

Playing for teammate, The Woodlands wins regional title

By Demetrio Teniente
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WACO - It was clear from the onset that there would be no stopping The Woodlands Saturday afternoon at McLane Stadium.

Neither the rain nor Round Rock could cool off the Highlanders as they racked up 543 yards of total offense on their way to a 41-18 victory over the Dragons in the Division I Region II-6A finals. It marks the program's first regional title since 2003.

The Woodlands (14-0) will now face Allen (14-0) in the state semifinals at 1 p.m. next Saturday at Darrell K. Royal-Texas Memorial Stadium in Austin.

Just one week after senior linebacker Grant Milton was rushed from McLane to a nearby hospital to emergency surgery for a serious head injury, the Highlanders took the field knowing their teammate was still in critical condition and in a coma. When The Woodlands took the field, the players had "21" decal on the backs of their helmets in honor of Milton. Some players also wore green wristbands with "#MiltonStrong21" printed in white on it or wrote the number 21 on their hands.

"We talked all week about how we have to finish this thing because that is what Grant would have wanted us to do," The Woodlands coach Mark Schmid said. "They know him, and they know that they needed to do that, so that's what they came out and did."

It has been a hard week for The Woodlands. And while the team and the rest of the community have responded with hope rather than fear, the effect of Milton's injury on the players and coaches is evident.

After the game, Mark Schmid commended his team's ability to keep their focus throughout the week. But when asked if he'd ever had to deal with this kind of situation himself, he simply shook his head, fighting back tears. "There is no playbook for something like this," he turned and pointed to his team. "But those guys are awesome. Those guys are awesome."

The Woodlands senior quarterback Eric Schmid seemed determined to do anything he could to help position his team for the win. He threw for 247 yards with a touchdown and rushed for 107 yards with three more scores on runs of five, 17 and 12 yards, respectively.

The senior signal-caller broke free for a 57-yard run that set up his 12-yard score, which made it 34-6 with nine seconds left in the first half.

There was very little he hadn't done for the Highlanders through the first two quarters. But the offense wasn't able to do much more outside a 19-yard Carlos Ramos touchdown run to make it 41-12 with 3:33 left in the third quarter.

"I think we were just trying (too hard) to put it away," Eric Schmid said. "But the defense played great all night. I don't know how many sacks they got, but they were putting pressure on them, and the secondary was covering well."

The Woodlands' defense combined for six sacks. Michael Purcell had 2.5 sacks, Zach LaCanfora had 1.5, and Zach Loane and Cole Sichley each had one.

Purcell, who announced his commitment to play for Air Force Friday night, also had four tackles for loss and a forced fumble. "Tremendous leadership on his part," Mark Schmid said. "Not just vocally, but he does it with his actions. We rely on him so much, and he is such a centerpiece on our defense, and he was that tonight."

The Woodlands also held Round Rock (10-4) to 119 yards rushing, which is no small feat considering that three Round Rock players came into Saturday's game with a combined 2,939 rushing yards. Dragon's senior quarterback Marc Reed had 1,277 rushing yards on his own coming into Saturday's game, and The Woodlands held him to just one yard on 19 carries.

"That says our defense stepped up big time," Mark Schmid said. "They were the No. 1 offense in their district and had been scoring in the 40s over the last five or six weeks. They like to run the football - they will throw it if they have to, but they like to run it. Our defense did a good job of stopping the run."

The Dragons' quarterback finished with 310 yards on 8-for-12 passing with two touchdowns. But 99 yards of that came on a seemingly impossible touchdown pass in the fourth quarter. Standing in his own end zone, with bodies all around him, Reed delivered a perfect pass to Jason Uwaeze, who took it the distance to make the score 41-18 with 11:26 left to play.

Reed's other touchdown was a 53-yard bomb to Collin Sullivan, which cut The Woodlands' lead down to one score, 13-6, with 7:14 left in the second quarter. Sullivan finished with three catches for 71 yards, while Uwaeze had 159 yards on two catches.

Despite giving up 429 yards, The Woodlands held Round Rock to 18 points, the fewest the Highlanders' defense had allowed since its 63-10 win over College Park on Nov. 4.

"Last week was a really big shock to us, but we really banded together as a team and as a community," Purcell said. "We played some inspired football tonight."

The Woodlands' junior wide receiver Kesean Carter led the team with five catches for 93 yards. Ramos finished second on the team with 79 yards on 13 carries with 19-yard touchdown run and a 24-yard touchdown catch.



The Woodlands Highlanders' second-quarter eruption buries Round Rock Dragons

By Jim East, Woodlands Online Sports
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WACO, Texas – After rattling off 28 points in the second quarter of their soggy Saturday showdown with Round Rock, The Woodlands Highlanders walked out of Baylor's McLane Stadium with a 41-18 triumph and a ticket to next week's state semifinals against Texas powerhouse Allen. The 14-0 Highlanders to face 14-0 Allen Eagles in the playoff semifinals at UT-Austin

The Allen Eagles, who won state titles in 2012, 2013 and 2014, defeated Duncanville on Saturday 42-23. The Woodlands (14-0) and Allen will meet at 1 p.m., Saturday at UT-Austin.

Despite giving up a pair of big plays for touchdowns – one for more than 50 yards, one for 99 – The Woodlands defense turned in a sensational, hard-hitting performance and set the tone with two red-zone stands in the first quarter.

On the game's first drive, the Dragons ventured inside the 20 before the Highlanders slammed the door shut. Round Rock attempted and missed a short field goal, giving The Woodlands offense its first crack at the end zone.

It didn't take long for the Highlanders to march downfield, and Connor Klapesky punched it in from a yard out. The point-after was off the mark, leaving The Woodlands with a 6-0 lead.

Round Rock looked strong again on the next drive, but after getting down to their 2-yard line, the Dragons offense stalled against the Highlanders' unforgiving defensive line. After four cracks at the end zone, the Dragons turned it over on downs. That drive turned out to be the beginning of the end for Round Rock outstanding season.

About a minute into the second quarter, Highlander quarterback Eric Schmid scored from five yards out to make it 13-0. Dragons quarterback Marc Reed got his team on the board just a minute later with a 53-yard touchdown pass to Collin Sullivan. Round Rock missed the point after.

Schmid made it a two-possession game with another rushing touchdown, this one a 17-yarder, and then he connected with Carlos Ramos on a 27-yard pass to inflate the Highlanders' lead to 27-6. Finally, with under a minute left, Schmid ran for one more score to give The Woodlands a commanding 34-6 edge at halftime. Schmid ran for more than 100 yards in the first half.

About eight minutes into the third quarter, Dragon tailback Marquis Brown scored on a 12-yard run, but Ramos answered with a 19-yard touchdown run barely a minute later.

That was more than enough for the Highlander defense and Player of the Game Michael Purcell. The Woodlands tormented Reed all night and finished the game with six sacks. Every time the Dragons tried to get their running game in gear, a herd of Highlanders flocked to the football.

Round Rock got one nice final moment early in the fourth quarter. Starting at their one 1, Reed threw a pass over the middle and Jason Uwaeze made a tough one-handed grab before breaking into the open field and completing a 99-yard touchdown.

The Woodlands defense buckled down from that point on, increasing the pressure on Reed and putting the finishing touches on a victory that moves the Highlanders two wins away from a state championship.

The Woodlands ends Round Rock's playoff run with 41-18 defeat

by Thomas Jones
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WACO

Round Rock has made a habit of rallying from deficits during a historic season, but The Woodlands had no interest in becoming another footnote.

The Woodlands (14-0) jumped out to an early lead and rolled to a 41-18 win in the Class 6A, Division I, Region II title game at McLane Stadium. While the Highlanders advanced to a state semifinal against Allen, Round Rock (10-4) returned to Williamson County disappointed with the loss but satisfied with one of the best seasons in a history that dates back to 1913.

"It's never easy to lose, but what a great run," said Coach Jeff Cheatham, who led the Dragons to their longest playoff run in school history. "This bunch has set the bar for us for the future. I can't say enough about these kids and the support of the community. We got beat by a really good football team."

The explosive Highlanders, who are seeking their first state championship, scored a touchdown on five of their six first-half possessions to seize a 34-6 lead at halftime. Quarterback Eric Schmid triggered The Woodlands' attack with 241 yards passing and 109 yards rushing in the first half alone while accounting for four touchdowns.

Schmid, the son of head coach Mark Schmid, ended the game with 394 total yards.

Cheatham knew the Dragons would have to score plenty of points to stay close with The Woodlands, and that made a pair of missed opportunities early in the game particularly painful. On the first drive, Marquis Brown ripped off a 54-yard run to set up Round Rock inside the Highlanders' 20-yard line. But the drive bogged down, and Round Rock missed a field goal.

On the Dragons' next drive, quarterback Marc Reed hit Jason Uwaeze for a 52-yard gain that moved the team to the 2-yard line, but The Woodlands held firm on four straight running plays, including a fourth-and-goal from the 3.

According to Cheatham, having Schmid and the powerful Highlander offense on the other sideline helped determine Round Rock's fourth-down attempt.

"We knew we would have to score some points," Cheatham said. "They're too potent; their quarterback is a really good football player.

"We had a couple of chances in the red zone, but we couldn't get them converted. The momentum flipped on us early."

Round Rock's offense tried to regain that momentum with several big plays in the second half, including a 99-yard scoring bomb from quarterback Marc Reed to Jason Uwaeze. But The Woodlands' offense and a fearsome pass rush that sacked Reed six times never let the Dragons back in the game.

Round Rock's Marquis Brown ended his stellar sophomore season with 104 yards rushing, including a 19-yard touchdown run. Reed, a senior, threw for 305 yards.

The Woodlands has now eliminated Austin-area teams in two consecutive weeks. The Highlanders beat Bowie 52-31 in the third round.

"They are diverse offensively, and that makes them tough," said Round Rock defensive end James Lynch, a USC pledge who had an unofficial nine tackles, including a sack and three tackles for a loss. "They can run the ball, pass the ball, and they have a great quarterback.

"It's never good to lose, but we represented Round Rock well. I hope this season sets the tone for the program."

