HIGHLANDER FOOTBALL

HIGHLANDERS' RECORD-BREAKING SEASON ENDS IN SECOND ROUND LOSS TO KLEIN

The Highlanders entered the second-round matchup with Klein on a 10-game winning streak, having scored at least 39 points in every game during that stretch. Klein came into the contest with a similar 10-1 record, and a gameplan to keep the high-powered Highlander offense off the field. In the end, the Bearkats held the Highlanders to a season-low 27 points, and stormed back from a 17-point second-half deficit to pull off the upset 31-27 at Aldine's Thorne Stadium.

Klein received the opening kickoff, as both offenses started the game with quick three-and-outs. Klein took over right at midfield for their second possession and began to find some success through the air. Bearkat QB Carter Latelle completed 5 passes on the drive and found Mike Brown in the back of the end zone for a short TD to put Klein up early 7-0.

The rest of the half was all Highlanders. The Woodlands offense responded with a TD drive of their own. Kaden Copelin hit his favorite target Carter Cass on a swing pass to the left that went 42 yards and put the Highlanders in the red zone. A few plays later, Cass would cap off the drive with 4-yd run to even the score at 7 points each.

Klein's next three possessions would end on interceptions. Bryce Stott jumped a hitch route to pick off Klein QB Latelle and returned it 36 yards inside the 10-yd line. On the very next play, Copelin would hit Jason Haskins out of the backfield for an 8-yd touchdown strike. It was Copelin's 47th TD pass of the season, setting a new school record. Eric Schmid previously held the record for TD passes in a season with 46, set during the 2016 season that ended in the state championship game. A missed extra point made the new score 13-7 for the Highlanders.

Klein's next offensive drive showed promise after a 43-yd run by Juelz James moved the ball deep into Highlander territory. This time it was Pilot Clary with the interception to stop the Bearkat scoring threat. Clary returned the ball 35 yards past midfield to set up the offense with great field position.

As has been the case for most of the season, the Highlander offense didn't take long to find the end zone. On the second play of the drive, Copelin rolled left and threw a perfect strike to Kaiden Stewart for 33 yards to move the ball inside the 10-yd line. Then one play later, Copelin connected with Cass for a 7-yd touchdown, making the score 20-7. This was Cass's 24th TD on the season, which ties for 2nd most ever in Highlander History.

The Highlander defense appeared to have forced a three-and-out on the Bearkats' next possession, but Jack Bomer took off running on a fake punt for a first down to extend the drive. But the drive didn't last long after that. Two plays later, Pilot Clary outjumped receiver Mike Brown for his second interception of the game to end the scoring threat.

The Highlanders moved the ball past midfield on the ensuing possession but ended up punting the ball back to the Bearkats. Klein got a big run from Brown to move the ball near midfield, but back-to-back sacks by Nate Beagle and Magnus Herndon ended the drive. The first half would end with the Highlanders holding on to the 20-7 lead.

The Woodlands were set to receive the 2nd half kickoff and looked to stretch their lead. However, at the end of great kickoff return, Carter Cass lost the ball and Klein took over at the Highlander 44-yd line. The Bearkats came out with a different approach in the 2nd half. Often lining up with 7 offensive linemen and 3 backs, Klein looked to lean on the power run game in an attempt to mount a comeback. A 28-yd run by James moved the ball into field goal range, where Kieran Grimes hit from 22 yards out to cut the Highlander lead to 20-10.

Now with the ball for the first time in the second half, the Highlander offense worked its way down the field into scoring position. Copelin connected on two big pass plays on drive, first by finding Haskins as he was avoiding a sack for 19 yards. Copelin then went deep to Bryson Bourn for 41 yards to set up The Woodlands with a 1st and goal at the 10. Copelin finished off the drive with a three-yard bootleg keep as the Highlanders went up by 17 points with a 27-10 lead.

The Bearkats went back to the running game on their next drive, after getting a great kickoff return out to midfield. Aaron Cortez had back-to-back big runs as Klein moved into scoring position. On a 4th and 3 from the 5-yd line, Latelle went play-action and hit Jack Bomer for the short TD completion.

Still down 10 points at 27-17, Klein dug into their bag of tricks and attempted an onside kick that was successfully recovered by Dustin Thompson. Back on offense, the Bearkats methodically marched down the field. Kendrick Brown finished the 12-play drive (11 runs, 1 pass attempt) with a 2-yd plunge as the Bearkats seemed to have seized momentum and trimmed their deficit to 27-24.

Another onside attempt was recovered this time by Max Mitchell of the Highlanders. Mitchell would lead the team with tackles with 14 to put his season total at 121. But after being off the field for 26 consecutive plays, the Highlander offense was unable to get back on track. Despite the great field position, The Woodlands failed to pick up a first down and were forced to punt the ball back to Klein and put the TWH defense back on the field.

Down by 3 with about 5 minutes left in the game, Klein set out to complete the comeback. Five runs and one pass later, Klein had moved the ball out to their own 33-yd line as the clock continued to click down. With the first and 10 but time beginning to become a factor, the Bearkats knew they needed to take a shot for a big play. Latelle was able to buy some time in the pocket and found Kain Bollen coming all the way across the field from left to right for a 44-yd completion. On the first play after the two-minute warning, Brown ran around the right edge for 27 yards as the Bearkats found themselves knocking on the door at the 1-yd line. Brown would then score from 1-yd out as the Bearkats took a 31-27 lead.

The Highlanders had one last attempt to recapture the lead. Bourn returned the kickoff 47 yards to set up TWHS at the Klein 29-yd line with about 1:30 left on the clock. With the game on the line, it was Klein's defense that stepped up to the occasion and prevented the Highlanders from advancing to the

3rd round of the playoffs. A fourth down stop at the 24-yd line ended the game and the season for The Woodlands.

Despite the loss, it was an amazing season for the Highlanders that saw many broken records, a 32nd consecutive playoff berth, a 5th straight trip past the first round of the postseason, and their first district championship since 2021.