

The Postseason Awaits the Highlanders Following their Strong Display Against Oak Ridge

By: Jake Wilson | Published 11/08/2024



THE WOODLANDS, TX -- The end of the 2024 regular season saw The Woodlands Highlanders (9-1) take a commanding 56-17 victory over the Oak Ridge War Eagles (3-7) at Woodforest Bank Stadium.

The path to the postseason had been set before the start of Friday night's game, but the desire to end the regular season on a positive note was among The Woodlands' top priorities.

In an interview with The Woodlands Online Sports, Highlander Head Coach Jim Rapp spoke on the team's aspirations for getting the team's sixth consecutive win.

"Every one of these games is important to us," said Rapp. "I told our guys a long time ago that we're a good football team. Now the deal from here on out is, one team is going to win and the other is going to go home."

A clear drive was shown on The Woodlands' first defensive stand.

The War Eagle passing game showed flashes of how explosive they can be, moving the ball in chunk yards deep into Highlander territory. The large plays ended near the goal line and necessitated a field goal attempt from the Oak Ridge kicking team.

But from the edge screamed an unblocked Mikey Harrison for the Highlanders, who put his mits up to block the incoming attempt. His outstretched arms sent the ball careening into Oak Ridge's side of the field, setting up The Woodlands with an opening possession at the War Eagle 21-yard line.

A few plays later, the Highlanders were on the board with a dump-off passing touchdown from Jack Daulton to Jason Haskins to make the game 7-0.

Adding an element of tension to the game was the heavy rushing attack taken by the War Eagles. The team boasted the second-best run game entering the night, but it had the consequence of eating at the team's time to attempt a comeback.

Oak Ridge's reliance on Justin Hayes to move the ball on the ground was well-founded, as it was efficient in picking up yards. But, with a field goal being the team's reward on their second drive, the team only got three drives in the opening 12 minutes of play.

Meanwhile, the Highlanders only needed one offensive drive to reach the endzone, and sensational special teams play paid dividends for the second time in the first quarter. A burst of speed and blocks down the sideline gave a lane for Johnnie Bolander to fire through on his way to a kickoff return score to push The Woodlands' lead to 14-3.

“We spend a lot of time every day focusing on special teams and our kids work their tails off to be good at it,” said Rapp. “You have to block well and it takes some luck every once in a while, so I was excited to see them put it together early.”

Oak Ridge’s offensive futility carried into the second quarter, adding more stress to the team’s increasingly desperate plight to get back on the scoreboard.

The rest of the War Eagles’ first-half drives saw the team continue to come away from drives with no points. Three empty drives following their first-quarter field goal saw the previously sensational Oak Ridge offense reduced to a shell of itself.

“That’s what we try to do every week, is stop the run,” said Rapp. “We were able to get some pressure on and did a good job stopping the run.”

A last-minute touchdown from Hayes got the War Eagles back into the scoring column before the halftime break, but it did little to eat at the impressive Woodlands lead.

Control by the Highlander defense allowed the offense to work through their methods effectively. More lengthy runs from Haskins punctured the opposing defense for long-distance scores, and the passing game put the ball into the hands of playmakers like Eli Lancaster for even more touchdowns.

By the time the dust settled on the first half, the Highlanders had stretched their lead to 25 points on the heels of three of their four second-quarter possessions ending in touchdowns.

Substitutes came onto the field for the Highlanders to start the second half, but their offense did not skip a beat in adding another score. Runs to Cody Jordan were the most effective way to break through the tired Oak Ridge defenders, ending in the team’s third rushing touchdown.

Jordan’s rushing score was one of the many nails put into Oak Ridge’s coffin before the end of the game.

A solo receiving touchdown from James Scott in the fourth was the only meaningful stride taken by the War Eagles during the second half. The lone score was the only bright spot in the sea of turnovers and punts that categorized the Oak Ridge production.

One last Highlander touchdown punctuated the near end-to-end control had by The Woodlands on their way to a 56-17 romp.

“To me, it comes back to fundamentals and being fundamentally sound on both sides of the ball,” said Rapp ahead of their playoff matchup. “It’s all about us continuing to get better from the individual skill standpoint.”

The next likely opponent for the Highlanders will be the Nimitz Cougars, with The Woodlands getting to play host on Friday due to seeding in the playoff bracket.