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The Woodlands' defense stifles Klein in 15-6A victory

By Jon Poorman
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SHENANDOAH — The Woodlands' defense rose to the occasion once again on Saturday evening, stifling what had a been a high-scoring Klein offense en route to a 23-7 victory at Woodforest Bank Stadium.

The Highlanders (5-2, 5-0) remained tied with Klein Collins (7-0, 5-0) atop the District 15-6A standings with the win, their fifth straight since starting the season 0-2. The Woodlands improved to 17-4 all-time against the Bearkats (3-3, 2-2) and snapped a two-game winning streak by a Klein team that was averaging 41 points per contest.

The Woodlands held the Bearkats to 188 total yards and built a 20-0 lead before the visitors could manage any points. Normally proficient in the running game, Klein was limited to just 91 yards on the ground against a Highlanders team that is allowing exactly 10 points per game against its league opponents.

"They've been playing well for seven weeks," The Woodlands coach Jim Rapp said of the defense. "And I'm not surprised this was the seventh one in a row they've done a really good job. I think we

pride ourselves, and have for a long time, in stopping the run, and Klein is a running team. That's what I said going in — whether they can run it against us or we can stop them is going to be the key, and sure enough, we played a heck of a ballgame defensively, stopping the run.”

The Woodlands put the first points on the board with about six minutes remaining in the opening quarter as Fabrizio Pinton connected on a 25-yard field goal. The score came on the heels of an interception by The Woodlands safety Ben Langston, who returned the ball 38 yards into Bearkats territory and gave the offense prime starting field position.

Pinton added to the Highlanders' lead later in the first quarter, this time splitting the uprights from 45 yards out. That field goal was also set up by the defense, which made a stop on fourth down when Klein attempted a fake punt play.

“He's a great asset to have,” Rapp said of Pinton. “You don't have to lose your mind if you don't score [touchdowns]. We want to get seven [points], but if we're getting three, that's better than nothing. So he's a great asset to have.”

The Woodlands finally reached paydirt with eight minutes to play in the second quarter as Casey Sunseri zipped a pass between defenders to Cole Dodson in the middle of the end zone. That gave the home team a 13-0 advantage.

The Highlanders' defense was exceptional in the opening half, holding a high-powered Klein offense to just 74 total yards. The Woodlands made two fourth-down stops, batted two passes, recorded a sack and forced a turnover. The Bearkats managed just 2.7 yards per play and never advanced the ball past the Highlanders' 43-yard line.

“We've accepted the role because without us getting stops, we wouldn't win many games,” Langston said. “So we kind of noticed that we have to have stops, so we put in the work during the week, and it's paid off.”

The Woodlands offense finally came alive on its first possession of the third quarter, traveling 78 yards in just three plays to put more points on the board. The drive culminated with a 44-yard touchdown pass from Sunseri to Malik Johnson, a long pass that hit the speedy receiver in stride as the senior signal-caller absorbed a shot from a defender.

Sunseri completed 14 of 24 passes for 154 yards and two touchdowns. He also rushed for 59 yards on 12 carries. Running back Bryeton Gilford led the team with 77 yards on the ground, and Johnson caught six passes for 77 yards.

“Offensively, we’ve struggled a little bit,” Rapp said. “We’ve gotten better, and we just have to find our playmakers and do a better job of getting those guys the ball. We did a better job of that this week. If they’re going to try to take away Bryeton, we’ve got to find another avenue, another area to go with. We did some outside run stuff and throwing the football, so it was good.”

The Bearkats eventually got on the scoreboard with just 34 seconds remaining in the third quarter as D’Anthony Simms reached the end zone on a 1-yard run. Klein started the possession at the Highlanders’ 49-yard line after Dahki Adams corralled an interception from quarterback Ben Mills and returned it 35 yards.

The Woodlands capped the scoring with seven minutes remaining in the game as Pinton connected on his third field goal, this time from 24 yards out. Langston secured his second interception of the night on the Bearkats’ final drive.

“My confidence level is very high,” Langston said. “We’ve been playing very good offense for the past two games, very good defense. We’ve allowed seven points as a defense [in each of] the past two games, so that’s pretty good.”