

# FOOTBALL: Saline Falls to Canton in District Semifinal

Coach Joe Palka knew his Saline football team was in for a tough game when the playoffs opened Friday at Canton. Saline, 7-1, and Canton, 8-1, could have been a regional championship game with those records. It's about as tough as a district semifinal gets.

The loss of injured senior defensive leaders CJ Gildersleeve and Danny Weidmayer, two guys who this team would have relied on to stop the Chiefs' hide-and-seek running game, only made that challenge tougher. And the rainy, chilly forecast likely did more to hurt Saline's passing game than Canton's running game.

Canton rushed for 343 yards and capitalized on three Saline turnovers to win 42-14 and advance to next week's district final at Belleville, who beat Salem, 17-7.

"We knew it was going to be a challenge. We tried to create different things and an alternative plan because of the injuries. You factor the weather in, you factor all that in, and it was a tough night," Palka said. "I told the kids that sometimes there are going to be tough nights like this. That's just part of football. We haven't had many of them. Tonight was one of those nights."

Canton did to Saline what Saline has done to several teams this year. They struck twice in the game's first three minutes.

On the second play from scrimmage, Steven Walker ran for a 76-yard touchdown.

"They busted a trap," Palka said. "No matter how much you practice it, you can't simulate how they do it."

Things got worse on the Hornets' first drive. Saline had moved from the 22 to the 37. On 3rd-and-6, Cole Daniels threw to Emmett Turner. But Lou Bachler stepped in front and intercepted the pass. He went about 43 yards for the touchdown. The kick was no good. Canton led 13-0 just 2:50 into the game.

Saline had good field possession on the next drive after Logan Evans returned a short kickoff 22 yards to the 43. Daniels passed to Brendan Murphy for a 15-yard gain and then Andrew Diuble for 21 yards. Saline had a first down at the Canton 18. But the drive stalled there after a short run and two incomplete passes. Vinnie Patteri's field goal attempt was wide. The Hornets came away empty-handed. The Saline defense gave the offense a chance to redeem themselves. Tom Raupp came up with a tackle on third down to force the punt from the Canton 27. Chase Meredith's punt was a good one, but Ethan Collick returned it 14 yards to the Chiefs' 45. A block in the back penalty brought Saline back to their own 35. Daniels moved the chains with an 18-yard pass to Murphy. Diuble and Munday had runs to move the chains again.

On 3rd-and-10, Daniels found Andrew Diuble over the middle for a 32-yard touchdown. Patteri's kick was good. Saline was within six at 13-7. Canton didn't let Saline feel good about its touchdown for long. On first down, Walker rushed 42 yards to the Saline 38. A few plays later, on 3rd-and-7 from Saline's 20, Conner Engel faked the hand off and had nearly everyone fooled. He passed over the middle to Noah Brown who ran into the corner of the end zone for the score. The kick was good. Canton led 20-7.

When the Hornets got the ball back they mixing in speedy J Drew McGovern in at QB. Saline moved the chains once with an 11-yard pass from Daniels to Emmett Turner. That was as far as Saline got. A fourth down pass for Turner fell incomplete. Canton took over at its 50. On first down, Connor Terech stopped Walker. On 3rd-and-8, Collick and Terech stopped Luke Jouppi two yards short of the marker. On 4th-and-2 from the Saline 42, Trevor Garbo Walker for a one-yard gain.

Saline got the ball back at its 41 but couldn't move the ball. They went three-and-out. Vinnie Patteri's punt, from Saline's 43, rolled all the way down to the Chiefs' one.

After a three yard rush gave the Chiefs a little breathing room, Engel faked the handoff and then passed to Troup for a 61-yard gain.

“They did a better job than they have in the past with the play action,” Palka said.

The Chiefs pressed on toward the Saline goal line. They had a first down at the Saline 10. On 2nd-and-9, Walker rushed down to the Saline two. He was tackled by Terech, who forced the fumble and recovered it at the Saline four.

It was a potentially huge play for the Hornets to prevent the score before the half – especially since Saline was to receive to start the third quarter.

Down by just two scores, Saline wanted a strong start in the third. Patteri got the Hornets rolling with a 32 yard kick-off return to the Saline 39. On first down, Daniels was sacked and he lost the football. Troup scooped it up and ran it to the Saline 22.

Three plays later Troup rushed for a 16-yard touchdown. Canton led 27-7.

Things got worse for Saline when Canton recovered the kickoff. A personal foul helped Canton move 15 yards. A couple plays later, on 4th-and-1, Troup carried the ball and was tackled by Garbo.

The Hornets thought they stopped Troup. The refs said otherwise. Instead of Saline climbing back into the game, Canton had pulled away.

“For us, we can’t turn it over three times. Then we come out in the second half and think we’re going to get a jump and we turn the ball over on the first play,” Palka said. “Those are the things that prevented us from climbing back into the game. If one of those things don’t happen, maybe we get a little bit offensively and we’re only down a touchdown. We just couldn’t close the gap tonight and turnovers were a big part of that.”

Saline put together a scoring drive in the fourth quarter. Munday helped the drive along with a 25-yard rush. Daniels had two passes to Diuble for another 18 yards. On 3rd-and-5 from the Canton five, Daniels found Diuble in the corner of the end zone for their second touchdown connection. Patteri's kick made it 42-14.

It was a spark from an offense that struggled most of the night. "We seemed like we were playing slow on offense tonight for some reason. Diuble was the guy who had jump. We felt like we had to get the ball to him," Palka said.

Despite the loss, Palka was proud of his team.

"I'm proud of our kids. It's a disappointing night tonight. It's gone on four years now without a loss in the SEC. They're going to walk away as probably the winningest class for their four years," Palka said.

"We finished in the AP Top 10. We finished as Washtenaw County champs. We can't let one tough playoff game mar what was a great season."

Palka said that a lot of people know about the season-ending injuries for starters like Gildersleeve, Weidmayer, Drew Richardson and Marco Harris.

"What they don't know is about the three kids with separated shoulders who played through it. Two of them will need surgery. These kids fought through a lot this year," Palka said. "We wanted to win a state championship, obviously it wasn't in the cards this year. But I'm proud of how they played and what they accomplished."

After the contest the scene was an emotional one as the underclassmen formed a tunnel and the seniors walked through, sharing embraces and pats on the shoulder pads with their friends.

Palka said it was a great group of leaders.

"They're great kids, excellent leaders and just really good people. We had no issues within our team. Everyone got along. I attribute that to the seniors," Palka said. "At the end of the day, you want kids to be able to say, 'hey, I had a great experience with Saline football.' If they do that, that's really the win for us."