

Defense lifts Saints by Waverly

Written by Tom Fruehling

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Out-of-sync on offense for most of the night, unbeaten Xavier had to depend on its defense to escape with a 14-7 opening-round playoff win over Waverly-Shell Rock on Wednesday night at Saints Field.

It wasn't pretty. The Class 3A fourth-ranked Saints racked up 13 penalties, 11 of them for false starts.

"We had so many penalties, it just took away our rhythm," moaned Xavier coach Duane Schulte. "Penalties just killed us."

The defense saved them, though.

The always-rugged Go-Hawks managed just 54 yards (all on the ground) in the first half, and their only first down came on their very first possession. They punted five straight times and then were intercepted by Bryce Charipar, a game-saver for the Saints all night.

Meanwhile, Xavier was able to squeeze out a 14-0 halftime lead.

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After punting on the first three series themselves, the Saints got on the board early in the second quarter when quarterback Bryce Schulte zig-zagged back and forth for a slow-moving 65-yard touchdown.

Following a Waverly punt that put them at their own 3-yard line, the Saints then took five minutes to march 97 yards in 11 plays with Sean Murphy running in from 13 yards for the score.

The tables were turned after intermission, however, as Waverly-Shell Rock came to life and dominated much of the second half. Xavier had only three first downs the rest of the way.



"They're a tough football team with tough kids," Schulte said. "They were a 6-3 team from a tough district."

And they played tough right to the end.

The Go-Hawks blocked a Dallas Klein 33-yard field goal attempt midway through the third quarter. And while they didn't complete their first pass of the night until late in the quarter, they put together a 17-play drive that took up almost seven minutes and finally scored with 7:48 left in the game.

One touchdown pass was called back for holding, but quarterback Tanner Krueger lofted a floater to Cole Havlovic on the very next play on fourth-and-goal from the 20-yard line.

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"They're a good team," Charipar said. "We knew they'd keep pounding away."

And indeed they did.

After a Xavier punt, they came right back down the field and had a first down on the Saints' 11 with 2:37 still to play. On the next play, though, Murphy caught Waverly speedster Jamir Moore three yards behind the line of scrimmage.

"We were looking for a sweep," Murphy said. "Everybody read their blockers and did their job."

Following two incomplete passes, the Go-Hawks faced fourth-and-13 with the game on the line. A dynamo on defense all night, Charipar broke through from his linebacker spot and sacked Krueger for an 8-yard loss to preserve the squeaky victory.

"Those two plays (by Murphy and Charipar) were huge," Schulte said. "In the same situation, they'd scored a touchdown the time before."

"Both of our guys are seniors, and they kept their wits about them. They executed when we needed it."

In the end, it was a nail-biting narrow escape for the Saints. But for veteran coach Schulte, who has been to the rodeo many times before, all that counts is the final score.

"I'll take a 2-0 win," he said. "At this point in the season, it's all a matter of winning and moving on."

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XAVIER 14, WAVERLY–SHELL ROCK 7

WSR CRX

First downs 6 10

Rushes-yards 41-197 33-225

Passing yards 115 23

Comp-att-int 6-17-1 5-12-0

Fumbles-lost 2-1 1-0

Punts-avg 6-35 7-34

Penalties-yards 3-25 13-75

Waverly-Shell Rock 0 0 0 7 - 7

Xavier 0 14 0 0 - 14

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Scoring plays

X – Bryce Schulte 65 run (Dallas Klein kick)

X – Sean Murphy 13 run (Klein kick)

W – Cole Havlovic 20 pass from Tanner Krueger (Jacob Norton kick)

Individual statistics

Rushing

Waverly–Shell Rock – Riley Steckelberg 16-64. Xavier – Maliki Wilson 19-61, Erik Rodriguez 6-59.

Passing

Waverly–Shell Rock - Krueger 6-17-1-115. Xavier – Schulte 5-12-0-23.

Receiving

Waverly–Shell Rock – Ryan Sprain 2-41.

Xavier – Murphy 2-15.