

Fueled by revenge, Canton ends Saline football's perfect season

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Canton
27
Saline
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ANN ARBOR -- **Saline** had a target on its back entering the 2015 football season.

From winning the Southeastern Conference Red Division last year to reaching the Division 1 state final, the Hornets knocked off plenty of teams that were left wanting revenge. Few had the chance to beat the 2014 Saline team quite like **Canton** though. "We should have had it and they just made a couple more plays than us," said Canton coach Tim Baechler. "We watched film of it (Thursday and Friday) and we were angry."

Fueled by their 42-35 loss to Saline in last year's regional final, the Chiefs took back what they believed to be theirs Friday, running over the Hornets en route to a **27-7 regional title victory**. Canton rushed for 357 yards and four touchdowns in the game, led by 193 yards from **Markus Sanders**.

Saline didn't help its cause by muffing a first-half punt, allowing its opponents to keep burning clock while the defense began to wear down. Sidelining **Josh Jackson** and the rest of the dynamic Saline offense was the hope of Bachler's, though he didn't see it working out so well.

"We kept their quarterback on the sideline for long chunks of time to keep them cold. You talk about that in theory, but when you do it, it's awesome. Our defense held the No. 1 team in the state to seven points. I wasn't expecting that."

After the teams exchanged punts and turnovers for most of the first quarter, Canton quarterback **Jake O'Donnell** punched in a one-yard run to put the Chiefs on the board. Saline struggled to find any offensive rhythm throughout the half, quickly giving the ball back to the Chiefs' triple-back, tight-T offense.

Canton marched down and scored again before the half, this time on a two-yard run by **Jakob Wickens**. At the break, Baechler reminded his team of the lead they blew one year earlier.

"I told them it's 0-0; you won the first half now forget it, we've got to go for the jugular and put people away."

Saline came out handing the ball off to **Connor Hibbard** -- a strategy they didn't use much in the first. The junior running back picked up a pair of first downs on the drive, but the offense couldn't convert on a second-straight fourth down, giving the ball back to the dominant Canton run game.

Canton took the ball 64 yards in 14 plays before notching its third touchdown on a one-yard run by **Lou Baechler**.

Down 20-0, Saline looked like it might come alive in the fourth quarter. Jackson picked up a first down by hitting **Bryce Wolma** for a 17 yard gain, and came back on the next play to find **Mike Monahan** in the end zone for a 38-yard score.

"We thought we had some momentum there," said coach Joe Palka. "We felt if we got that kick or if we got that stop on third

down, that's typical Saline football and we're coming back, this is our quarter, but it just didn't happen today."

The Chiefs converted on three third downs on the ensuing drive, including a nine-yard touchdown run by **Jared Stephens** to put the game out of reach with six minutes to play.

For the first time this season, a defense was able to contain the Hornets, holding Jackson to 8-of-20 passing for 73 yards and a touchdown. In the run game, he compiled -12 yards, having to fall on a botched snap for a loss of 20.

The senior quarterback took a beating all night, hanging in the pocket until the last second to try and make plays. He was slow to get up on several occasions in the second half, but never left the game.

"He's a great player," Baechler said. "Shoot, he was like Tom Brady against us last year and there was snow on th ground. That kid is not going to have a bad game so we had to man-up and go hit him. And we got to him a few times. We knew they'd make some plays because they're very talented, and it worked."

With the win, Canton advanced to the state semifinals where they'll face Detroit Cass Tech. Meanwhile, the Hornets end their 2015 campaign with a 10-1 record. Despite falling short in the regional final, Palka was nothing but prideful talking about the season his kids turned in.

"This team overachieved. We've had the bull's-eye on our back from the start of the year and we weren't as physically talented as we were a year ago. They left a great legacy and we kept showing mental toughness. They achieved far more than our staff's expectations for them, regardless of what the outside parties thought.

"We had a bad game and it wasn't the right one to have it in but it can't take away anything from their season."

As Saline says goodbye to another talented senior class, Palka's outlook on the future remained positive.

"We'll miss them but the bar is set high and expectations will be there next year. We just have to reload."