

Nolen's memory on their minds as Chiefs face Mustangs.

Tim Smith 10:29 a.m. EST November 6, 2015



Friday morning, the life of the late Josh Nolen will be celebrated. Later Friday, his extended Canton Chiefs football family will be taking the field ready to honor the memory of the 22-year-old who passed away Oct. 30 after a four-month battle with a rare form of kidney cancer. When Canton sprints onto the turf at Northville's Tom Holzer Field for the 7 p.m. kickoff, in the MHSAA Division 1 district final, players will have number "8" decals on their helmets — the same number proudly worn by Nolen during his prep career as a stellar defensive back. "These kids do not know Josh," veteran Canton head coach Tim Baechler said. "They know of him, and many of them are wearing the bracelet # *pray4joshua*."

"We have spoken about the type of young man he was and the type of player he was. We will have a '8' sticker on our helmets. I'm not sure if that will make our kids play with a little more attitude, but I know Josh will be looking down and will be pulling a few strings for us. We are planning on bringing it anyway."

The Chiefs (8-2) will be looking to hand the Mustangs their first loss of the season and earn another crack at the D1 regional (which last year ended with a heartbreaking loss to Saline).

Baechler said the keys to that happening will be finding a way to contain Northville senior quarterback Justin Zimbo and continuing to work efficiently in the trenches on both sides of the ball.

"He (Zimbo) is a slippery guy, but we will have unblocked guys there," Baechler noted. "We just need to tackle well. We must also contain their outside run and quick passing game. Again, we must not allow big plays and have to tackle well."

The Chiefs, coming off a 70-35 win against Livonia Stevenson in a first-round game, look to move the chains through their multi-pronged wing-T offense.

Canton's offensive catalyst is 5-7 running back Markus Sanders, who in 2014 gained more than 2,000 yards. This season, he has followed up with nearly 1,800 rushing yards and 27 touchdowns.

Baechler pointed to the work being done by his offensive line in helping create holes for Sanders and others to race through.

"Our entire offensive line is playing with much better pad level and leg drive," Baechler said. "Our backs actually have made the most improvement in their blocking which has helped our offense."