

# THE COURIER

OF MONTGOMERY  COUNTY



## The Woodlands falls shy of stunning defending state champs Allen

WACO — The Woodlands gave Allen all it could handle on Saturday afternoon in the Region II-6A semifinals. It just was not quite enough to dethrone the defending state champions.

The Highlanders (9-4) saw their season come to a close with a 31-24 loss against the No. 1 nationally-ranked Eagles, who have now won 29 consecutive games dating back to 2016. Allen (13-) advances to the regional finals where it will face either Klein Oak or Waco Midway next week.

The Woodlands, meanwhile, wraps up its first season under head coach Jim Rapp, who took over for Mark Schmid after spending 14 years as the offensive coordinator. Though it was not the ending they had hoped for, the Highlanders were praised for their effort by their leader.

“I’m proud of them because I watched a lot of video and watched a lot of teams that looked like they were afraid of Allen,” Rapp said. “We weren’t afraid of who they are and what their program is about. We have a good program as well, and we have a successful program.”

Allen made the first impact play of the game early in the first quarter when Keith Johnson blocked a Highlanders punt and set his team up at the opposing 21-yard line. The Woodlands' defense stood tall on three consecutive plays with its back against the wall, but the Eagles were still able to put points on the board with a 35-yard field goal from James Griffith.

The Highlanders were able to piece together an 80-yard drive later in the quarter and took their first lead of the game at 7-3 on a touchdown by left tackle McKade Mettauer. The senior offensive lineman found himself in the right place at the right time, pouncing on a fumble by running back Bryeton Gilford, who coughed the ball up at the 1-yard line.

The Woodlands' lead did not last for long as Allen answered on the ensuing possession with a 3-yard touchdown run by Celdon Manning.

The Highlanders were forced to punt on their next drive, and a shanked kick left the Eagles in prime scoring position at the opposing 30-yard line. Allen gave the ball right back, however, as Ben Langston picked off a pass on a trick play by the Eagles.

That turnover ultimately led to points for The Woodlands, which evened the game at 10 with a 31-yard field goal from Fabrizio Pinton. That score came with just 1:21 remaining in the second quarter and was set up by a 60-yard completion from Ben Mills to Matthew Bulovas.

Allen quickly made its way down the field on the ensuing drive, thanks in large part to a 42-yard completion from Tisdale to Theo Wease. That allowed the Eagles' senior quarterback to loft a pass to Bryson Green in the left corner of the end zone for an 8-yard score with just 15 seconds remaining before halftime.

"The thing that got us in the end was that we hurt ourselves," Rapp said. "We had special teams faux pas, and we had mistakes offensively and defensively, and you can't make those kind of mistakes against a team like them. We battled toe to toe with them, but when we hurt ourselves, we struggled."

Allen averaged right at 500 total yards per game entering Saturday, but the Highlanders limited the Eagles to just 163 in the first half. The Woodlands, meanwhile, had 205 yards.

Allen extended its advantage on its first drive of the third quarter as Manning raced 64 yards to the house for the 24-10 lead. Manning, who finished with 90 yards on 10 carries, gained more on the ground on that play than the Eagles had as a team over the first two quarters.

The Woodlands was able to answer with a key drive of its own, pulling within one score of the lead on a 4-yard touchdown run from Gilford. The junior running back, who went over 1,500 yards for the season during the game, finished with 112 on 22 carries.

Allen looked to go ahead by double digits once again late in the third quarter, lining up for a 45-yard field goal attempt. The kick was blocked by The Woodlands' Kennedy Stewart, however, and gave the Highlanders possession.

Any momentum gained by the block quickly evaporated on the last play of the period as KJ Willie intercepted a pass from Mills and returned the ball to the Highlanders' 6-yard line. That led to a 2-yard touchdown run from Grant Robinson to put the Eagles ahead 31-17.

The Woodlands shook off the miscue and found the end zone once again on the ensuing possession as Gilford scored on a 2-yard run. The score was set up by a 50-yard run by Malik Johnson and pulled the Highlanders within one touchdown of the lead with 7:40 to play.

That was as close as the Highlanders would get as Allen was able to make enough plays on both sides of the ball to close out the victory.

"We felt comfortable being able to run the football," Rapp said. "I thought we had a couple of good wrinkles in our passing game, and we had some opportunities there. They took a little bit of that away, but we ran the football well. Defensively, we played really well. We just had a couple of plays, when you get right down to it, that hurt us. But we felt like we did what we could do against those guys. We just hurt ourselves."