

Canton survives last-play scare to oust Belleville in Division 1 district final



After an intense week of practice preparing for Friday's Division 1 district final against top-ranked Belleville, it all came down to a single play for the Canton Chiefs.

And what a wild and crazy play it was. But Canton's prevent defense was able to finally bring down Jalen Wallace with nothing but zeroes on the scoreboard to preserve a nerve-wracking 28-25 victory against the previously undefeated Tigers.

"How many kids on our team would start for them?" asked jubilant Canton coach Tim Baechler after the district trophy presentation. "Not very many. Yeah, this was a great win."

Senior running back Colin Troup carried the offense, rushing 24 times for 178 yards and a touchdown. But it was bend-don't-break defense that made sure the Chiefs secured the win.

"I was scared to death on that last play," Baechler said. "My god, my heart sank, rose, sank, rose. What a way to end. I'm sick right now."

Baechler could afford to laugh, however, because the Chiefs won their 10th straight game after their Week 1 loss to Muskegon Mona Shores. Canton now will move on to the D1 regionals.

With several players lined up 40 yards behind the line of scrimmage, Belleville quarterback Christian Dhue-Reid completed a short pass to Julian Barnett — who then tried to dance around the defenders while avoiding what would be the game-ending tackle.

Barnett flipped the ball to Wallace, who made a bee-line for the sideline trying to turn the corner. But the Chiefs were ready and finally brought him down.



Canton senior Noah Brown (2) raises his arms in triumph after scoring on a 25-yard touchdown catch in the third quarter against Belleville. (Photo: JOHN KEMSKI | EXPRESS PHOTO)

Tough in the clutch

“This week we installed a new victory formation, getting some of our tall guys back in the end zone for any jump ball” senior linebacker Chase Meredith said. “We were lined up for that, everyone was ready. And they threw something short, so we all had to rally to the ball.”

Senior Noah Brown, who caught a 25-yard pass from senior quarterback Connor Engel midway through the third quarter to give Canton a 21-6 advantage, said the team “worked all week in our last second defense, and we just got the job done today.”

Canton's decisive touchdown came on a fourth and goal from the 4-yard line and nursing a 21-19 lead with under six minutes left in the contest. Engel faked a handoff into the line, and then sent a perfect pass deep into the end zone where tight end Lou Baechler made no mistake with his TD catch. That capped a 15-play, 55-yard scoring drive that began late in the third quarter.

"I went on my route, and I was open and Connor through a heck of a pass right on my stomach. I came down with it," Baechler said.

The Tigers responded to cut the deficit to 28-25 on a 7-yard pass from Dhue-Reid to Davion Williams with 3:18 to go, but Canton blocked an extra point for the second time.

Canton then milked the clock for all it was worth, picking up a first down along the way to ensure Belleville (10-1) would not have much time to work with.



After teaming up for a fourth quarter touchdown pass play, Lou Baechler (1) gives props to quarterback Connor Engel (7). (Photo: JOHN KEMSKI | EXPRESS PHOTO)

Following are several takeaways from the D1 showdown:

TIGER TRICKERY

Late in the second quarter with the Chiefs up 14-6, Belleville set up to punt the ball. But the Tigers threw on fourth down and 18 instead. Patrick Lupro connected with Jalen Williams for a 20-yard gain and keep the drive going. But Canton's pass defense stiffened from there, and Belleville missed on another fourth down pass attempt.

OH THOSE PENALTIES

Canton, at least in the first half, played relatively miscue-free football — at least where penalties were concerned. The Tigers, on the other hand, were whistled for several false starts to stymie any offensive momentum. And a holding call nullified what would have been a 58-yard TD catch-and-run by Williams.

FULL SPEED AHEAD

Canton ran the ball most of the time during the opening half, looking to not only gain chunks of yardage but also take time off the clock. With several running backs getting touches, the Chiefs put together some efficient drives that paid off with a pair of TD runs (by Steven Walker and Troup).

EVERY POINT COUNTS

The Chiefs blocked a Belleville extra point early in the second quarter. On the flip side Canton did the job on both first-half PATs, with junior Ben Wright holding for senior Chase Meredith and sophomore Cooper Donlin (one each).

CLEAN PICKINGS

Canton made enough important plays on defense to keep the run-and-gun Tigers at bay. With the game scoreless in the first quarter, senior defensive back Robert Laird intercepted a Belleville pass in the end zone.

On the first offensive snap of the second half, a badly overthrown ball went right into the hands of senior Joe Vespaziani, another Chiefs D-back.

"We know there were matchup issues big time back there," Tim Baechler said. "But they just scrapped, got a couple picks. That's what we said, 'Hey, they're going to make some plays, guys. But we're going to make a couple, too.'"



The Canton Chiefs celebrate after defeating Belleville, 28-25, in Friday's Division 1 district final. (Photo: JOHN KEMSKI | EXPRESS PHOTO)