

Chiefs punch playoff ticket

5-4 Rocks must play waiting game

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For the second straight Friday, Canton and Salem squared off at Plymouth-Canton Educational Park with a playoff berth on the line. Other than the fact Canton prevailed each week, that's where the similarities ended between the two contests.

The game Oct. 12 was a 34-7 blowout; Friday's [thrilling](#) nail-biter on a rainy, windy night came down to the final play.

A 45-yard field-goal attempt by Salem junior Alex Kenrick — only possible after the Rocks recovered an onside kick — sailed wide right, enabling the Chiefs to win 28-27 and earn an automatic state playoff berth with their sixth win of the season.

“That's stuff we practice,” Salem head coach Kurt Britnell said about the onside kick and subsequent field-goal attempt. “We converted it and it went how we wanted it to other than the miss, obviously.”

Not the same

Canton head coach Tim Baechler said the Salem team the Chiefs faced Friday was a different bunch from the previous week.

“They (Rocks) did so many new things today that caused us problems,” Baechler said. “Offensively, defensively, that's the advantage of a back-to-back game like that.

“We got it right the first game, they get to go back to the drawing board and make all kinds of adjustments and changes. They did a lot and they were good. But we got lucky.”

For much of the night, it looked as though the Rocks were going to get payback for the previous week and in the process end two long droughts. It's been more than a decade since Salem defeated Canton, and since the Rocks reached the postseason.

With the bitter defeat, however, the 5-4 Rocks now must wait until the MHSAA's Selection Sunday show to find out if they squeak in to the playoffs.

"We're a bubble 5-4 team," Britnell said. "I don't know exactly how they do things in East Lansing. But if they look at this game ... we can be competitive and we're worthy."

Still hoping

The senior quarterback who almost directed the Rocks to a miracle finish, Jake Deprez, sat on the wet turf following the game trying to compose his thoughts, wondering if his prep career was over.

"We've been down the last couple weeks, but I thought we stepped it up tremendously," said Deprez, who completed 12-of 25-passes for 236 yards and two touchdowns. "We came out and we played how we used to play. This is good to see. I'm just hoping we get in."

Salem did give up the first touchdown of the night, however.

With 4:56 left in the first quarter, Canton sophomore quarterback Greg Williams (5-of-5 passing, 159 yards, two TDs) shot-putted the football to senior running back Malcolm Hollingsworth in the right flat.

Hollingsworth (18 rushes, 163 yards, two TDs) eluded tacklers and rolled down the field for an 86-yard score. Connecting on the extra point was Connor Shennan as the Chiefs went up 7-0.

Deprez brought his team right back, leading a 57-yard march in seven plays. Culminating the drive was a 46-yard toss to junior running back Drake Jordan, who collected 232 all-purpose yards.

Jordan got past the Canton secondary, reached the Chiefs' 10-yard line and turned around with his back to the goal line. He stood waiting like an outfielder before catching the long throw and then ran into the end zone. Kendrick's extra point tied the game at 7-7 with 8:01 remaining in the half.

The Rocks took a 14-7 halftime lead. Another long toss, this time a 42-yarder to senior wideout Youssef Barakat (five receptions, 104 yards),

keyed Salem's 82-yard scoring drive in the final minutes of the second quarter.

Following that catch near the midfield stripe, Jordan took over with runs of 5, 4, 14 and 10 yards (the latter good for a TD).

Canton answers

Canton made some adjustments at halftime and scored on the third play of the second half on a 68-yard run by Hollingsworth. He burst through the line of scrimmage and raced down the field along the right hash marks.

But the extra point was off the mark, enabling Salem to maintain a 14-13 lead.

With 3:57 left in the third, the Chiefs finally regained the edge (20-14) on a 24-yard TD strike from Williams to senior tight end Scott Gring (two catches, 40 yards).

Back came the resilient Rocks, on an 80-yard drive in 13 plays that stretched from the end of the third quarter into the fourth.

Passes of 21 and 22 yards to Barakat moved the chains, and Depez helped his cause with an 11-yard run down to near the goal line.

He then scored on a quarterback sneak, and Kenrick's extra point made it 21-20 Salem with 10:12 left to play.

Some textbook Canton football followed, namely 15 consecutive running plays that accounted for an 80-yard scoring drive — not to mention taking more than eight minutes off the clock.

When Hollingsworth finally carried it in from the 5-yard line with 1:48 remaining, the Chiefs were up 26-21. To compensate for the earlier missed extra point, senior tailback Kendall Scott (185 all-purpose yards) tacked on a two-point conversion run.

Undaunted, the Rocks came right back. Depez completed passes of 17 and 39 yards to Jordan (the latter a juggling, circus catch at Canton's 12-yard line).

Then, Depez threw the ball to Barakat, sweeping around right end for the TD to slice Canton's lead to 28-27 with 31 seconds left.

Going for it

Salem tried for a two-point conversion pass, which if successful would have put the Rocks back in front. But the throw bounced off a receiver's hands in the back, right corner.

"I said to the guys on the sidelines, 'Do you want to win it or do you want to tie it?'" Britnell said. "Everybody to a man said let's go win it."

The Rocks still had life when Kenrick's onside kick was pounced on by senior Steve Elugbemi with 28 seconds to play. That gave Kenrick his chance to kick a **winning** field goal, but it wasn't to be.

Canton senior lineman Cameron Dillard breathed a sigh of relief that the pesky Rocks were finally dispatched and that the Chiefs' season isn't over.

"It was definitely a good game, we fought hard on both sides of the ball," Dillard said. "It just came down to the last field goal. They missed it and we came out on top.

"Now we got to do full, all-out practice next week, no mistakes and get ready for the start of playoffs. One and done."