

Smith's final minute touchdown clinches 35-31 win for Chiefs over Byrd

NATCHITOCHES, La. – Senior quarterback Owen Smith scored on a 20-yard touchdown run with 57 seconds left to give the Natchitoches Central Chiefs a 35-31 win over the Byrd Yellowjackets Friday night at Turpin Stadium in district 1-5A football action.

The Chiefs (4-3, 2-3 in 1-5A) and the Yellowjackets (1-6, 0-5 in 1-5A) spent the first quarter jockeying for field position as both teams stalled offensively. The game was scoreless entering the second quarter.

However, Byrd scored on a 4-yard touchdown run by Jackson Davis with 9:45 left in the second quarter before the extra point attempt by Texas A&M commit Asher Murray. The Yellowjackets led 7-0.

But the Chiefs were ready for the 48-minute battle. They responded as KJ Newton caught a 6-yard touchdown pass in the corner of the endzone from Smith (NCHS PAT was blocked) making it 7-6 with 4:30 to go until halftime.

However, the Yellowjackets scored with 13 seconds left in the half on a 10-yard run by Christian Maxie (Murray PAT is good) making it 14-6 at halftime.

In what seemed like a pedestrian first half, the second half was anything but. Natchitoches Central opened by tying the game after Imari Speed scored on a 31-yard fumble return for a touchdown, his second defensive touchdown of the season (35-yard interception return Oct. 3 at home against Haughton). NCHS tied it on the two-point conversion moments later as Smith found Semaj Thomas making it 14-14 less than minute into the third quarter.

But this one was just getting started. Three plays into the following drive, Maxie blew through the line for a 79-yard touchdown run as Byrd regained the lead after Murray's PAT, 21-14, with 8:22 left in the third.

On the next play from scrimmage, Chiefs' senior running back Kelton Howard answered back with an 80-yard touchdown to tie the game at 21-21 following Amsden Pasche's extra point with 8:11 left in the quarter. Howard finished with over 200 yards rushing and two touchdowns as he was a workhorse for the Chiefs' offense all night.

"I've changed how hard I've been practicing," said Howard. "At this point, I want the defense to feel like it's going to take a lot to get me down and I was able to run through some tackles tonight."

The Yellowjackets appeared to be heading to another touchdown on the following drive before the Chiefs' defense forced a 32-yard field attempt by Murray. He split the uprights giving the Yellowjackets a 24-21 lead with 2:32 left in the third.

Howard went back to work on the next Chiefs' possession. He roared 45 yards down to the Byrd 35-yard line before he capped it off with a 6-yard touchdown run (Pasche PAT good) as NCHS regained the lead, 28-24, with just 8 seconds left in the third quarter.

The Yellowjackets responded as they drove down and scored with 2:28 left on a 2-yard touchdown run as the visitors regained the lead, 31-28.

But the senior leadership of Smith showed up in crunch time for NCHS. He sprinted 27 yards to midfield where he was pushed out of bounds. After a personal foul penalty by Byrd put the Chiefs inside the Yellowjackets' redzone, Smith threw the final haymaker as he dropped back and again and ran 20 yards for the game-winning touchdown with just 57 seconds left in the game.

"We had just run that same play earlier in the drive and it worked well," said Smith. "I was hoping coach (offensive coordinator Chris Kuykendoll) would call it again and he did and it was wide open."

The Yellowjackets got one last chance as they pushed it to midfield with 5 seconds left. But a desperation pass attempt was well short of the endzone as the Chiefs batted down the ball and the Yellowjackets hopes of a win.

"I'm most proud of the resilience," said NCHS head coach Brad Laird. "I didn't think we had much energy in the first half. But we went back and forth in the second half and had to fight for all 48 minutes. But we knew we didn't play our best half in the first half, but Imari's touchdown really helped jumpstart us and then we were able to battle our way to the win."

The win was the third in a row for the Chiefs after beating Haughton 42-32 at home on Oct. 3 and Opelousas, 34-33, on the road Oct. 10.

Next up, the Chiefs will play Thursday night at home against Airline (3-3, 1-3 in 1-5A) at 7 p.m.