

Shootout Ends in Justin Willis Kick to Give Wildkats the Win Over Highlanders

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THE WOODLANDS, TX -- The Willis Wildkats (4-0) trusted the leg of their kicker, Justin Willis, to nail a game-winning kick in a thrilling matchup against The Woodlands Highlanders (3-1) for the top spot in 13-6A.

Intense pressure swirled above Woodforest Bank Stadium ahead of the much-anticipated matchup between the Wildkats and Highlanders. The de facto district championship would determine the likely favorite to run the table and win 13-6A, so both teams prepared their best.

Like they had done all season, the Wildkats wanted the ball to start the game, trusting their electrifying offense to start the game with a quick score. Head Coach Trent Miller's trust in his guys was well placed as shown by Romel Stevens' first touchdown catch of the season on an 18-yard strike from Jack Emerson.

The Highlanders replied with back-to-back scores to claim their first lead in response to the quick deficit.

The first score came on a 46-yard pass from Jack Daulton to Shane Walker, which evened the game at seven. Then, Emerson's first interception of the season gave the ball back to The Woodlands offense, which needed one play from Jackson Bolender to reach the endzone for a 14-7 lead.

In an exclusive interview with The Woodlands Online Sports, Coach Miller gave his thoughts on Emerson's expectations before the game and how he responded to the adversity.

“That first pick he threw worked all week against our scout teams, but the ball was a little underthrown,” said Miller. “But the entire offensive unit plays as a unit. They all had his back and picked him up on the sideline, and he gave himself another chance to prove himself.”

Emerson’s next chance came following a crucial stop by the Wildkat defense. The Highlanders were driving deep into Willis’ territory, but a punch at the ball and a fumble surrendered the ball back to Willis while halting The Woodlands’ advance.

Willis’ offense then marched 90 yards down the field to reach the end zone on Daylion Robinson’s first rushing score of the game. The potent momentum shift gave control of the game back to Willis before halftime.

Three touchdowns for the Wildkats to one for the Highlanders during the second quarter gave the team a 28-21 lead at the half. Robinson’s 2nd rushing score was the catalyst that gave Willis its lead, but the Highlanders were adamant to get back in control.

The Woodlands exited the locker room with a sound strategy of eating clock and limiting Willis’ time of possession. A five-minute scoring drive started the second half for the Highlanders and evened the game at 28.

Willis’ corresponding drive ended in a rare punt, and the Highlanders were ruthlessly efficient in reclaiming the lead.

Touches from multiple offensive players gave The Woodlands a multi-faceted attack similar to the Wildkats. Bolender, Walker, Daulton, Eli Lancaster, and Cody Jordan all received touches throughout the Highlanders’ next scoring drive.

Jordan managed to ride solid blocking from the Highlander offensive line to rush for a score that pushed the Highlanders back in front 35-28.

Needing a reply, the Wildkats trusted their ever-reliable weapon Jermaine Bishop Jr. to get the job done.

The talented junior receiver was worked seamlessly into the offensive drive by taking receptions and rushes into the Highlander defense.

“He is a special kid, whenever we’re struggling in practices or on Friday nights, it’s always when in doubt Jermaine it out,” said Miller. “Any time that young man has the ball in his hands in space, he’s deadly.”

Bishop Jr’s electrifying play was put on full display with a 55-yard passing score to tie the game at 35, but it would not be the last taste of offensive production for the Wildkats in the third quarter.

An interception of a lofted Daulton pass from Jacorion Hatchett stopped another Woodlands drive in its tracks. With the game inching toward a close finish, each stop carried heavy importance.

“When The Woodlands is working with so many talented guys and a massive o-line, you’re going to give up some big plays,” said Miller. “But I was so excited and impressed with how [the defense] stepped up in the third and fourth quarters. They bowed their neck when they needed to.”

The interception gave the ball back to Willis for another third-quarter drive and the trusty Bishop Jr. made another house call. A flash of speed through a gap from his blocking teammates gave the talented receiver his third touchdown of the game and a 42-35 lead to the Wildkats.

Entering the fourth quarter, the Highlanders were driving toward another tying touchdown. Steady play from Daulton and the rest of The Woodlands' offense was pushing the team toward a time-consuming score. A rush from Jason Haskins sealed the deal, and the teams were tied at 42.

Momentum seemed to favor the Highlanders in the fourth, with the first offensive drive for Willis ending in an interception into the hands of Caycen Bartolazzi.

The endzone interception gave a golden opportunity for the Highlanders to score the knockout blow and end the game in victory, but the Wildkats had other plans.

Stern play from the defensive front and sideline-to-sideline play from the defensive backs made a game-defining stop for the Wildkats. The Highlanders were forced to punt their potentially game-winning drive away to Willis.

A surgical, time-consuming drive saw the Wildkats favor runs to Robinson and Terri Lawrence III. Strong pushes from the offensive line gave the talented runners the space needed to secure first downs and keep the drive alive into Woodlands territory.

The Highlanders were helpless to stop Willis on their march down the field and into field goal range of Justin Willis.

The Woodlands attempted to ice the kicker, but calm and concentration from Willis prevailed. Willis' kick sailed through the uprights as time expired, and the Wildkats took home a nail-biting 45-42 win.

"We practice that every single day," said Miller. "That wasn't anything that he wasn't prepared for or anything that he hadn't seen. I couldn't be happier for him."

Willis' win sets the team at the top of the 13-6A standings as the only four-win team in the district. The road still stretches ahead of the Wildkats, but their test against The Woodlands has prepared them for the worst the district may throw their way.

"I think this gives our guys the confidence they were looking for. We know who we are as a team and as a program, but we have to go out and prove it," said Miller. "The target on our backs has gotten significantly bigger, so we have to prepare for each game like it's a district championship."

The next test for Willis will be next Friday against the struggling Cleveland Indians, while the Highlanders will look for a rebound against Caney Creek.