

Brighton football nips Canton in emotional roller coaster, 23-17



With a capacity home crowd all dressed in pink to honor cancer survivors and those lost to the disease, the Brighton Bulldogs — also dressed in pink — saw red when it came time to face KLAA West Division football rival Canton.

In a game that looked and felt like a state playoff match up, the gutsy Chiefs scored on a 9-yard pass from quarterback Ben Stesiak to wide-out Caden Domzalski with all zeroes on the scoreboard to force overtime at 17-17 (following a successful PAT by Seth Troszak).

But the Bulldogs seemed to have destiny on their side, as Zach Hopman intercepted a Stesiak pass at the goal line to end Canton's overtime chance.

And when Brighton had its overtime chance (rules stipulate each team gets a series starting at the 10-yard line), senior quarterback Will Jontz sprinted around right end and followed a key block from outside wing Sheldon Riley into the end zone for the game-winning touchdown, closing out an emotion-packed 23-17 victory. The Bulldogs improved to 4-1 with Friday night's win.

“I knew the offense was capable of putting it in,” Jontz said. “I trusted my O-line and my running backs to block. I found a hole and made it.”

Jontz (9-14, 90 yards in the air and 17 more on the ground) and Hopman said the “Pink Out” night for cancer awareness — in which players honored cancer victims by wearing their names on their jerseys — gave players a little extra incentive, not that they needed any playing the always-tough Chiefs (3-2).

“My mom, she died when I was eight of breast cancer,” Jontz said. “So I dedicated this game to her.”

He possibly wouldn’t have had that chance if not for the clutch pick by Hopman, who jumped up at the goal line to intercept a third-down pass by Canton quarterback Ben Stesiak. He also had a key interception in regulation.

“It was great to see everyone come out and support donations for breast cancer,” Hopman said. “It’s just awesome to see everyone wearing people’s name on the back. I’m wearing my grandma, she’s not with me here right now, but I just dedicate this (win) to her.”

Hopman added that he “had no doubt,” that Brighton would prevail on the special night. “I trust in God and I believed in it.”

There wouldn’t have been any need for overtime magic if not for Canton’s own stirring comeback in the final minutes of the fourth quarter. Down 17-10 and getting the ball at their own 19-yard line, Stesiak orchestrated a game-tying touchdown drive. He hooked up with fellow senior Noah VanBerkel for three double-digit completions, the third giving Canton the ball at the four-yard line with 1.5 seconds left. VanBerkel reeled in passes of 18, 15 and 17 yards during the march.

Augmenting the passing game was Canton’s hard-running senior tailback Steven Walker (23-112, one TD), who powered the team to back-to-back first downs.

Then came the game-tying toss to Domzalski, which briefly boosted the road team’s hopes for victory.

“I faked the toss, I ran around the corner, saw Domzy open and I had to toss it a little high and get him a little lead,” Stesiak said. “Just threw the ball and hoped for the best and got it. Touchdown. He kept his feet in bounds I give him a lot of credit. Great call by coach (Andy) Lafata.” But Brighton answered the bell in overtime.

“You’re going to take some hits in this league,” Lafata said. “This league is tough as hell, you’re not going to roll through this league easily.

“We’re on the road, tough environment, great coached team, that’s one of the best teams we played all year (and) probably one of the best that we will play.”





Canton quarterback Ben Stesiak finds his target in Noah VanBerkel in the fourth quarter of the game at Brighton Friday, Sept. 21, 2018.

Following are several takeaways from the game:

GOING FOR IT

With Brighton already up 7-0 (on a 17-yard pass from Jontz to Jackson Krause) and a Canton drive stalling near midfield in the first quarter, the Chiefs went for it on a fourth-and-six situation. Stasiak found Walker in the right flat for seven yards and a first down.

That kept the chains moving and ultimately, Walker punched it in from inside the 1-yard line with 9:40 to go in the half to tie the contest at 7-all.



Canton's Steven Walker (4) plows ahead for some first-half yardage against Brighton. (Photo: Jon Vespaziani)

MAKING A STAND

Right before halftime, Canton looked ready to score another touchdown. A 28-yard run by Jawuan Frazier moved the Chiefs inside Brighton's 40 and Walker's spinning move was good for another first down at the 15.

Canton had a first down at the 2-yard line and could not move an inch on the next three running plays due to Brighton's defensive wall. Finally, with 11.4 seconds to go before the intermission, senior kicker Seth Troszak split the uprights from 19 yards to put the Chiefs up 10-7.

TURNAROUND

In the fourth quarter, the Bulldogs evened the game at 10-10 on a 20-yard field goal by Paul Skoczylas and then kicked off to the Chiefs — who couldn't field the ball cleanly.

Liam Fay recovered the loose pigskin and Brighton made Canton pay on the very next snap when Jontz threw a 37-yard scoring strike down the left sideline to Austin Lin to put the Chiefs down by a touchdown.

BAECHLERS IN THE HOUSE

Retired Hall of Fame Canton coach Tim Baechler was on the sidelines with wife Julie watching his former team square off against the Bulldogs.

They weren't at Hope College this weekend, where 2018 Canton grad Lou Baechler is playing football, because of a bye week.

CANCER AWARENESS

It was "Pink Out for Cancer Awareness" and the Bulldogs donned pink jerseys for the contest. The Brighton bleachers also were packed with pink for quite the spectacle.

A special halftime program paid homage to cancer victims and saluted cancer survivors.

Following the game, players donated their special "Pink Out" jerseys to cancer survivors in the stands or to family members who have lost loved ones to the disease. On the back of the jerseys were names of their lost family members who they dedicated the game to.

Friday's event closed out Brighton's "Pink Week."