

# Second-Half Control Gives Highlanders Boost to Victory

By: Jake Wilson | Published 09/06/2024



THE WOODLANDS, TX -- The Woodlands Highlanders (2-0) handily defeated the Deer Park Deer (1-1) in a 52-24 romp in the Highlanders' home opener at Woodforest Bank Stadium.

After their 49-22 win over Cinco Ranch, the Highlanders aimed to continue their winning ways and enter 13-6A district play with an unbeaten record.

The Woodlands' goal of beating the Deer in a fashion that prepared them for district play was aided by a strategically planned opening kickoff. A well-placed kick from Scott Starzyk fell between the Deer Park returners, allowing the Highlanders to fall on the loose ball for opening possession.

Just one play later, receiver Jackson Bolender weaved through the Deer secondary for the game's opening score and a 7-0 Woodlands lead in under 30 seconds.

In an interview with The Woodlands Online Sports, Highlander Head Coach Jim Rapp spoke on the importance of getting his receivers involved in as many plays as possible.

"It's important that we make sure our guys touch the ball," said Rapp. "If we're going to win games, we have to make sure that we get it to our guys when we can."

After their return blunder set the team behind in less than a minute, Deer Park's ensuing drive showed promise in the face of a stacked Highlander defense.

Blocking at the line of scrimmage and a handful of trick plays from the Deer offense moved the chains onto the doorstep of Woodlands territory. But penalties cost Deer Park their momentum and the drive had to be punted away to the Highlanders.

Following a stop by their defense, the Deer returned to the field with 90 yards needed to tie the Highlanders on the scoreboard. The Deer relied on a balanced mixture of runs to the outside edges and a passing game to make up large chunks of yards. Their passing game came to a head when Tre Martinez outsped his defender for a 66-yard receiving touchdown to tie the game.

The joy was short-lived for Deer Park though. A burst of speed and excellent blocks from the return team set up Shane Walker with a running lane down the Highlander sideline. Walker went untouched through the gaps in the Deer kickoff team for an 85-yard return touchdown to put the Highlanders up 14-7 at the end of the first quarter.

A Woodlands stop just outside the red zone prevented the Deer from getting points to start the second quarter. Deer Park's 32-yard field goal would have inched the team close on the scoreboard, but the attempt crept wide right. Fortunately for the Deer, their defense would force another punt from the Highlander offense, giving the team a second chance to tie.

Starting from their 12-yard line was a daunting task, but a shift in focus to the running game caught the Highlander defenders off guard. A blistering run up the middle put Deer Park into Woodlands territory before a stretch of hard-nosed runs from Christopher Brown breached the endzone for a 14-14 scoreline.

The Woodlands' situation only worsened when a demolishing blow on the ensuing kick return forced a fumble that landed in Deer hands.

"They're some tough kids," said Rapp of the Deer Park players. "They have a very storied program and a tradition of winning, and they're not going to give up. So I had to tell our guys, 'It's not over.' and to keep pushing."

With a chance to claim the lead, Deer Park's coaching staff attempted another trick play to catch the Highlanders reeling after their kickoff mistake. But Parker Stewart was prepared and intercepted the incoming pass before returning it deep inside Deer territory.

A run to the right side of the offensive line by Bolender put The Woodlands back in front 21-14 at the end of the first half.

The Highlanders were in a beneficial position due to their successful "onside kick" to start the game. The Woodlands received the second-half kickoff fresh off their score and in a spot where Deer Park was forced to make a stop or fall behind even more.

But with the team needing a stop, the Deer were at the whim of a rapidly moving Woodlands offense. Explosive runs from quarterback Jack Daulton maneuvered the Highlanders into opposing territory before a 49-yard rush from Bolender gave the receiver/running back his third score of the game.

The struggling Deer defense was thrown a bone after the defense forced a stop inside Highlander territory. The routine punt turned into a disaster for The Woodlands when multiple blockers wrapped Starzyk up before he could get the punt off.

The shortened field allowed the Deer to use one play for a 25-yard passing touchdown to make the game 28-21 with the Highlanders still in front. Needing to prevent a full-on collapse, the Highlanders returned to the offensive attack determined to stretch their lead again.

Deer Park was again the beneficiary of a Highlander mistake, as a quarterback run into the heart of the defense resulted in a fumble. Deer defensive lineman Cameron Colquitt pounced on the loose ball to set up his team in excellent field position.

Instead of breaking under the pressure, the Highlander defense bolstered and held the line. The Deer attack was forced into their own backfield for losses, and Deer Park had to settle for a field goal and a 24-28 deficit.

The Highlanders carried their next drive from the third quarter into the fourth, with a score needed to keep the Deer at bay.

The Woodlands' 53-yard drive reached the endzone for the much-needed score. A wide-open Walker streaked to the endzone for a 35-24 Highlander lead that pushed the initiative back on Deer Park.

"When the game came down to seven or so points, we bowed up and we played," said Rapp. "That's the biggest takeaway for me."

The Deer failed to handle the fresh pressure put on them by the Highlanders, and the team was forced to punt again. Another Woodlands score would likely ice the game and give the win securely to the Highlanders.

With the ball on the Highlander 23-yard line, The Woodlands set off to deal the proverbial knockout blow to Deer Park. A well-called drive from the Highlander coaching staff put the ball into Daulton's hands on designed quarterback runs. The junior sliced through defenders on his way to cap off a 28-yard rushing score to put the Highlanders up 42-24 with time quickly running out for the Deer.

Insurance scores from The Woodlands, including a pick-six from Stewart, put the game to bed as the clock struck zero. The second-half production from the Highlanders secured a 52-24 victory for The Woodlands, along with an undefeated record going into district.

"It's been a while since we've been undefeated after two [games], and it's nice that we are," said Rapp. "But our biggest takeaway is that we have to play one game every week and we have to get better every week."

Rapp and the rest of the Highlanders will open their district run against the equally unbeaten Grand Oaks Grizzlies next Friday at Woodforest Bank Stadium.