

PREP FOOTBALL: CC outlasts Canton in old-fashioned slugfest, 21-14



Catholic Central's Jon Malone hauled in this 62-yard scoring pass mid-way through the third quarter to tie the game at 14-14 / JOHN HEIDER PHOTO

Given the opportunity, Bronko Nagurski would have strapped on his leather helmet and jumped into the mix during Saturday afternoon's Division 1 [district championship](#) tilt between Canton and host Novi Detroit Catholic Central.

Playing 1930s-style football when passes (nine combined) were scarce and brute force in the trenches was vital, the 10-1 Shamrocks edged the Chiefs, 21-14, to advance to next weekend's regional round of [playoffs](#) against Ann Arbor Pioneer (9-2).

In the end, CC won the [game](#) by a foot -- the distance Canton running back Kevin Buford's fourth-and-4 run deep in Shamrock territory, deep in the fourth quarter, fell short -- and an arm: CC quarterback Kyle Cooper's right one, which delivered a game-tying 62-yard scoring strike to Jon Malone and a key fourth-and-8 laser early in the fourth to Matt Doneth to keep the Shamrocks' game-winning drive alive.

Canton, which led 14-7 at the half, finished 9-2.

“We just didn’t make quite enough plays,” said Canton head coach Tim Baechler. “That third quarter just kind of melted away -- I think we ran three plays -- and we couldn’t get them off the field. We had a good drive going in the fourth quarter, but they made just enough stops.

“That’s our offense. That’s what we do. I thought we left a couple things out there; we missed a couple passes. It just wasn’t in the [cards](#), I guess.”

CC outgained Canton, 284-277, in total yardage. Of the 103 plays run from scrimmage, only nine gained more than eight yards.

“We told the boys all week that it was going to be a 48-minute game and that it was going to come down to the fourth quarter,” said CC head coach Tom Mach. “We knew they were a very good team that comes after you hard. I’m proud of the way the kids came through in the fourth quarter. They played with a lot of heart and soul.”

Canton grabbed a 7-0 lead on its first drive when senior running back Zac Merillat did a Shamrock shake at the line of scrimmage and outsprinted the CC secondary to the end zone for a 42-yard TD.

With its top two kickers -- Scott Piwowar and Connor Shennan -- playing in the Division 1 state championship soccer match in East Kentwood, the Chiefs turned to senior Isa Ferras, and he delivered, going two-for-two on extra points.

The Shamrocks countered on their first possession, manufacturing a seven-play, 60-yard scoring drive that ended with David Houle’s 10-yard TD run up the gut. Alex Kozlowski tacked on the first of his three extra points and the game was deadlocked at 7-7.

The Chiefs marched to the CC 12 on its next drive, but came away empty when Anthony Darkangelo recovered a fumble on a first-and-10 play.

Canton finally broke the deadlock on the last play of the first half when Buford bulled into the end zone from 1 yard out to give the Chiefs a 14-7 advantage. The TD was set up four plays earlier when Michael Boes recovered a fumble at the CC10. Kyle Adams had pinned the Shamrocks deep with a booming 66-yard punt.

CC’s game-tying play -- the 62-yard Cooper-to-Malone hook-up -- was sandwiched in between a pair of Canton three-and-outs.

The game-winning drive -- a 13-play, 55-yard monster that chewed up close to seven minutes -- was capped by a 2-yard scoring plunge by Houle, who gave the Shamrocks a 21-14 lead. The TD came three plays after Cooper hit Doneth with a 20-yard connection on a crossing pattern on fourth-and-8 from the Canton 25.

Taking over at its 17 with 8:27 left, Canton moved the ball methodically down the field, picking up 22 yards on a Buford sweep on the drive’s first play.

The Chiefs converted a fourth-and-2 from their own 47 mid-way through the drive when Buford managed to get the left edge for four yards.

The game's pivotal fourth-and-4 play came with 2:39 left when Buford secured an inside hand-off and took off around the right end before cutting back toward the middle where he was met by CC's Mike Schultz, among others.

"You think about players in that situation, not so much the play call," Baechler said of the near-miss on fourth down. "I'd give it to Kevin again."

Merillat led all rushers with 123 yards on 12 carries. The Toledo-bound Buford finished his stellar high school career with 72 yards on 17 attempts.

Houle and Darkangelo both churned out 79 yards to lead the Shamrocks.

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