

Fake punt lifts Saline past Canton, 37-31



[Mick McCabe](#) , Detroit Free Press 3:22 a.m. EDT November 5, 2016

Saline 37, Canton 31



Canton high schools Jake O'Donnell is tackled by Saline high schools J Drew McGovern during first half action Friday, November 4, 2016 at Saline high school in Saline. Kirthmon F. Dozier, DFP



Saline's objective was to steal possessions from Canton to keep Canton's potent offense on the bench. It worked in the first half, when the Hornets recovered an onside kick that led to a touchdown.

But with Saline leading by only three points early in the fourth quarter and facing a fourth-and-9 on its 37-yard line, the Hornets went for another steal. Lined up in punt formation was upback Connor Hibbard.

"We just practice it all the time, and it always works in practice, and we can't wait to do it in games," Hibbard said. "I know that the defense loves to block on that play specifically. It's something we practice all the time and we hope works in the game."

Hope? With the ball on your 37-yard line, a fake punt better work!

"The defense wasn't really expecting it, and I just went off the side," Hibbard said. "They guys up front knew what to do. They pinned them inside and I kept going."

Hibbard kept going for a 48-yard gain to set up Zach Schwartzenberger's 7-yard bootleg for a touchdown.

In the end, it was enough to enable Saline to escape with a 37-31 victory over Canton on Friday night in a Division 1 district championship game. The win means No. 4 Saline to host No. 1 Detroit Cass Tech in Friday's 7 p.m. regional final.

Saline coach Joe Palka had no qualms about faking a punt in his end of the field against the Chiefs.

“You have to because they’re too good offensively,” he said. “Anytime we had a chance to steal a possession, it was our goal to get them and we got two, and that helped us out at the end of the day.”

At the end of the day, Canton (8-3) didn’t do enough to prevent Saline (11-0) from swiping the precious possessions.

“The onside kick, you’ve got to make a play on that, we didn’t,” Canton coach Tim Baechler said. “The fake punt was a mental mistake by us; we didn’t play it right. The halfback pass, we knew that play was in their play book, we practiced it. The boot pass was a mental error. We could have had two picks, we didn’t, they caught both of them.

“Other than that, we played hard and battled.”

They battled in a terrific game that saw the teams combine to score three touchdowns in 1:18 of the second quarter.

After tying the score on the final play of the first half, Saline took the opening kickoff and scored when Schwartzenberger threw a short pass to tight end Bryce Wolma, who turned it into a 63-yard TD.

“I sold the run-fake a little bit and released right up the side,” he said. “It was like a 15-yard pass or so right in the pocket there, right in front of the safety. We hit it in a perfect spot.”

Then Wolma, who has committed to Arizona, eluded a host of defenders to score.

“I saw a guy to my right and a guy to my left,” he said. “I didn’t think I could split them so I made the guy to my right miss and I tried to cut and go towards the middle of the field for the last two guys.”