

Defense also sizzles for red-hot Canton Chiefs



It happens every week, every season.

The Canton Chiefs rack up insane offensive numbers — both yards and points — not to mention victories on an annual basis during the highly successful 20-year regime of head coach Tim Baechler.

Peel back the onion and you'll find another potent ingredient to the ongoing success of the program. It's a defense that plays at a dialed-to-the-max level, breaking up passes, throwing quarterbacks and running backs for losses and coming up with key takeaways, too.

Consider the Division 1 pre-district game against nemesis Saline on Oct. 27, a 42-14 conquest. The Chiefs slowed the Hornets' running game to a halt (57 yards) and spiced things up with timely defensive gems such as a fumble recovery by junior nose guard James Deese early in the third quarter.

"If you're going to play an odd-front defense, your nose guard better be a great player," said Canton defensive line coach Craig 'Bubbs' Hnatuk. "And James (Deese) is a great nose guard. He's just relentless, he understands

pad level. It helps that he was a wrestler at one time. He's tough, he's nasty and he gets after it.

"So you have to double team him. If you think you're going to single block our nose guard, you're going to have a long night."



The defense has plenty to do with Canton's successful season, says assistant coach Craig 'Bubbs' Hnatuk. (Photo: TIM SMITH)

Part of the plan

Deese actually stripped the ball from Saline's quarterback and Canton's offense took over, going on to score the first of two quick TDs to turn a 20-7 halftime game into a 34-7 blowout.

"It was definitely a big momentum swing for us," said Deese, who is soft spoken off the field but a force to be reckoned with on it. "As he was coming up, I saw the quarterback coming and he was kind of carrying the ball a little loose, so I went for it. And it came out. I tried to hold the ball for the team."

Talking about that play still brought a huge smile to Hnatuk's face because Deese is just a spoke in a wheel that flattens anything in its path.

"We held Saline to 57 yards rushing, which made them one dimensional," Hnatuk explained. "And at that point in time, we can start stunting, or we're not worried about the run. So, our kids are playing well together. They understand the team concept."

“Our motto on defense is play your 1-11, do your job, trust your teammates. It’s a great group of young men, just a fabulous group of guys.”

The Chiefs employ three interior linemen (Deese, left tackle Ronald Fenderston, right tackle Darius Robinson) with outside linebackers Noah Brown and Chase Meredith up on the line.

Stationed behind them are middle linebacker and defensive captain Lou Baechler and linebacker Aaron Garbarino to comprise what Hnatuk labels a 5-2 defense.

“Baechler is middle linebacker, he calls everything, he’s quarterback of the D,” Hnatuk said. “And Noah Brown makes a lot of plays for us but we all play together. It’s a great front seven, one of the best front sevens I’ve been around.”

And that group of defenders can be downright scary for other teams simply because of how determined, strong and smart they are.

“It’s everyone playing together, knowing what their gap responsibilities are, and trusting their teammates that they’re going to be there,” Hnatuk stressed. “... My guys, at defensive line, depending on what we’re playing, either we’re reading the (offensive) guard or we’re reading the offensive tackle. It’s more simplistic for us. Linebackers have a lot more on their plate.”



Canton's James Deese is all smiles as he runs back to the sidelines after forcing and recovering a fumble against Saline. His play was a catalyst in the Chiefs' pre-district victory. (Photo: Bill Bresler | hometownlife.com)

Pulling the rope

If there is, bring it on, said Lou Baechler — a hard-hitting performer who also comes up with clutch plays on offense when needed.

“My role is kind of like the leader on defense,” Baechler noted. “I make all the pre-snap checks and calls when they motion. And then I just play my position.

“It’s easy being the leader on the defense when you got such smart kids in front of you and teammates around you and they do their job.”

Nothing seems to get Baechler down, or at least keep him down, for too long. Midway through the season, he suffered a fractured arm.

Baechler missed a couple games, but hasn’t missed a beat since returning. He hasn’t missed too many tackles, either, having busted through several casts along the way.

“He’s a great leader,” said Hnatuk, in his eighth season on the Canton staff.

“I’ve been coaching football for 34 years, and he’s one of the smartest, toughest football players I’ve come around.

“The kid gets it. I’ve known him since he was a little kid, and it’s a joy to just be around him. His football IQ is off the charts.”



Senior middle linebacker Lou Baechler is the captain of the Chiefs' stellar defensive unit. (Photo: TIM SMITH)

Insider information

Another under-the-radar plus for Canton's defense is the fact Baechler is a regular contributor on offense as a tight end, making clutch runs and catches and helping provide blocking protection for senior quarterback Connor Engel.

"On offense we come off and pound kids, I block linebackers a lot," Baechler explained. "I know what they don't like, so when I'm on defense I try not to put myself in that situation and try to get lower than them, and use my hands a lot."

It's not a secret how tireless the Canton coaches are when getting their players ready for every single practice, every single game. Year after year.

"The head coach is brilliant, son of a gun," Hnatuk said. "I've gotten texts at two or three in the morning. He's back up because he couldn't sleep, so he's watching another offensive formation to make sure that this is the right defense we want to play.

"There'll be changes once in a while that he makes that he feels a lot better about."

Players not only pound the rock, they pound the playbooks to get it right.

"It carries over to our kids," Hnatuk stressed. "Because every day at football class he (Tim Baechler) goes over that with them so they are spot on, to know exactly where we line up and what we're doing for every formation that we're going to see."

Deese and his teammates see that level of commitment and want to follow the blueprint.



The Canton Chiefs are fired up after forcing a Saline turnover during the Oct. 27 Division 1 pre-district contest. Among celebrants (from left) are Noah Brown (2), Chase Meredith (14), Robert Fenderson (52), Darius Robinson (5) and Lou Baechler (1).

Knowing their stuff

There isn't one Canton Chief who wants to be the one that blew an assignment, let teammates and coaches down.

"What makes it tick is just how much we work at everything," Deese added.

"We drill everything, coaches work so hard for our schemes. (If we're) in our spots the defense is going to keep rolling.

"Communication is really big for our defense. Our linebackers do a really great job of making our calls really early for us so we know exactly what we need to be doing every play."

More often than not, the Canton defense is getting it done. Sometimes in as few as three plays by the opposition.

The Chiefs' vaunted offense usually takes it from there. But it all goes together into one package, more times than not with a capital W on the wrapping paper.

"Everyone knows Canton, about their offense," Lou Baechler said. "They call it Little League offense. We produce 44 points a game so they can call it what they want.

“But I think our defense is starting to get more known too, and usually we’re only letting up 14-15 points a game and I think we’re successful because of that.”



Canton senior Noah Brown (2) is shown in this play running the football. But he is one of the team's defensive standouts, too. (Photo: Bill Bresler | hometownlife.com)