

Chiefs ground game pummels Mustangs

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The fact Tim Baechler had to take his Canton Chiefs back to Tom Holzer Field to face Northville for the second time in two weeks wasn't something he was crazy about in the first place.

He really disliked the idea after his offense coughed up the football on the opening series of Friday's Division 1 first-round playoff game against the Mustangs — leading to an early 7-0 deficit.

But the veteran coach reached into his bag of tricks and pulled out senior running backs Julian Thornton here, Markus Sanders there and Reid McDonnell everywhere.

Canton racked up over 500 yards on the ground and defeated Northville 55-29, led by McDonnell's career game of 255 rushing yards, four touchdowns and a crucial interception that helped stem a second-half comeback bid by the Mustangs. The Chiefs (8-2) now advance to face Saline on Nov. 4.

"You play them a second week in a row, he (Northville head coach Matt Ladach) brings out new stuff, new plays," Baechler said. "Literally it's impossible to stop everything. I'm glad we're out of here.

"To play a team back-to-back and win in the playoffs is very hard to do. We dominated them, we put more on them, we won by more than we did the last time (42-27 on Oct. 21). So that's good.

"But we played very sloppy, we had a couple stupid penalties. And that first turnover was the stupidest thing I've ever seen in my life."

Baechler was referring to a play where senior quarterback Jake O'Donnell could not get the handle of a snap, dropped back and hurried a short throw that landed in the hands of Northville's Ryan Doroudian — who returned the fumble 54 yards down to Canton's 1-yard line.

The Mustangs took the early 7-0 lead on senior Jack Burke's quarterback keeper with 6:56 to go in the first.

Quick response

The Chiefs were able to score the equalizer on the subsequent series, with Thornton (182 yards rushing) shooting through the left side of the line and scampering 48 yards for the score.

McDonnell capped off Canton's 61-yard drive in 13 running plays with a 5-yard TD, about 4:30 into the second half. The Chiefs set up that drive by stopping the Mustangs on a fourth-down run.

Northville (7-3), by deferring the opening kickoff of the night, got the boot to open the second half with a chance to get some momentum. Burke, however, injured his foot in the series and limped off never to return.

"Any time you lose a kid like Jack Burke who is a phenomenal athlete, a great person, a great leader, it hurts," Ladach said. "And I think it hurt us more emotionally than anything else because our kids love Jack Burke.

"When he went down, it definitely took some of our emotion out. And it took us a little bit to get our breath back. But Jonathan (Michalak) came in and did an awesome job, leading the offense. I'm not at all disappointed in his play."

On a roll

On Canton's next series, it was McDonnell again, racing up the gut for a 56-yard touchdown to make it 21-7 with 8:42 left in the third.

He topped himself just two minutes later, ripping through the line and rolling 69 yards for another TD. That launched Canton's six-touchdown half, which followed Baechler's move to a double-wing formation that the Mustangs did not have an answer for.

"The double wing is something we have in our tool box," Baechler said.

"We practice it all the time, we just haven't used it yet. We brought that out and thank god we had it because they had a difficult time adjusting and stopping it."

Canton padded its lead to 35-7 with 3:11 remaining in the frame, on a short plunge (two yards) by McDonnell.

Northville didn't fold its tent, however, as Michalak (10-27 passing) scored on a 1-yard run.

The teams traded touchdowns just 13 seconds apart to make it a 42-21 Canton lead going into the fourth.

Sanders (148 yards and three TDs) busted one for 38 yards for the Chiefs, but Michalak responded with a 80-yard scoring toss over the middle to Anthony Abbott II.

Getting it back

With the Chiefs hanging on to the 42-29 advantage, McDonnell fumbled to give the Mustangs hope.

He atoned for that miscue on defense on the very next play, picking off a Michalak pass. Canton went on to score again, with Sanders taking it in from the 7-yard line to all but seal Northville's fate.

"Yeah, I was pretty (ticked) after I fumbled, anyone would be," McDonnell said. "But I knew I had to respond, or someone on the team had to respond to get the momentum back and that's what we did."

McDonnell and Thornton both praised their linemen for making their big personal games possible.

"The linemen and the backs, no one ever gives up on a play," McDonnell said. "We just block until the whistle. Everyone wants to help each other out as best we can."

Concurring was Thornton, noting that the linemen "they always want to get better and they always want us to look good. And we thank them for it every time."

Meanwhile, Baechler said defeating the Mustangs in back-to-back weeks was a major hurdle that his team survived.

"It's no fun coming back here," Baechler stressed. "You got to get mentally psyched to go prove yourself again. It's very difficult. The advantage definitely goes back to the team that got beat in the first game."

“But we’re like ‘Hey, we’ve got bigger aspirations.’ this is just another team in our way.”

Ladach credited the Chiefs and how they switched things up from the previous week.

“Last week they hardly broke the T,” Ladach said. “This week they went into the double-wing and we were prepared for it. We practiced it this week. But they caught us in it.

“They also hit us on the counter. Hats off to them, their kids did a nice job and their coaches did a nice job.”

He also said he was “so proud” of the way the Mustangs battled all season.

“We had some games that we probably shouldn’t have won, but we won because our kids believed in one another,” Ladach said. “And we won because our kids were just flat-out tougher than the other (teams) kids.”

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Canton defenders, led by junior linebacker Lou Baechler (middle) put the hurt on a Northville ball carrier during Friday’s contest. (Photo: JOHN HEIDER | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER)



Northville and Canton linemen prepare to do battle Friday night. (Photo: JOHN HEIDER | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER)