.

Every time it looked like the Wildkats would gain some breathing room, Farrakhan made a big catch, or senior receiver Aden Self would make a big play. It allowed backup senior quarterback Patrick Miller to find a rhythm.

The Highlanders had no issue moving the ball. But with the defense unable to get stops, and three turnovers awarding Willis extra possessions, The Woodlands worked from behind for most of the game.

Willis led 60-45 with 1:47 left after a 5-yard run by junior running back Terri Lawrence III. After Miller found Farrakhan for a 1-yard score with 38 seconds left to make it a one-score game, Willis recovered the ensuing onside kick to seal the win and run out the clock with The Woodlands having no timeouts.

What it means

Willis beat The Woodlands for the first time in four tries.

The Woodlands wrapped up its regular season with a loss and is 7-3 overall (7-1 in district) heading into the playoffs in two weeks.

Willis can win the district title outright with a victory over Oak Ridge next week.

A triumph over the War Eagles would give the Wildkats a 10-win season for the first time.

Quotable

“I give it to God and rely on my focus and work ethic I put out through the week,” Lagway said of his mindset and approach heading into the marquee matchup.

Game balls

Bishop was sensational. The two-way star caught 13 balls for 228 yards and three touchdowns.

“We got open,” Bishop said. “We were aware of where guys were going to be. D.J. being able to see what they’re in and where the safeties were ... we were able to exploit the holes.”

Junior receiver Jalen Mickens had 75 yards and a touchdown on five catches for Willis. Senior receiver Debraun Hampton had five catches for 49 yards.

Willis’ defense had three takeaways, all fumble recoveries via defensive back Jevin Allen, sophomore linebacker Brock Reynolds and junior defensive lineman Frankie Long.

Long also had one of the Wildkats’ three sacks, along with senior lineman Josiah Stephens and sophomore lineman Day’Jon Moore.

The Willis defense held The Woodlands to 91 rushing yards on 28 carries (3.3 yards per carry).

“We all ran to the ball hard, and we never really let them get a big run,” Long said. “We played with intensity, and we fed off that.”

In reserve, Miller was admirable for The Woodlands, completing 13 of 21 passes for 211 yards and three touchdowns.

Farrakhan had seven catches for 104 yards and three touchdowns. He also had The Woodlands’ lone takeaway with a first-half interception of Lagway.

Senior linebackers Cayden Clayton and Caleb Phillips had sacks for the Highlanders’ defense.