

# Fast out of the gate

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By Tim Smith

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Thursday's opener quickly provided the usual offensive juice that fans have come to expect in recent seasons from Canton's varsity [football](#) team.

The Chiefs took the opening kickoff and marched 80 yards in eight plays, capped by a highlight-reel 29-yard touchdown run by senior halfback Ryan Jones.

Then came a brief, defensive hiccup in the form of a Walled Lake Central touchdown on the Vikings' first drive.

For the rest of the night at Plymouth-Canton Educational [Park's](#) varsity turf field, the Chiefs clicked on all cylinders en route to a 42-14 shellacking of the Vikings.

He likes it

“First [games](#) are scary,” veteran Canton head coach Tim Baechler said. “That's a very, very good football team over there (Central). I'm very pleased.”

From the start, the familiar triple-back set paid dividends for the home team.

Senior halfback Zac Merrillat racked up gains of 11 and 14 yards while senior halfback Kevin Buford also helped out with

runs of six and five yards.

The latter gave Canton a second down at the Central 29, and Jones — seven carries for 102 yards and three TDs — did the rest on the next play.

“There's definitely a lot of adrenaline (in an opener),” Jones noted. “At the snap of the ball my heart was pounding so much.”

If there was a slip-up at all, it came in Central's first series. The Vikes embarked on a 67-yard scoring march to make it a 7-7 game.

Quarterback Zac Leimbach ran nine times for 55 yards, including a seven-yard TD to cap the drive.

Baechler and his defensive coaches immediately made adjustments to stop Leimbach from that point on, and it mostly worked. Leimbach finished with 83 yards rushing in 15 carries.

Canton regained the lead for good with 9:

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04 to go in the first half when Buford scored from five yards out.

It was another 80-yard drive and all three starting backs chipped in with gains of at least 10 yards.

Three minutes later came one of the key plays of the contest. A low snap to Central punter Colby Morris bounced inside the 15

where a Canton player pounced on it.

On the very next play, Canton senior [quarterback](#) Kyle Adams rolled around right end for a 14-yard score.

“That botched snap allowed us to end the punt (attempt) and we capitalized,” Baechler said. “It gave us a 14-point lead and definitely was a turning point in [the game](#).”

Highlight-reel worthy

At halftime, the coach emphasized to his players about not letting up and Canton's defense heeded those words.

On the third play of the second half, senior defensive lineman Devante Watkins put a big hit on Central running back K.J. Schultz (17-65) and knocked the football loose.

Merillat collected the pigskin near the midfield stripe, spun his way out of traffic and scooted down the right sideline for a 50-yard fumble return touchdown.

“I was in pursuit of the football and one of our players (Watkins) had a nice hit, put his helmet on the ball and popped it out,”

Merillat recalled. “It was kind of a blur. I saw it on the ground, picked it up and the defense did a nice job of getting people off me in that big pile.

“I just saw green and ran ... It just happened, you know? Just instincts.”

Baechler couldn't hold back a smile when talking about Merillat getting rewarded for his usual all-out play.

“That was just what the doctor ordered,” Baechler said. “A good hit caused the fumble and Zac just, he's all hustle. He never takes a play off.

“He's the hardest working kid on the team and it was pure poetic justice that he was the one that scooped and scored that, because he's always hustling.”

Central's next offensive series was three-and-out and the Chiefs quickly padded their lead.

Keeping it coming

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Adams only threw one pass all night (not including a two-point conversion), but it was a 34-yarder over the middle to Buford to move the chains down to the Vikings' 16.

Merillat and Buford (who combined for more than 80 yards rushing) ran for two and six yards, respectively, to give Canton a first down and goal at the nine-yard line.

Following Central's third offsides of the night, Jones bulled his way just inches outside the goal line.

He finished the job on the next play, opening up a 34-7 advantage with five minutes left in the third.

The Chiefs tacked on another TD with 8:02 left in the game, on Jones' third score of the night (this one from 18 yards).

Providing a big spark on the series was 5-

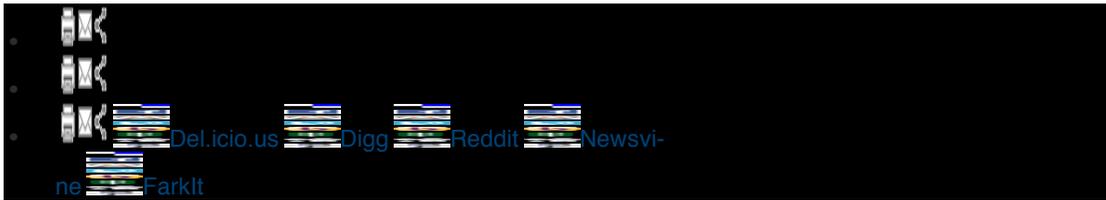
5 junior running back Malcolm Hollingsworth with runs of 14, 10 and 39 yards.

Then came Adams' two-point toss to senior Evan Rinke to give the Chiefs a 35-point spread at 42-7 and start the running scoreboard clock.

Central later scored a meaningless touchdown on a 19-yard pass from Nick Timmons to Tim Tanzillo in the final moments.

Canton next will visit Grand Blanc, with the game slated for 7 p.m. Thursday.

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Canton senior Zac Merrill celebrates his 50-yard fumble return touchdown, one of the key plays in the Chiefs 42-14 win over Walled Lake Central.

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