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HIGH SCHOOL SPORTS

Defense, physicality showcase Highland's strong first impression new Suburban League home

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Highland running back Evan Foust. Joshua Gunter, cleveland.com



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MEDINA, Ohio – Highland football has always instilled toughness and physicality under coach Mike Gibbons. It's what has led to consistent success over the years, including back-to-back conference titles in the Suburban League American Conference and a trip to the Division II regional championship last season.

So, making the move to the Suburban League National Conference this season, Highland knew it would have to continue leaning on those traits to contend with the bigger schools.

On Friday, the Hornets did just that and delivered a statement with a gritty 23-21 win over visiting (and previously unbeaten) Nordonia in the conference opener.

The Knights (3-1, 0-1) entered the game averaging 45.3 points, including outscoring their opponents 105-25 in the first half.

On their home turf, the Hornets (3-1, 1-0) took it personal and dominated the opening two quarters – holding the Knights to 58 yards, three first downs, and forcing two turnovers – to build a 23-0 lead.



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“It was a gutty performance by our team. Nordonia is a tough team, and we knew it was going to be a four-quarter game,” said Highland coach Mike Gibbons. “It was a tremendous defensive effort to hold a team with that much firepower scoreless in the first half.”

The Hornets set the tone on the opening possession of the game, driving 68 yards in 10 plays to take a 7-0 lead. Eight of the plays were runs, with the drive capped on a 21-yard catch by senior Evan Foust from sophomore QB Colton Wadle.

“We wanted to come out and set the tone immediately,” said Foust, who also had an interception in the second quarter to set up a field goal. “We thought if we could dominate the first half, it could set us up for the rest of the game.”

The Knights responded with their best drive of the half on the ensuing possession, but it ended near mid-field when the Hornets forced a turnover-on-downs. That led to another physical, eight-play, 57-yard drive (six runs) by the Hornets, capped on a 28-yard touchdown pass from Wadle to senior Jake Weber to extend their lead, 14-0.

That fed into the confidence of the Hornets’ defense. They consistently made things uncomfortable for the Knights’ high-octane offense with pressure, which led to two interceptions – one by Foust and another by Weber – resulting in two field goals by senior Jonah Kowza.

“All week, we were harping on being disruptive,” said Weber. “We were able to do that, especially in the first half. ... Every turnover matters. Setting up our offense in good field position was huge.”

Nordonia opened the third quarter with a 15-play drive that resulted in a trip to the red zone. But the Highland defense stiffened and forced another turnover-on-downs following a sack by junior Lukas Grillis.

“Being physical was part of the game plan coming in. We wanted to take it to them right away,” said Grillis, who tallied three sacks on the night. “They [Nordonia] had all this heat coming in which made us angry.”

Nordonia found some success late with a couple long pass plays from senior QB Steven Fakult to Jamere Davis, cutting the lead to 23-14, early in the fourth quarter.

With the momentum shifting and the Hornets offense not having as much success moving the ball, the defense was up to the task again.

Midway through the fourth, the Knights faced a fourth-and-2 from midfield. The Hornets snuffed out a quick pass and forced the QB to scramble before he was stopped one yard short, forcing another turnover-on-downs, and halting the hopes for a comeback.

It was yet another testament to the team’s physical mindset.

“We knew we had to be the most physical team on the field. We live by that,” added Foust.

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