

On a night of myriad big gainers, the Canton Chiefs' bid to reach football's Final Four literally came inches short.

Host Saline, behind quarterback Josh Jackson's six touchdowns (four passing, two running), eked out a 42-35 victory Friday over the Chiefs on a frigid night at Saline High School.

Jackson brought enough heat for everybody else at the stadium, during a Division 1 regional final that was played with temperatures in the 20s and with a coating of snow on the turf.

After the Hornets (11-1) broke a 35-35 tie on Jackson's 18-yard keeper up the middle with 7:52 to go in the game, the Chiefs tried for what would have been a tying TD.

On fourth-down and inches from outside the Saline 20, sophomore running back Marcus Sanders was stopped just short of the first-down marker.

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Head Coach Tim Baechler

That enabled Jackson (26-32, 313 yards) time to essentially run out the clock and end the Chiefs' season on a heartbreaking note.

"We're so proud of these kids," Canton head coach Tim Baechler said. "We've had so many struggles with health issues, suspension issues and the kids kept coming back and coming back.

"We kept improving every single week and lo and behold we're playing in the Elite Eight, just a couple plays away from being in the Final Four.

"It's one of the most satisfying seasons in my career, there's no question about that."

One of Canton's catalysts and team leaders, senior running back Chuck Turfe, gave kudos to the Hornets for playing tough during crunch time.

"I just got to give props to their team man," said Turfe, who ran for 49 yards in 13 carries and scored a touchdown. "They came out ready to play and there's no excuses.

"They came out playing, they executed, we just got beat by a great team."

The Chiefs were unstoppable on the ground to open up the game and led for most of the first half.

Getting things started on the opening drive was senior running back Brian Newton (17-111, one TD), who scored on a 33-yard burst through the right side of the line with 9:24 to play in the first.

Newton also had a 19-yard gain during that drive as the Chiefs had no trouble with their footing on the slick playing surface.

Saline came back with a 6-yard TD pass from Jackson to Chris Mercer, but the Chiefs missed out on a glorious opportunity to snuff out that drive.

That's because quarterback Trent Theisen (who played the second series for Saline) fumbled a reverse, but still managed to recover the ball.

Canton did stop that series with no damage and the Chiefs' offense answered with a scoring march of 64 yards in nine plays.

Sanders, who set a school rushing record the previous week against Livonia Churchill, bounced off a block to go 25 yards down to the Hornets 1-yard line.

Taking it in on the next play was Turfe, and Andrew Loehnis booted the extra point to put the Chiefs back in front 14-7.



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Canton runs over Churchill

Sanders strikes

The Chiefs' defense held to stop Saline's next series and senior quarterback Greg Williams (5-6, 63 yards) quickly led his team into the end zone to make it a 21-7 edge with 32 seconds left in the first.

Scoring on a 49-yard run was Sanders, who finished with 178 yards in 18 carries and tallied approximately 2,000 yards for the season.

Saline cut the deficit to 21-14 with 9:57 to go in the half, as Jackson found Kevin Gross for a 23-yard scoring toss.

Once again, the Chiefs got it back when Sanders scored on a 32-yard run, to briefly put Canton in front 28-14.

Saline's turn on the see-saw prompted another Jackson TD pass, an 8-yarder to Mercer with 2:05 left.

That led to the turning point of the night, a successful onside kick by the Hornets.

Instead of the Chiefs gaining possession with a chance to answer before the half, Saline got the ball near midfield.

Seven plays later, Jackson took it up the gut for a 4-yard scoring plunge to make it 28-28 with 44 seconds left in the half.

"No," said Baechler, stressing the play wasn't a surprise. "We saw them do it at the exact same time against Monroe the week before.

"We knew it was coming. All our kids up there have very good hands, I wouldn't have changed that. We were ready. It just took a bad hop."

Canton tried to pull a similar surprise with an onside kick to open the second half, but the Hornets recovered instead.

Saline then needed to go just 49 yards to reach the end zone and take the lead for the first time.

Jackson threaded three passes on the mark to Jeb Palka to move the chains inside the Canton 25.

After Canton's Jalen Cochran sacked Jackson for a 10-yard loss, the quarterback connected on a 34-yard touchdown pass to Cameron Cole to give the Hornets a 35-28 lead.

Drawing even

Williams led the Chiefs to the tying touchdown with 11:59 left in the fourth, finding tight end Nolan Gilo for a 15-yard toss.

But right back came Jackson and the Hornets, stinging the Canton defense with the winning TD.

Canton looked to get it right back, with Williams hitting Micah Rinke and Newton for gains of 17 and 15 yards, respectively.

The Chiefs' drive fizzled at that point, unable to get another first down. On fourth-and-inches, Sanders appeared to have the necessary yardage to keep the drive alive.

But officials did not agree and Saline got the ball back on downs, ultimately closing out the game.

"We ran the ball well, I thought," Baechler said. "We just had a couple critical plays where we might have made some mistakes.

"... There were a couple critical calls on fourth downs. I don't regret the calls. If we execute, I think we make the plays. But they made just a few more plays than we did on both sides of the ball and there's your 7-point loss."

The regional title was the first in Saline history.

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