

Defensive Contest Ends with Highlanders Taking the Edge Against Conroe

By: Jake Wilson | Published 11/01/2024



CONROE, TX -- Senior night at Buddy Moorhead Memorial Stadium saw The Woodlands Highlanders (8-1) march to victory over the Conroe Tigers (7-2) in a battle to settle the ultra-contested 13-6A playoff standings.

Honoring the graduating class and their contributions was the early highlight of the evening for the hosting Tigers. But, high-end play and strategy needed to prevail through the passionate scenery if either team hoped to come away with a win to secure the second-place spot in the district standings.

In an interview with The Woodlands Online Sports, Highlander Head Coach Jim Rapp explained the team's preparation for a matchup that would solidify the team's place in the upcoming playoffs.

"One of the things I talked about with the guys was how we needed to play this like a playoff game," said Rapp. "We're playing for a chance to be the number one big school seed and to host a playoff game at Woodforest."

The Woodlands' execution proved to be an early deciding factor, with the team taking advantage of first-quarter opportunities to build a lead.

A quick three-and-out was forced by the Highlander defense on Conroe's opening drive, forcing the Tigers to punt the ball to one of the district's top-three offensive units.

The multifaceted attack from Jack Daulton and the utility skill players got to work on The Woodlands' opening offensive drive. Shallow passes to receivers and quick runs broke through the Tiger defense for efficient yards before a gap opened for Jackson Bolender to reach the endzone.

Bolender parlayed his first rushing score into a receiving touchdown on the Highlanders' next possession, mounting a 14-0 Woodlands lead at the end of the first quarter.

In contrast to The Woodlands' offensive success, the Tigers' production was stagnant.

The once fantastic Conroe rushing game struggled to move through or around the Highlander defensive front. The lack of an efficient ground game led to the Tigers punting on each of their three first-quarter possessions, handing complete control to The Woodlands in the process.

"Those two guys, Green and Nunley, are fantastic runners," said Rapp. "We knew that going in, but we didn't necessarily do anything different for them. We just fit the run and did the things we needed to do."

Fortunately for the Tigers, their defense adjusted to the Highlanders' attack to force some important stops throughout the second quarter.

A turnover on downs and a punt on The Woodlands' drives that followed the Bolender receiving score left the Highlanders without points on back-to-back drives. The window was open for Conroe to make a push, they just needed the offense to reach the endzone.

Conroe started their fifth drive from their 27-yard line with a touchdown being the team's top priority. Their lackluster rushing attack came alive on the legs of Dramekco Green, who ate large portions of the field for first downs. The short pickups were a taste of the eventual touchdown run of over 50 yards that saw Green weave through the Highlander defense for Conroe's first score.

The Woodlands' responding drive showed similar promise to their early drives, with the offense moving the ball with scrambles from Daulton catching the Tiger defenders off guard. Unfortunately for the Highlanders, their effort stalled shy of the red zone, leading to the team calling on Scott Starzyk to attempt a long field goal.

Starzyk's dependable leg conceded an incredibly rare miss on the over-50-yard attempt. The miss left another Highlander drive empty while giving the ball back to Conroe's hungry offense.

With time running out in the first half, Conroe used the improvisation skills of Christian Nunley at quarterback to create yards. His scrambles and throws on the run moved the ball down the field for the Tigers, but the squad ran out of steam before the buzzer.

Conroe's late push to end the first half brought the game to a 14-7 Highlander lead going into the locker rooms. With pressure starting to mount, both teams needed to come up with a solution if they wanted to break the near deadlock.

"One of the things we talked about was playing 48 minutes of Highlander football," said Rapp. "I thought we did that defensively in the first half, we just needed to overcome some challenges on the offensive end."

The first possession to start the second half saw the Highlanders best the challenges they faced to reestablish control on the scoreboard.

Their healthy mix of passes and rushes resumed their offensive production that fell silent following the first quarter. The drive culminated in a long touchdown to push the lead to 21-7, giving a slightly bigger edge to the Highlanders.

"Getting that score on our first drive was what we needed to do," said Rapp. "It was a good thing to see considering our struggles then and moving forward, but I'm proud of them."

Scores continued to be a hot commodity throughout the rest of the third quarter. The Woodlands' opening drive touchdown ended up being the only points for either team in the quarter.

Back-to-back punts from the Tigers hindered their ability to chip at the Highlander lead, but a fumble on a late drive from The Woodlands equally ensured that the Highlanders would not add to their lead before the final quarter arrived.

Conroe needed stops in the fourth quarter if they hoped to wipe away the two-possession Highlander lead with the remaining 12 minutes.

Long, time-consuming pauses between Woodlands plays ate valuable seconds off the clock for the increasingly antsy Tiger offense. Luckily, the Conroe offense forced negative plays on The Highlanders' first drive of the fourth to force a punt with seven minutes remaining.

The run-heavy Conroe offense needed to traverse 96 yards following an excellent Highlander punt if they wanted a touchdown. Time ticked away from the Tigers, and from inside the opposing 10-yard line, they failed to breach the endzone.

The Highlanders' stand at the goal line was the final nail in the coffin for the Tigers, as the final whistle ended play in a hard-fought 21-7 Highlander victory.

The win secures the second overall seed in the 13-6A standings, but it will be the top Division I seed under the new UIL playoff seeding rules. With the win secure, the focus on the postseason can follow one final week of play for The Woodlands.

"The things we need to work on are us," said Rapp. "We're trying to get better every day, and I tell the guys all the time, 'I don't really care how we start, I want to see how we finish,' and that's been the mentality for the most part."

Rapp and the rest of the Highlanders will seek to end the regular season on a high with their game against Oak Ridge next week. Meanwhile, Conroe will hit the road for a season-ender at Cleveland.