

Hornets defense flips momentum for good

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BELLEVUE — First, the Highland football team's defense got mad. Then the big, strong, fast and angry Hornets got more than even.

After giving up a long run that helped Whitehouse Anthony Wayne tie the game in the first quarter, the Hornets did anything and everything necessary while rolling to a 38-14 victory Friday night in a Division III, Region 6 semifinal at Bellevue High School.

"That (ticked) us off," 6-foot-3, 270-pound offensive tackle/defensive end and Miami (Ohio) commit Carson Noonan said. "We knew we had to start throwing punches out there."

In outgaining the Generals (12-1) 336-134 en route to a 31-7 halftime lead, the Hornets landed a number of haymakers on the defensive side while quarterback Dylan Borla, running back Casey Myser, slot receiver Lucas Gerding and Co. executed perfectly on the offensive side.

The first came with Highland clinging to a 10-7 lead early in the second quarter. With Anthony Wayne facing third-and-1 from the Hornets 42-year-line, 6-3, 260-pound center/defensive tackle Ryan Zywiec burst threw the line and threw Generals running back Braiden Gardner for a 3-yard loss, forcing a punt.



AARON JOSEFCZYK / GAZETTE

Highland's Garrett Phillips breaks up a pass after intended Anthony Wayne receiver Ben Nieckarz collided with the referee.

Ten plays and 80 yards later, Highland led 17-7 when Myser scored his second touchdown of the night and Medina County-record 43rd of the season.

"We were furious," Zywiec said of a 69-yard run by quarterback Grant Kinnee on the Generals' first play of the game, which set up their game-tying TD. "We have one rule: You get one big play per game."

The next big defensive play came on Anthony Wayne's ensuing possession, when the Hornets had two defenders matched up

against three wide receivers split wide right on third-and-5, but Kinnee overthrew his intended target along the line of scrimmage.

That came one play after Hornets linebacker Evan Foust ran 40-plus yards to successfully cover a wheel route in front of the Highland sideline.

Following a punt, the Hornets went 72 yards in six plays, with Borla running for the last 20 to make it 24-7 with 2:03 left in the first half.

"We just had to keep our composure and stay calm," said defensive back Colton

Foust, who added a second-half interception. "We had to pick it up a notch. It's a next-play mentality."

The knockout blow came on the Generals' next possession. The nearly unstoppable Noonan smoked the offensive tackle and stripped Kinnee of the ball from the back side, with 5-11, 235-pound Highland tackle Cody Bendau recovering at the Anthony Wayne 23 with 1:26 left in the first half.

After a holding penalty nullified a Myser TD run on Highland's first play, the Hornets

needed five more to score, with Borla hitting Nick Dobkowski for a 1-yard TD that made it 31-7 with seven seconds left before halftime.

"We knew we had to make a big play," Noonan said. "I'm so proud of (Bendau)."

Bendau looked at his recovery as being in the right place at the right time.

"I was just doing my job, and Carson Noonan stripped it out and I jumped on it," he said. "It was surreal. It was a great experience having all the guys congratulate me, I can't lie."

That was the beginning of the end for the Generals, who have been eliminated from the playoffs by Highland two years running and four times in the last eight years.

The game was played with a running clock from the 6:59 mark of the third period until the Generals scored a cosmetic TD with 3:12 remaining in the fourth.

"Their quarterback was a good runner and we saw that," Colton Foust said. "He broke a couple big ones, but we contained him for the most part."

"We put a lot of work into what we do. Dominating teams is our goal."

Dominate is exactly what the Highland defense has done all year. The Hornets have five shutouts and have allowed just 106 points in 13 games, an average of 8.2 per outing.

"We like to demolish people on the defensive side of the ball," Zywiec said. "We get after it every week."

"We have the best D-line in the state. I don't think anybody can block us up front."

Bendau, a baby-faced junior, wasn't quite as direct, but he basically agreed with his senior teammate, who along with Noonan has showed him the way.

"Oh, wow, I love those guys," he said. "They're so important to me. They're great people to be around. I'm just happy they're on our team."

"We have really high standards for ourselves. When plays like (the early 69-yard run) happen, we have to come right back. That's what we did."

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