

THE COURIER

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The Woodlands takes care of business against Allen to reach state title game

By Demetrio Teniente
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AUSTIN - It's taken 13 years, but The Woodlands is headed back to the state championship game. The Highlanders were largely considered the underdogs in Saturday's UIL Class 6A Division I state semifinal against Allen at the University of Texas' Darrell K. Royal Stadium in Austin. But the outside noise did little to stop The Woodlands.

The Highlanders did just about everything right - holding a run-heavy Eagles offense to 81 yards on the ground, winning the time of possession with methodical drives, all while still making big play after big play on their way to a 36-28 win over Allen.

The Highlanders (15-0) will travel to AT&T Stadium in Arlington next Saturday at 8 p.m. to play Lake Travis (14-1) for the state title.

"Allen had that run of three consecutive state championships in 2012, 13 and 14," The Woodlands coach Mark Schmid said. "And (this season) they were ranked No. 1 in the state so we had to be the underdogs. But our kids have faced big opponents all year and they've never felt like they were the underdogs. It is huge to be able to beat a great football team. To beat an undefeated team - especially an Allen team, is sweet."

The Woodlands has been playing well all season. But it has turned it up a notch ever since senior linebacker Grant Milton was hospitalized two weeks ago after suffering a serious head injury in a win over Austin Bowie.

Milton, who remains comatose, has become the driving force behind the Highlanders playoff run. "We've been playing that way all year but we've picked it up in the playoffs," The Woodlands defensive lineman Michael Purcell said. "We are peaking - and this is the perfect time to peak. We've definitely been playing inspired with what happened to Milton. We are just playing for the team, the school and for him."

Allen (14-1) tried to set the tone early and began the game with a methodical march down the field. The Eagles put together a 14-play, four-minute drive but were turned away in the red zone and had to settle for a 32-yard field goal attempt. The Woodlands receiver Christopher Stewart broke through the Allen offensive line and blocked Michael Ewton's kick to keep the game scoreless.

The Highlanders responded by driving 80 yards in 11 plays - ending with a seven yard touchdown run by running back Carlos Ramos to give The Woodlands a 7-0 lead with 4:26 left in the quarter.

On the third play of the Eagles' next drive, on 3rd down and 10 to go from his 25, Allen quarterback Mitchell Jonke was intercepted on a deep pass over the middle by The Woodlands' Ethan Bonner.

The Highlanders ran 12 plays to go 44 yards, eating up 3:55 minutes off the clock. A 39-yard field goal by Lockhart West gave The Woodlands a 10-0 lead in the first five seconds of the second quarter.

A 68-yard touchdown pass from senior quarterback Eric Schmid to Dylan Casey with 3:17 left in the first half followed by a 24-yard field goal from West with 11 seconds remaining gave The Woodlands a 20-3 lead heading into halftime.

The Woodlands received the ball to begin the second half and Eric Schmid took advantage, connecting with Kesean Carter for a 72-yard touchdown on the Highlanders opening drive. Charles Gringas had his point after attempt blocked so The Woodlands went up 26-3 with 10:33 left in the third quarter.

Carter led the Highlanders with nine catches for 183 yards and a touchdown, while Casey had 140 yards on five catches.

"Our linemen blocked well and gave me plenty of time to throw and our receivers did a great job of getting open." Eric Schmid said. "You can't get open every time, but they got open when we needed them to and that's why we are standing here at the end of the game."

But Allen didn't go quietly. The Eagles defense forced three consecutive punts on the possessions following Carters' long touchdown. Jonke found Theo Wease for a 30 yard touchdown with 7:19 left in the quarter and Ewton nailed a 37 yard field goal to make it 26-13 with 3:10 left in the third.

With Allen's resurgence in the second half, The Woodlands was struggling to put the game away. On the Highlanders' first drive of the fourth quarter, in a 13-point game, Allen forced a three-and-out. Eric Schmid booted a perfect punt that was downed at the Allen one yard line.

On the Eagles following drive, Purcell recorded a pair of sacks - his second setting up a 4th and 14 for the Eagles at their own 19. Jonke had defenders on him immediately, and though he stepped up to avoid the pressure, Jackson Shupp got a hand on the ball just as the ball left the quarterbacks' hand and it fell harmlessly to the ground.

The Woodlands took over on downs and four plays later, West hit his third field goal of the night from 30 yards out - making it 36-20 with 3:02 left to play.

Purcell finished with six total tackles, 2 1/2 sacks, three tackles for a loss and a pass breakup. "He played a heck of a game tonight," Mark Schmid said. "He is worn out. There isn't anything left in him - he gave it his all. He kept putting pressure on the quarterback and we did a great job of stopping their run game. His leadership, just by his actions, speaks volumes."

Eric Schmid had another spectacular game, as he threw for 369 yards on 21-of-32 passing with three touchdowns.

It was an afternoon of redemption for The Woodlands. Allen beat The Woodlands, 56-21, in 2013 in the third round of the playoffs, handing the Highlanders their worst loss in program history. Furthermore, The Woodlands hasn't been to the state championship game since it lost to North Shore in 2003.

"In 2003 we didn't finish the deal," Mark Schmid said. "We're going to finish the deal this time. When we start the football season, every team and coach dreams that at the end of it they'll be playing for a state championship. Our guys just won the opportunity to do that next week. The way we've played all year and the way we battled in this game, I couldn't be more proud."

On to Arlington the Highlanders go. "This is what we've been dreaming of since we were in seventh grade so actually doing it is amazing," Eric Schmid said. "I'm kind of speechless."



Woodlands Highlanders soar over Allen Eagles to move on to Texas State Championship Game

By Jim East, WOL Sports
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AUSTIN, Texas – The Woodlands Highlanders derailed a dynasty on Saturday afternoon and proved they just might be a team of destiny.

By holding off the Allen Eagles 36-28 in the state semifinals, the Highlanders earned the right to prove that they are, in fact, the best high school football team in the great state of Texas. Next week they go for the ultimate prize, the first state championship in school history, when they face Lake Travis in Arlington.

On Saturday afternoon at DKR Texas Memorial Stadium in Austin, the Highlanders used a true team effort to build a huge lead and then survive a furious rally by the Eagles.

Lockhart West booted three clutch field goals, Grant Murphy caught a momentum-shifting fourth-quarter touchdown pass, and defensive dynamo Michael Purcell recorded two huge sacks in the final five minutes to help the Highlanders prevail.

When the final seconds ticked off, the celebration began. Head coach Mark Schmidt got a Gatorade shower, and countless Woodlands fans wearing shirts with Grant Milton's jersey number, 21, celebrated in honor of their hospitalized teammate. Milton, a senior linebacker and a valuable team leader all season, suffered a traumatic brain injury following a playoff win in November.

"I'm so very proud of this team. They have had to deal with a lot over the past two weeks and yet they stayed focused. They are playing inspired football," said Miles Milton, Grant's father. "What a gift if Grant were to wake up and cheer his brothers on to a state championship victory."

Carlos Ramos put The Highlanders on the board in the first quarter with a six-yard touchdown run to make it 7-0. It was the beginning of a massive barrage of offense.

Ethan Bonner's interception set up the first of West's field goals to make it 10-0, and less than a minute after the Eagles finally put some points up with a field goal, Highlander quarterback Eric Schmid and wide receiver Dylan Casey connected on a 68-yard touchdown pass.

West delivered one more field goal before halftime to make it 20-3, and less than 90 seconds into the third quarter, Schmid – the Player of the Game – came through with one of the great moments of his great season. Facing a third-and-long situation, he changed the play at the line of scrimmage, took the snap and threw a 72-yard touchdown pass to Kesean Carter.

26-3. Game over, right? Not so fast.

Both teams entered this game with 14-0 records, and Allen wouldn't go down without a fight. The Eagles scored the next 10 points to close the gap to 26-13, but early in the fourth quarter Schmid hooked up with a wide open Murphy on a 9-yard touchdown catch with 9:46 to play. Milton raised one hand in celebration as he ran into the end zone.

To their credit, the Eagles never stopped fighting, but there was simply not enough time for them to mount a comeback, and the Highlander defense came up with some big stops along the way.

The Woodlands stuffs running game, makes big plays to knock Allen out in state semis for second straight year

By Michael Florek, Staff Writer



AUSTIN -- With a little more than nine minutes left in Allen's Class 6A state semifinal matchup against The Woodlands on Saturday, reality started to set in.

"I'm not going to cry this time," an Allen cheerleader told her squadmates.

The Woodlands had just driven 79 yards for a touchdown to halt Allen's run of 10 straight points and go back up by 20 points in a 36-28 victory. It's the second straight year Allen (14-1) has lost in the state semifinals.

"It was just one of those games where we didn't play that well," Allen coach Terry Gambill said. "At the same time, you have to give those guys over there a lot of credit."

The Woodlands (15-0) will play Austin Lake Travis (14-1) in the Class 6A Division I state title game at 8 p.m. next Saturday at AT&T Stadium in Arlington.

The Woodlands jumped out to a 7-0 lead in the first quarter, putting together an 11-play, 80-yard drive -- including a 29-yard pass from Eric Schmid to Kesean Carter -- after Allen missed a field goal attempt.

Allen then threw an interception on its second drive, and The Woodlands turned that into a field goal. The Woodlands led 20-3 at halftime.

Coming out of halftime, The Woodlands faced third-and-7 on its own 28. Schmid found Carter behind the Allen defense for a 72-yard touchdown. Allen responded later in the quarter as a big punt return from Carson Schleker set up a 30-yard touchdown pass from Mitchell Jonke to Theo Wease.

Allen then forced three straight The Woodlands punts, using a few corner blitzes to earn well-timed sacks. But it could only manage three points in that span, as Allen's rushing attack was held to under 100 yards for the first time since Week 2. It had been averaging 275 rushing yards in the playoffs. "We just started doing some things, taking what they would give us," Gambill said.

Early in the fourth quarter, Schmid found Carter for a 27-yard pass. Two plays later, Schmid threw an 8-yard touchdown pass to Grant Murphy to put The Woodlands up 33-13.

"We got bit with some corner blitzes early, so we made the decision, we've got to throw earlier and go back and forth with passing and running on first down," The Woodlands coach Mark Schmid said.

Allen scored two straight touchdowns, its last with 51 seconds left, but on the onside kick attempt, the ball bounced off of a group of players leaping for the ball and The Woodlands fell on it to end Allen's hopes.

"When you get in these games, you've got to make plays," Gambill said. "They made plays."